

**PLACE BRANDING:
A CASE STUDY OF THE ATLANTA HAWKS' CITY EDITION CAMPAIGN**

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Branding has become an essential element to sport organizations and an organization's ability to improve brand equity is ever present in distinguishing one brand from another. Teams typically distinguish themselves by utilization of their unique assortment of logos, uniforms, colors, and other visually identifiable elements. Given the unprecedented amount of rising tensions in the U.S. at the intersection between sports, politics, and racial issues, it is necessary to see how brands are reacting to such current events. The National Basketball Association's "City Edition" campaign has provided the opportunity for each of the league's 30 teams to collaborate with Nike, the league's most recent uniform supplier, to develop a unique uniform set intended for each team to honor its respective communal identity. While all teams have created new alternate uniform sets to be worn and sold, some teams have gone as far as implementing new court designs, creating alternate logos, and even utilizing this campaign to integrate corporate social responsibility objectives.

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the strategic marketing efforts of one team's "City Edition" promotion that extends into the realm of social responsibility. This study examined the case of the Atlanta Hawks' Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) campaign, which incorporated a variety of branding strategies extending far beyond the simple addition of a new alternate jersey. Primary data was gathered through interviews with team marketing staff members who were directly involved in the creative process and execution of the campaign. Secondary data was gathered via content analysis of local and national news articles ($N = 102$) that provided coverage on the campaign and its impact. Additional information was reviewed from official league and team web pages, as well as the team's primary social media platforms.

DEDICATION

To Dr. Waltemyer, thank you for continually being the father figure that I needed in my life. You inspired me to work toward the idea of becoming Dr. Anderson, and I hope to fulfill that vision one day. I hope I have made you proud.

To The Sport Management Society, thank you for making my years beyond that classroom worth it. I truly know what it means to be a part of a family. It has been a pleasure to serve as a member, an officer, and an advisor. Trust the process.

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Contributors

This work was supervised by a thesis (or) dissertation committee consisting of Professor Gregg Bennett [advisor] and Professor D. Scott Waltemyer [co-advisor] of the Department of Health & Kinesiology, and Professor Frank Ashley III of the Department of Public Service & Administration.

All work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of different cities or particular geographic locations, it is likely that they manage to envision some specific imagery or symbols pertaining to those different communities. In the U.S., when you think of New York City, imagery that comes to mind may include the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, or its fire department. When one thinks of the Bay Area, one could potentially ponder the Golden Gate Bridge or the slopes with trolleys in San Francisco. Dallas is synonymous with an animated nightly skyline, St. Louis is the “Gateway to the West” with its Gateway Arch, and Pittsburgh is historically recognized for being a hub of the steel industry. New Orleans is connected to Mardi Gras with its signature purple-green-gold colors, the state of Oklahoma with its historical ties with Native American culture and tribal iconography, and Utah with its Great Salt Lake, geologic beauty, and its religious ties to The Church of Latter-day Saints. Beyond each individual city, the U.S. has its own symbols that separate itself from other countries; U.S. pride could resonate in the words of the national anthem, with the elegance of a bald eagle, or the colors of red, white, and blue (in that specific order). Symbols, colors, and other visual elements are clearly an important part of how we identify ourselves with others, and one could even say that when they mentally picture certain cities, states, or countries, they just may also envision their favorite sports organizations.

In 2017, the NBA launched its new uniform line supplied by its newest partner, Nike, which designed several variations of uniforms for each team. Each new “edition” of uniforms had its own theme with the league revealing replacements of the traditional home, away, alternate, and throwback jerseys. However, there was a notable slot for an entirely new style of jersey that was obscured with only a silhouette of a yet-to-be revealed jersey and the following

message: “Inspired by The Community” (Nike, 2017a). Months later, the NBA “City Edition” uniforms were finally revealed with entirely new experimental designs that, according to Nike News (2017b, para. 3), “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.”

The motive of the series is to create a shared identity among each team and its fans from the court “to the cities’ streets” (Nike, 2017b), primarily through place and city marketing. Some teams chose to represent a particular ethnic or racial demographic that has had a prominent role within its community while others pay homage to historical figures beyond sport that contributed to city culture. This promotion inspired many organizations to illustrate local characteristics like strength or vibrance through its color or design choices (Nike, 2020). Often, natural landmarks and notable city icons can be discovered in the fine details on many of the promotional uniforms while personalized mottos typically appeared just above each team’s jock tag. Distinguished industries (i.e., automobile) have been represented by many teams while others celebrated anniversaries of historical achievement – both in and outside of sport. And though the emphasis has clearly been placed on the cities or states, some organizations deliberately paid homage to their own heritage.

In executing this promotion, certain teams remained consistent with their typical visual identity (VI) elements of colors and logos while others abandoned their normal designs for new, dynamic color palettes. Often, classic team patterns and customary designs are infused to glorify team and community identity alike, while modifications to team primary and secondary logotypes and wordmarks are also frequent. Though this promotion was engineered to be focused on team uniforms, several teams have decided to use the jerseys as part of a convoy of an even larger promotional package. This has included separate logotypes and typefaces from their core

visual brands, fresh taglines that capture team and city unity, and even entirely new court designs to accompany the campaign. Since the promotion's inception, some teams have consistently retained the same City Edition jerseys and courts for several seasons while others have managed to diversify their campaign from season to season. As Hussain and Ferdous (2014) suggest, generating and supporting a brand's visual identity (VI) is fundamental in developing a brand for organizations, but such an assertion seemingly may not apply to this promotion. Beyond the visual elements, some teams have even decided to incorporate a charitable, nonprofit, or community-focused cause to support as part of the campaign.

Annual online "unveilings" of these specialized uniforms have become customary with this new Nike-NBA partnership. The City Edition promotions have been spearheaded by teams through their online and social media presence, leading to official league and team web pages becoming a nest for substantial amounts of information. These team sites offer vital data on how each team communicates sharing their identity with fans and local communities via the City Edition campaign. Another online touchpoint that has extended the reach of this promotion is the use of social media, with the ability of utilizing community identity-inspired hashtags and other means that further intertwine these campaigns with their identified fans.

This case study examines the strategic place marketing and branding efforts that contribute to the visual identity of the Atlanta Hawks' Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) City Edition campaign. Primary data was gathered through interviews with two of the team's marketing department staff that were directly involved in the creative process and execution of the campaign. Secondary data was gathered via content analysis of local and national news articles ($N = 102$) that provided coverage on the uniforms and the supplemental promotional

activities related to the MLK theme. Additional information was reviewed from official league and team web pages, as well as the team's primary social media platforms.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review gathers existing literature on branding, specifically discussing both place branding and visual identity. To follow, a review of alternate uniforms usage by the “Big 5” North American men’s professional sport leagues

Review of Branding

Gardner and Levy (1955) first asserted that a brand name is much more than an icon to separate one organization from another but consists of a full collection of assets and values that contribute to producing a separate, distinctive identity. A brand has been defined in many ways; according to Hankinson and Cowking (1993, as cited in Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005, p. 508), a brand is “a product or service made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values.” More broadly, Aaker (1991) defined brand identity as “that set of unique associations that a firm seeks to create or maintain” (p. 68). To extend, Alessandri (2009) defines brand identity as an organization’s strategic presentation in an effort to create a positive image. Lee and Alessandri (2018) expand on the qualities and benefits of positive brand identity:

A truly superior brand identity is strategically built on the history, beliefs, or traditions of the organization. The brand identity’s meaning should be reasonably apparent to those familiar with the organization, and the best brand identities will remain true to the organization even through changes in the short- and long-term because they were built with some sort of guiding statements, such as the organization’s mission statement or a long-term vision statement. (p. xiii)

According to Alessandri (2001), an organization's visual identity (VI) is the brand's organized expression of itself exemplified through its name, logo, colors, architecture, and a plethora of additional elements. These are the symbolic elements that operationalize brand identity and help provide distinguished VI between opposing organizations (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006). Branding is often associated with consumer products, but with the emergence of the concept of destination branding that started with Morgan and Pritchard (1998), destinations have become their own version of a "product."

Place Marketing

More broadly, marketing strategies applied to geographic locations are known as place marketing. Place marketing is most typically used to describe this phenomenon, but often the term has been used interchangeably with similar terms like geographic and destination marketing in literature. Book and Eskilsson (2010) described this strategy as "the selection of place-related attributes and projects to put forward and the marketing strategies used by different actors" (p. 315). Place marketing can be used in the context of both creating civic pride for native inhabitants and local residents, as well as for touristic strategies of attracting outside inhabitants.

Place Branding. These strategies develop place branding, or destination branding. Book and Eskilsson (2010) note that sports is a growing factor in the development of city's greater place marketing:

In the marketing of places, the four fundamental marketing Ps (Price, Place, Product, and Promotion) are increasingly supplemented by the four Es (Entertainment, Education, Excitement, and Escapism) (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). As a result, new and more differentiated marketing strategies are growing in importance. One such strategy used by

many places around the world today is to focus on sports, big events as well as different kinds of sports activities.

Place branding can be used in a variety of contexts ranging from as small as local communities to as large as entire nations. A variety of case studies already exist examining the marketing strategies of a place on a city-wide or regional level, which is known as city marketing. Among these are Hong Kong (Chan & Marafa, 2014), Debrecen, Hungary (Kozma, Radics, & Teperics, 2012), and Victoria, Australia (Rinaldi & Beeton, 2015). Yoav (2019) expanded on this to not only include more localized efforts, but country-wide branding for sport-related activities. Many studies also analyze the various elements of place marketing, branding, or identity for large sporting events such as the Super Bowl (Schneider & Bradish, 2006), the World Cup (Sylvain, 2010), and the Olympic Games (Yoav, 2020). Though place branding literature is still growing in capacity within the sport industry, tourism has had much more focus in this area of study.

Place Identity and Image. Place marketing can be further broken down into the key concepts of place identity, image, and profile (Book & Eskilsson, 2010). Place identity is a marketing objective to generate a specific brand for a designated place while the place image is the subjective view shared among consumers (Aaker, 1996; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Rainisto, 2003). For example, identity is exemplified by an organization using colors, such as black, to intentionally display a desired sense of industriousness connected to that locale. Such a quality may already be understood in the mind of a consumer for a specific location through reputation or media portrayal (for both residents and non-residents alike), which generates an informed image in the mind of the consumer (Book & Eskilsson, 2010). Profiling is a branding strategy used to create collective associations and images for the successful portrayal of a city to attract visitors (Book & Eskilsson, 2010). Thus, organizations in the city of Houston, Texas may utilize

the town's official nickname of "Space City." Such nicknames can be used to further generate civic identity and imagery (Muench, 1989). These unique attributes are utilized by a city or region to help produce a desired positive view of the destination (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Iversen & Hem, 2008) through the distinctive associations created for cities and regional locations (Im, Kim, Elliot, & Han, 2012).

Visual Identity

Hall (2006) also indicated that place marketing strategies can be communicated through a variety of visual identity elements including slogans, logos, and other features. These collective symbolic traits support a brand's identity (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006). As cited in Lee, Cavanaugh, and Alessandri (2019), it was found that organizations have a variety of other touchpoints that further enhance visual identity (Hussain & Ferdous, 2014; van den Bosch, de Jong, & Elving, 2005).

Team Names. Hussain and Ferdous (2014) add that names are also essential to convey messages that provide added value and influence on an organization's brand equity. The added value is also evident with stakeholder's formation of brand associations tied to the organization (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Geographic fit further provides context for selected team nicknames, such as the New England Patriots being representative of the area's history (Lee & Alessandri, 2018). Team names also enhance differentiation between organizations within a professional league, while also providing distinction between teams of different leagues within the same city or region (i.e., the Milwaukee Brewers and the Milwaukee Bucks).

Color Palettes. It is well known that sports teams often wear colors to differentiate their brands from one another, like the Orlando Magic with black, blue, and silver, or the New York Knicks blue, orange, and white. A team's color palette, as defined by Lee and Alessandri (2018),

is “a collection of colors that is regularly used to represent the team or organization in question” (p. 27). In many sports, it is common that one team wears white while the opposing team wears color to make this differentiation easy to recognize for competitors and fans alike – though this is being called further and further into question with the NBA’s movement away from the traditional home-away, color-white system. The significance of the specific choices a team makes in terms of team colors relies on a multitude of factors. Spencer (2017) stated that the decision of team color is impacted by societal significance, integration of visibility and contrast, and historical considerations.

It was determined by Spencer (2017) that blue, followed by red, was the most prominent principal color used by teams in the NBA twice more than any other color, as was the case in Major League Baseball and in the National Football League. Spencer (2017) also confirmed that the NBA has the largest number of uniform colors per team relative to the NFL, NHL, and MLB. This seems to pose the question of why teams do not consider wearing red more often given that teams with red as the principal color in the uniform have historically been the most successful, as exemplified by the findings of Allen and Jones (2014) and Attrill et al. (2008).

Logos. The easiest way to recognize a brand is by its logo (or logotype) as a symbol, according to Lee, Cavanaugh, and Alessandri (2019). Logos serve as the face for organizations as they are visual identifiers for an individual to be able to differentiate a single brand among others (Wheeler, 2006). Such a symbol is likely influenced by a multitude of traits and elements from the organization and visual identity, respectively (Lee et al., 2019). According to Lee et al. (2019), typically the name and color of the brand are the contributing factors to the logo, however, logos can stand-alone once easily identified (i.e., iconic brands like the Los Angeles Lakers or Boston Celtics). Logos serve as identifiers of association through the use of branded

materials such as merchandising, social media content, and marketing materials (Alessandri, 2009; Henderson & Cote, 1998). Henderson and Cote (1998) suggest developing a logo with a familiar meaning to increase recognition among individuals. Lee et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of consistency in successful promotion of visual identity elements. There are several models to consider for increasing processing effect of memory and recall with images regarding a logo; these include the Levels of Processing (Craik & Lockhard, 1972), the Baddeley-Logie Model of Working Memory (Baddeley & Logie, 1999), and the Pictorial Superiority Effect (PSE) (Read & Barnsley, 1977), all of which indicate that images are more easily processed into memory for recall over text.

Logos are most commonly graphic designs with the primary intentions of enhancing identification with an organization (Alessandri, 2009; Henderson & Cote, 1998; Lee, 2011). Wheeler (2006) describes logos as the “signature” of an organization’s brand and can often appear with or without a typeface; for example, the St. Louis Blues have both their primary blue winged musical note logo that excludes the explicit use of “St. Louis Blues” written out, but there is a separate wordmark logo that includes both the icon as well as the team’s name.

Being able to develop a familiar meaning to logos (such as the aforementioned Blues using a musical note) improves recognition among individuals who observe the logo (Henderson & Cote, 1998). Henderson and Cote (1998) also suggest three attributes that enhance a logo: elaboration, naturalness, and harmony. Elaboration encompasses the use of three-dimensional appearance, the motion or flow, and the means of capturing organizational presence. Naturalness denotes a binary approach between realism and abstract imagery; Lee and Alessandri (2018), define abstract in this case as logos with limited to no information available for observers.

Henderson and Cote (1998) recommend that teams avoid the use of abstract imagery in order to ensure that observers are capable of understanding the iconography.

In the NBA, 21 of the teams include a basketball as a part of its primary logo to help create an observable commonly experienced object, as it can be assumed that fans of the sport – even minimally identified – have seen a basketball at some point or another. Additionally, there is inherent realism in the Boston Celtics logo with the depiction of a Celtic man or many of the animal-based mascots, while there is more abstract iconography displayed by the Oklahoma City Thunder and the Portland Trail Blazers “pinwheel” logos. Though Henderson and Cote (1998) also suggest for teams to incorporate organic, natural shapes for their heightened meaning – as opposed to geometric shapes – seven of the teams’ logos are enclosed in a circle with few exhibiting a more natural shape (such as the Chicago Bulls’ bull logo).

Logotypes and Wordmarks. Typography adds to the collection of devices that teams can look to for strategically communicating and marketing with its stakeholders (Lee & Alessandri, 2018), and can even advance the objectives of stakeholder response (Hussain & Ferdous, 2014). Multiple teams use their script or wordmark logos as primary or secondary identifiers for their brand; notably, the NBA is the only male professional league of the “Big 5” in North America of which all teams’ primary logos are typographic logotypes. According to Sports Logos (2021), among the “Big 5” organizations, full team nicknames or geographic identifiers (city, state, geographic region) of primary logos only appeared on four teams in the National Football League (12.5%), six National Hockey League teams (18.75%), 19 Major League Baseball teams (63.33%), and 26 Major League Soccer games (89.66%). Furthermore, this does not account for logos with only acronyms (Kansas City Royals) or single letters displayed (Green Bay Packers).

Iconic Representation. The use of images to make a concept easier to find, recognize, and remember while serving as a space-efficient system compared to text and one that can be used to draw attention within an information display is the application of iconic representation, according to Dreyfus (1972). Many universities would fall under symbolic means of iconic representation as they are most often represented by higher levels of abstraction (Rogers, 1989). Such a system of representation seems to be the essence of the City Edition campaign used by several NBA teams which is representative of the respective cities or geographic regions. For example, the logotype on the Oklahoma City Thunder 2018-19 City Edition jerseys (along with the uniform design itself) is representative of the Native American culture, well known for its connection to the state of Oklahoma, with additional visual elements (triangular patterns, diagonal stripe like that of a tribal sash).

Picture Superiority. The element of picture superiority is an aptly named function that expresses extension that pictures or images are more recognized than words. As applied by Paivio, Rogers, and Smythe (1968), images are usually much more easily recognized than words alone. Lee et al. (2019) suggest that the picture superiority effect is strongest when pictures represent common concrete things versus the abstract and aids in building brand awareness. The visual depth of images provides an advantage in memory given that pictures are visually more significant than text (Goolkasian & Foos, 2002). Compared to images, text is not particularly deemed iconic, according to Lee et al. (2019); and this is reaffirmed by Lee and Cavanaugh (2016).

Simplicity. People tend to prefer things that are easy to think about relative to more complex (Song & Schwarz, 2008). Regarding cognitive fluency and logos, this indicates that individuals are more drawn to simple logos and logotypes than their complex counterparts (Lee

et al., 2019). According to Lee et al (2019), a well-designed icon is simple without the extravagance of details but differentiable from other logos. Ironically, it can be noted that all NBA logos include at least a logotype, which often leaves the logos seeming more complex than their secondary or tertiary logo counterparts (that specifically do not include text).

Taglines. The use of mottos, phrases, or taglines can help define the identity of an organization through its marketing efforts and can reiterate the values of an organization (Lee & Alessandri, 2018). Lee and Alessandri (2018) discussed that the utilization of verbal symbology has resulted in the trademarking and the possession of certain lingo or jargon. Disputes like the 12th Man between Texas A&M University and the Seattle Seahawks, among others, may come to mind with this development. Lee and Alessandri (2018) expanded that this portion of visual identity has become marketable and profitable such that they are being used on apparel, print materials, signage, and – with this Nike-NBA partnership – on official uniforms. These theoretical understandings of taglines can be applied to the Philadelphia 76ers “Trust the Process” slogan, which has been a meaningful part of the team’s identity since rising from the lower ranks of the league over the course of the 2010’s (Rollins, 2018) and is even subtly hinted at within the 2020-21 City Edition uniform design.

Distinctive Patterns. Pinstripes have long been associated with specific teams across a variety of sports. In the NBA, notable teams with pinstripes have included teams like the Chicago Bulls and Orlando Magic, which has served as inspiration for many of the teams’ creative designs due to their popularity and classic design. Other teams may decide to go for a more localized approach by paying homage to ethnic or racial minorities that are prominent within a team’s community. This was the case with the Oklahoma City Thunder in 2018 when they decided to pay homage to the state of Oklahoma’s Native American population with a

tribal-inspired sash design into the blue of the uniform. This was stated by a Nike graphic design to be part of playing to the heritage of the Native population that encompasses the greater Oklahoma City area (Taylor, 2018).

Review of Alternate Uniforms in Sport

Alternate uniforms have historically functioned as an additional set of jerseys and pants that ensure teams are not wearing too similar of colors, which would make it inherently difficult for players and fans alike to differentiate between players mid-match. The use of alternate uniforms has grown to more than just as a tool of functionality for match participation and viewing as a “third kit,” but has become a promotional tool to further build sport brands and increase sales revenue. This is not restricted to any one sport, nor limited to just North American sports, and some promotions even expand beyond the confines of sport and are used to help with corporate social responsibility. For example, AIG Japan partnered with the All Blacks to create an award-winning campaign in support of the LGBTQ community and its opposition to discrimination with its Pride Jersey (TBWA, n.d.).

Alternate Uniforms in U.S. Professional Sport

In recent years, we have seen a collective effort from leagues to adopt specialized team uniform promotion strategies. In the National Football League, 2012 marked the first year of Nike becoming the league’s official uniform supplier. Just four seasons later, the league and Nike bestowed the “Color Rush” uniform series with each team having its own alternate jersey set. Typical attire for teams would generally include jerseys and pants of different team specific colors (i.e., the Green Bay Packers’ green jerseys and yellow pants), but this promotion matched teams’ jerseys and pants to create a completely solid uniform. Some teams would add to the specialty of these Color Rush games by altering helmet logos and facemask colors. A few

historic teams chose to avoid participating in the promotion altogether to maintain a presence of tradition while others fully-embraced the promotion to expand their catalog of uniform sets. An interesting component of this particular campaign was that the NFL had full control of when these alternate uniforms were to be worn. Though the program was discontinued in 2018, some teams have opted to include their former Color Rush uniforms as part of their current branding. Carroll (2018) reported that when Fox Sports acquired the rights to broadcast Thursday Night Football, the executive vice president of programming research and content strategy suggested that fans were not going to be displaced from consuming football with the loss of the Color Rush promotion.

In late 2020, the National Hockey League's partnership with Adidas released information on the league's new Reverse Retro alternate jerseys. The purpose of this promotion is to provide a modern twist on classic team uniforms and designs, with emphasis on years of team success and significance (Ledra, 2020). These specially designed jerseys incorporated classic logos, color palettes, and striping into this new set of alternative uniform sets. Though the NFL has specific rules on limiting alternate jerseys use like the Color Rush theme, the NHL emphasized the significance of the Reverse Retro campaign to be present on various occasions, including rival and special head-to-head matchups (Leahy, 2021). Beyond the jersey sets, goalies are known for boasting their flair, intimidation, and style with their fashionable face masks.

Early in 2020, Major League Soccer celebrated its 25th season with the FORWARD25 campaign, which focused on celebrating the league's fans. Each uniform incorporates traditional team elements and even the league's two new teams have been provided with their own new designs. Additionally, Adidas incorporated its three-stripe branding uniformly across all jersey designs on the right shoulder (MLS, 2020). This design feature is specifically included to pay

homage to the original uniform designs from when the league originally formed. As with the other leagues, a trend of “official unveilings” surrounded with an essence of awe and excitement as the uniforms were being revealed. For the MLS, the unveiling specifically utilized celebrity fans to increase the extravagance associated with the jersey collection’s release, which was also strategically just a week ahead of Fashion Week in New York (MLS, 2020).

Major League Baseball, baseball in general, is well known for its unusual promotional activities and activations. In the major leagues, fans would typically expect their team to represent in either a white or grey jersey, which corresponds to traditional home and away sets, but would commonly see team colors represented in the alternate jerseys. In previous years, there have been a variety of promotions and campaigns that have incorporated some form of alternate jerseys. In 2019, Players’ Weekend was honored in monochromatic style with all-black and all-white uniform sets, U.S.-themed classic caps for the Fourth of July, tie-dye blue caps for Father’s Day, camouflage theme for Armed Forces Day, and green-colored caps for St. Patrick’s Day. With the MLB, many of the promotions focused more on simply changing color palettes for team hats and socks (and included patches), rather than having full alternative uniform sets. The league recently struck up an official uniform partnership with Nike and, according to Creamer (2019), although Nike has been modest relative to its dynamic campaigns in the NBA and NFL, it is planning to unveil new team uniform designs by the 2022 season.

Completing the Big 5, the NBA itself is no stranger to specialized jerseys and uniform promotions. Under its previous uniform partnership, the “adizero NBA short sleeve uniform system” was created to introduce the league to an official short-sleeve jersey, something uncommon to the sport known for its sleeveless attire. This was not exclusive to the NBA as several universities with an Adidas partnership had the chance to display short-sleeve jerseys as

well, including powerhouse programs like UCLA and Kansas, according to Auerbach (2013). Another campaign was introduced which focused on the ethnic component of the league and its fanbase in the “Noches Éne Bé A” jersey promotion. In this promotion, teams had “Los” or “El” (whichever was appropriate) placed in front of their team respective mascots on their jerseys (i.e., Los Bulls) and spanned the entire league. One important note to this was that the Phoenix Suns were the only team to reintroduce this into their City Edition campaigns. The NBA’s former Adidas partnership was also notable for its annual promotion that was – similar to many MLB promotions – a one-use special edition Christmas day jersey for the annual holiday season. The variety of annual uniforms included the “BIG Color” campaign with solid uniforms and transparent text and numbers to kick off the annual Adidas tradition. To follow were the sleeved jerseys of the “BIG Logo” campaign, where teams were represented by their brand colors with an enlarged white team logo displayed across players’ chest. Subsequently, players were represented the next season with their first names labelled onto their jerseys in place of the traditional last name format utilized in nearly every sport at all levels of participation. With the holiday festivities promotion drawing to a close as Nike took Adidas’ place, the final two designs incorporated a festive font that was universal to each team. The first year, teams had “greige” infused uniforms while the final iteration implemented elements of the traditional uniforms and team colors into the final design, such as the Atlanta Hawks’ triangular chevron pattern (Creamer, 2015).

The NBA’s Uniform Expansion

Since switching to its new uniform supplier, Nike has abandoned the single-use promotional attire for a more traditional campaign that spans multiple games at a time and supplying the league and its fans with hundreds of options in total for official uniforms. Starting

with the 2017-18 National Basketball Association season, Nike and the NBA began their uniform partnership that contributed to many new options for teams to express themselves on the court and celebrate each team's heritage. Historically, home teams were to wear light color jerseys while visitors were to wear dark jerseys. However, the new partnership with Nike included an update to rules while also delivering an unprecedented plethora of uniform choices for teams. With growing enhancements in uniform design and technical performance, the new uniforms' designs not only took into consideration feedback provided by NBA players in an attempt to improve performance, but also worked toward Nike's sustainability efforts (Whitaker, 2017). The summer before players took to the court, the league made an official announcement releasing its first two of five uniforms sets: The Association Edition uniforms, which was set to replace each team's white (or light) jerseys, and its Icon Edition jerseys, which were the rebranded version of the road jerseys. Months later, the Statement Edition set inspired by "The Athlete's Mindset" was meant to be utilized for marquee matchups and big rivalries (Nike, 2017a) while a few teams also received a Classic Edition set focused on celebrating historically iconic uniforms. Finally, in late December, Nike released an official statement on the team-specific "City Edition" (CE) uniforms that are meant to capture the essence of each NBA market and are "Inspired by The Community" (NBA, 2017). This collaborative effort has compelled each team to utilize their social media channels in favor of promoting, or "unveiling," their jerseys; it has become something that fans look forward to prior to and during each season. Willis (2020, para. 2) describes that the campaign is intended to "invoke civic pride among its wearers" by utilizing elements of local popular culture, relevant historical significance of the community, or from the team's history.

NBA Statement Edition. As part of Nike’s new partnership, they transformed the traditional alternate jersey by creating the “Statement Edition” series. This series serves a similar purpose to that of the NHL’s Reverse Retro campaign in that the uniforms are aimed to be worn for more meaningful games and rival matchups. Such matchups are important to teams, as Smith and Schwartz (2003) pointed out, as the intense opposition experienced by fans with rivalries creates an opportunity for fans to further entrench themselves into their identification with *their* team. The designs of the Statement Edition sets are distinctive to each team; Nike (2017a) illustrated that some teams chose intentional colors that are meant to represent certain characteristics, use of primary and secondary logos, and recognizable tradition- and heritage-based patterns and iconography (i.e., pinstripes, city skylines). These are illustrated by the Cleveland Cavaliers’ 2017 set with the solid black coloring mimicking the success of the 2016 NBA title season, faint pinstripes representing grit, and the use of the team’s secondary logo. In 2020, it was announced that the Jordan Brand “Jumpman” logo would appear on all of the 2020-21 Statement jerseys, which extends beyond what was previously exclusive to the Michael Jordan-owned Charlotte Hornets and the NBA All-Star Game uniforms to bring a connection to the successful namesake (Nike, 2020).

NBA Classic Edition. As the name indicates, the NBA’s “Classic Edition” uniforms sets are intentionally designed to celebrate team history. Given the rebrand of the league’s jersey system, this series operates as what is more generally known as a “throwback” uniform. As previously mentioned, throwbacks have become quite popular for teams to utilize as part of their branding – hence, the NBA’s use for the classic promotion as a portion of the Nike greater partnership. Revealed in 2017, Nike (2017a, para. 13) expressed that these uniforms pay homage to some of the league’s “most iconic uniforms in league history” and allow for each team to

establish their own schedule of when to wear the sets. The roster of teams has expanded from just eight with the original release in 2017 to including a majority of the league for this upcoming season. Individual campaigns are generally put together with the intentions of creating a shared identity among generations and paying homage to or replicating previously worn popular uniform sets. Some replicate entire designs like the Memphis Grizzlies' who are choosing to honor previous designs, while others even extend the campaign beyond uniforms to include an accompanying classic court design (NBA, 2020). For the 2020-21 season, this addition of the court designs is part of the new "Hardwood Classic" campaign.

NBA Earned Edition. After initially releasing the first five sets of jerseys, Nike decided to expand even further by celebrating the most successful teams. In 2018, the "Earned Edition" series was released as a "perk" to the teams that had made it to the previous season's playoffs, and according to Nike (2018), allow fans for a physical product that showcases the success of their team. The Earned Edition set is simply a recolored version of each team's City or Statement Edition jersey, but for many teams the creative choices and designs of the Earned jerseys carry their own significance. For example, the Oklahoma City Thunder's 2018-19 Earned Edition uniforms replicate that of their respective Statement Edition jerseys – now orange instead of dark blue – with the orange of the set representing the state of Oklahoma's sunsets, earning them the unofficial nickname of the "sunset" jerseys (Nike, 2018). For the Miami Heat, their popular "Vice" City Edition campaign uniforms were expanded upon with a vibrant neon pink to further embrace the retro nightlife of 1980's Miami (Nike, 2018). These uniform sets were initially worn on Christmas day as a replacement to the previous tradition of single-use jerseys, but teams were allowed to continue to wear this promotional attire for the remaining duration of the season.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A case study methodology was utilized to examine the branding strategy of the Atlanta Hawks' City Edition promotion. Following an outline previously employed by McGehee and Cianfrone (2019), this project examines the identity of the organization, the positioning of the sport organization in its regional market, and its development of brand strategy with marketing actions. According to Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) as cited in McGehee and Cianfrone (2019), "brand identity consists of attributes comprising an organization's brand, positioning refers to targeting a market and distinguishing the brand, and brand strategy consists of the actual marketing actions take to influence brand equity" (p. 108). Building off of McGehee and Cianfrone's (2019) approach, the collection and investigation of data on the team's City Edition branding strategies was ascertained by: 1) a content analysis of online newspaper articles, web pages, and social media content related to the uniforms and subsequent campaign, and 2) conducting individual interviews with members of the organization's marketing department.

Content related to the campaign was gathered for analysis from a variety of secondary sources ($N = 102$) including news coverage possessing campaign-related material or information, as well as from official team social media platforms. In particular, local news sources consisted of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 11 Alive, and WSB-TV, among other sources, which provided additional information and context that pertained to this promotion. Given the circumstances of this promotion's intersection between race and sports, the campaign gained national coverage through several larger media outlets such as The Undeclared (owned by ESPN), Yahoo, and Bleacher Report. Vitouladiti (2014) expressed that this particular method of data collection, content analysis, is flexible and can be applied to various forms of media.

Several terms are associated with the uniforms and campaign; among the terms used to clarify searching for qualitative data pertaining to the campaign included “City Edition,” “MLK,” “Unity Night,” and “Earn These Letters.” The data for this study was gathered from the team’s official unveiling showcase of the uniforms in October 2020 to February 2021, which is after the team had officially worn the jerseys for their initial four City Edition Unity Night promotions.

To gather the most central understanding of the strategies of this campaign, 30-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with two members of the marketing department for the Hawks organization who had worked with the team since the inception and ideation of the MLK City Edition uniforms and campaign (labelled “Executive 1” and “Vice President 1”). The interviewees were asked to discuss the promotion’s origins and objectives, and how these objectives fit into the strategic place branding of the organization. This collection of primary data was used to cross-check and confirm the accuracy of gathered secondary data on identity, positioning, and brand strategy efforts derived from related new articles and posts. The semi-structured nature allowed for the main focal points of the study to be addressed and probed for further details while offering the interviewees the opportunity to expand on specific subject matter in more depth. A set of predetermined interview questions were provided to the participants to ensure relevance and nullify any potential ambiguity. The interviews were transcribed and confirmed for accuracy with the two interviewees.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The three-year culmination of this uniform design, its brand management strategy, and positioning of the organization through the subsequent campaign will be discussed.

True to Atlanta: Atlanta's Market

The Atlanta Hawks is a basketball organization based in the capital city of the state of Georgia. The city of Atlanta is home to nearly all five men's professional sport leagues, with the exception of a National Hockey League team. Among the various teams include the Atlanta Hawks, the Atlanta Braves of Major League Baseball, the Atlanta Falcons of the National Football League, and the recent addition of the Atlanta United FC Major League Soccer team. In addition, Atlanta's basketball landscape includes the Atlanta Dream of the Women's National Basketball Association. These five professional teams have combined for two championship titles, coming from the Braves in 1995 and Atlanta United FC in 2018. The city's sports market also includes collegiate D-1 programs Georgia Tech and Georgia State. Various special events have occurred in the city of Atlanta, including 1996 Summer Olympics, two Super Bowls, three NCAA Final Four Men's Basketball Championships, and WrestleMania. There are also several significant annual events that reoccur: NASCAR racing events at Atlanta Motor Speedway, the PGA Tour Championship, and the Chick-fil-A Bowl. The city hosts a variety of marathon events, which inspired the nickname of "Running City USA" (Atlanta Track Club, 2018), including the Peachtree Road Race. It should be noted that this is the same Peachtree Road that served as previous inspiration for the Hawks' City Edition uniforms (Executive 1; Vice President 1).

The city is notable for its role in a variety of historical events in U.S. history, primarily related to racial strife that ranges from slavery to civil rights and the Black Lives Matter movement. The Hawks organization has participated in the league-wide “City Edition” campaign as part of the league’s uniform partnership with Nike. Since the partnership launched in 2017, the team’s previous City Edition campaigns have consisted of honoring the city’s iconic rap culture and the historic Peachtree Street in 2017 and 2019, respectively. For the 2020-21 season, the organization decided to focus on the legacy and impact of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., an icon for the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s which has deep ties to the city of Atlanta. Homage to Dr. King is not new for the Hawks organization as the team has played a game on MLK Day for 26 consecutive seasons (Zauner, 2021).

The inception of this uniform’s ideation started in 2017 and began to develop into a full promotion that was to be launched in late 2020 (Executive 1). This was similar to their previous City Edition campaigns, which focused on “relevant” elements that are uniquely tied to the city identity of Atlanta (Vice President 1). Two of the team’s previous three City Edition branding strategies included celebrating the local rap and entertainment culture and the Peachtree Road, while the third focused on the team’s history and heritage by celebrating the team’s 50th anniversary in Atlanta. For this 2020-21 MLK-oriented campaign, “It was really about ‘What haven’t we done for the community that really resonates with the community? Something that is genuine to the city that we haven’t tapped into?’” (Vice President 1). A central theme that emerged within the interviews was the already-existing organizational commitment to social responsibility. “One thing that we’re always doing is that we’re a community asset – we’re always connected to our city, to our local government” (Vice President 1).

Among the various events of 2020, a resurgence in the Black Lives Matter movement following George Floyd's murder sparked continued conversations of social justice in the realm of sports. These collective efforts for social justice were carried from the streets onto the courts of the NBA, where Feldman (2020) indicated that the NBA made intentional steps to associate the league with the greater societal movement. Among those elements included "Black Lives Matter" scripted across the top of the court, permitting players to kneel during the national anthem, and authorizing players' use of social justice terms or phrases in place of their names on jerseys. Atlanta was not exempt from this global reaction with peaceful rallies and emboldened protests, with some even turning more destructive (Fausset & Levenson, 2020). In addition to BLM's impact in Atlanta, the iconic Georgia Congressman and fellow trailblazer of the Civil Rights movement alongside MLK, John Lewis, was recognized for his social activism and societal contributions by the Hawks organization in a press release following his passing in July of 2020. Lewis also supported the direction of the Hawks organization's community involvement and impact (Vice President 1). As noted by Atlanta Hawks Chief Marketing Officer, Melissa Proctor:

"No one could have ever anticipated that the world, that we would be in the current state, as we are, as a country, and so we really thought that we're obviously going to be unveiling it as have our City Edition, but the sentiment of the uniform is at a completely different level than we could have ever anticipated at the time of development. Always important, obviously, for Dr. King and the city" (Spencer, 2020).

A notable distinction from other teams' campaigns is its commitment to donating all of its City Edition jersey sales "back into the Atlanta community" (Spencer, 2021). With the case of the

Hawks, their non-profit approach centered on economic empowerment for Atlanta's Black community.

Creating a Campaign Coalition: More than Just a Jersey

According to Forbes 2020 as cited on Sport Market Analytics, the Hawks team value has quadrupled from just over \$300 million in 2010 to \$1.3 billion in 2019. Despite an immense increase in value, the team has missed the playoffs the previous three seasons leading up to the 2021 season. Both of the individuals interviewed noted that marketing strategies have centered upon staying "True to Atlanta" and its community given the lack of success on the court.

"We've developed over 30 courts around the city working with recreation centers, so looking at our community efforts and how we're growing with it. 'Building bridges through basketball' is our mission. How do we continue to make sure that we're doing the right things for our community, celebrating our community and what they stand for, and what they represent? We really wanted to focus on a figure that was important to the history of Atlanta." (Vice President 1)

Though the Nike City Edition promotion on a league-wide scale is intended to celebrate and honor team's local communities, to expand a team's wardrobe and identity, and sell limited-time merchandise, this MLK campaign is centered around expanding the message of educating and empowering the community (Dietz, 2021). The process for developing this campaign originated years before the official release when the team's marketing team began researching how to further connect with the team's hometown, similar to its previous campaigns. After interacting with the local community and many organizations, the campaign began to move into the direction of generating equality and promoting the education of the actions and original works of Dr. King (Atlanta Hawks and State Farm Arena, 2020). The King Estate has been a long-term

stakeholder as part of this uniform design and campaign, wanted to use this partnership to specifically educate the next generation of Atlantans on the legacy of Dr. King (Executive 1). Executive 1 expanded that The King Estate saw this as an opportunity to position Dr. King's teachings to an audience "in an unexpected way" by utilizing a sport as a vehicle. Managing Director and General Counsel of Intellectual Properties Management Inc. (the Manager of The King Estate), Eric D. Tidwell, expressed that, "We were honored to learn of the Atlanta Hawks' desire to pay homage to Dr. King's life and legacy by using him as the focus of their... City Edition uniform design" (Black Star News, 2020).

The objectives of this uniform design and subsequent campaign were supported by the collective partnerships handled by the team, but were then further amplified by the league, the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA), and Nike. Executive 1 stated the involvement from these various stakeholders' added supported demonstrated the strength of this campaign:

"Traditionally, they only want to broaden campaigns from teams that win championships. We were a losing team and not in the playoffs, so the fact that they wanted to work with us really meant a lot and spoke to the strength of the campaign. They came on board and extended the timeline, so we had to renegotiate terms which took some more time."

Even the team's uniform patch sponsor, Sharecare, is included in the significance of the team's uniform design choices, which emphasized the team and sponsor's shared support for MLK's legacy (Atlanta Hawks and State Farm Arena, 2020). Chase Bank is also involved with supporting the campaign as the Atlanta Hawks' partner for in-game activation for activities related to the team's "Unity Nights."

Promotion in a COVID World

Not only has the historical social movement related to racial and ethnic justice had an impact on the MLK uniform and campaign's reach, but the implications of the coronavirus pandemic have impacted human life at virtually every level. The NBA, and sport in general, was not excluded from the consequences of the virus, which had to momentarily suspend operations due to the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic amidst the 2020 season. Butryn, Masucci, and Johnson (2020) provided a commentary on the potential benefits and drawbacks of the promotional strategies for the case of Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) as the premiere sport experience to attempt to return as the world had shut down.

Digital Marketing

Given the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, many traditional marketing strategies related to in-person activities have been rendered ineffective due to legislation and other restrictions that impair in-person activities. Mediatracks Communications (2021) defined the market of Atlanta as tenth in the U.S. in 2020 with nearly 2.3 million TV homes but experienced a drastic growth into 2021 as it is now on a trajectory toward 2.7 million households with TV (375,000 in growth). Atlanta was the only city within the top 10 markets on this ranking that elevated in the ranking. The market moved up to the seventh spot and superseded Houston, Washington DC, and Boston. In this case, "TV homes" accounts for any households that consume media, which includes (but is not limited to) television, streaming, and on-demand video. Mediatracks Communications (2021) determined that despite the impact of the pandemic in 2020, media consumption increased as result of a demand for COVID news coverage, local coverage and impact from the pandemic, and an increased desire to consume entertainment.

Vice President 1 expressed that the team’s typical City Edition campaigns have been amplified via omni-channel presence, consisting of both traditional and digital marketing. However, due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the organization has had to be “flexible, agile, and creative” in their tactics by amplifying the initiative to reach people in an online and media-based approach. With the benefits of in-person promotions temporarily weakened across sports, the Hawks efforts to push online included increased digital marketing – primarily via web and social media, through email communication, advertisements, and video and motion graphics (Vice President 1). Executive 1 also added that the campaign efforts and message were amplified by NBA on TNT programming as it spoke about social justice and Black Lives Matter in the latter half of 2020. The subsequent coverage and added support from the NBA, NBPA, and Nike elongated the reach of the campaign from the intended efforts of solely focusing on the city of Atlanta to connecting with stakeholders of equality and social justice at the national level (Vice President 1). The aforementioned interaction with the Pope added international coverage to this campaign (Executive 1), prompting it to go from a city-wide focus to a global interconnection between religion and sport.

In-game Promotion

As a result of restrictions, the Hawks had originally reduced attendance to just friends and family of the team for the initial weeks of the 2021 season, but the team aimed to open the stands to a capacity of less than 10% (Jackson, 2020). The organization anticipated expanding the capacity of its home games at State Farm Arena specifically by the MLK Day game but had to postpone due to increase of positive coronavirus cases in the city (Jackson, 2021). Finally, the arena was able to reach 8% by January 26 – it’s second Unity Night game.

CMO Melissa Proctor expressed that the Unity Night promotion will be focused on the Atlanta community in a variety of different ways, specifically by highlighting “community leaders who are out there doing things to help unite our city and that are doing amazing things around economic empowerment” (Spencer, 2020). The Unity Nights consist of the team wearing the MLK uniforms and the accompanying City Edition MLK-inspired court. In addition, the campaign is packaged with a variety of previously utilized promotions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Night and MLK Day games. For further context, Vice President 1 expressed that the previous HBCU nights have garnered a highly engaged audience with consistent attendance from fans that travel from all over the country “to celebrate one cause and singular thought.” MLK Day games are also a consistent promotion for the organization – especially for this season’s MLK focus.

Expanding Visual Identity

The team has incorporated a variety of visual identity elements that helped identify and differentiate this campaign from others (Table 1). Spencer (2020) indicated that this is the first time in league history that someone’s initials have been prominently placed on a team’s jersey. In addition to the team’s primary “True to Atlanta” slogan, the team included a new tagline, “Earn These Letters,” which has been incorporated into this campaign. Executive 1 stated about the process of creating this visual element:

“The initial hashtag was focusing on royalty. And working with the King Estate, they were very much against positioning Dr. King as royalty because he was against that. Then, “Be a King” was too close to his daughter’s name, Bernice King and her social media name (i.e., Be A King on her official Twitter account). So, we tried to be more forward facing– we want you to take action and do something.”

Table 1 Atlanta Hawks 2020-21 City Edition Visual Branding Elements

Visual Element	Description of Usage
Color Palette	<p>Infinity Black – Denotes team’s attitudinal values (bold, relentless, unapologetic)</p> <p>Vintage Gold – Reverence of the memory of MLK</p> <p>Fidelity White – Connection to Atlanta (dedication and loyalty), also ideals of equality and compassion</p>
Primary Iconography	<p>Recolored (Vintage Gold) Hawks primary logo with enclosed black circle</p> <p>Symbolizing the Black community’s journey toward freedom and justice</p>
Secondary Iconography	<p>Crown and Shield – Located on the short panels inspired by MLK’s home church windows and MLK’s tie clips imagery</p>
Typeface / Wordmark	<p>“MLK” – The emphasis of this campaign centered as the primary point of focus on the City Edition jerseys</p>
Uniform Design	<p>Sponsor Patch (Sharecare)</p> <p>Stars – 22 stars to signify the times he was jailed in response to protest</p> <p>MLK signature – Located below the jersey jock tag</p> <p>Shorts Borders – Inspired by the stained-glass windows of MLK’s home church</p>
Home Court	<p>Center Court Logo – Modified Hawks primary logo (stained glass motif)</p> <p>Top Sideline – NBA logo, Chase Bank (sponsor) logo</p> <p>Bottom Sideline – Fidelity White MLK wordmark with 22 stars</p> <p>End Lines – Vintage Gold Atlanta Hawks primary typeface</p> <p>Arena Logo – State Farm Arena branding near top sideline (both sides of center line)</p> <p>Paint – Infinity Black, Fidelity White accents</p>
Slogan / Hashtag	<p>#EarnTheseLetters – Intended to empower the community to create positive change and continue the legacy of MLK</p>

On the team's official web page detailing the uniforms and campaign, the "Earn These Letters" motto is accompanied by actions that one can take to get involved in the community, just as Executive 1 stated. The many avenues listed include getting involved with youth mentoring, volunteering in various capacities, and support racial equality. "With this initiative and the cause of it and what MLK stood for, it's about being a good community servant and asset" (Vice President 1). This tied directly into the placement of "MLK" largely across the jersey, placing the significance on the historical figure rather than on the team itself. This sentiment resonated throughout the study, highlighting the consistently recurring idea of this campaign being "bigger than just basketball."

The colors on the team's MLK City Edition uniforms and courts intentionally divulge from the team's primary red and yellow by incorporating descriptive colors to honor MLK. Among these colors are "fidelity white," "vintage gold," and "infinity black," and all possessing a deeper significance than to merely distinguish the Hawks teammates from their opponents on the court (Atlanta Hawks and State Farm Arena, 2020). These colors were then implemented into the entirety of the resulting campaign and its various visual elements (logos, uniforms, court) and touchpoints (advertisements, merchandise, social media content). As Bengal (2020) pointed out, the team's City Edition court design also diverts even further from the team's primary branding of red and yellow. The team's modified center court logo that presents the primary team logo with a stained-glass pattern and black replacing typical white and red, respectively. Despite Melewar and Saunders (2000) suggesting a consistent visual identity as cited in Lee, Cavanaugh, and Alessandri (2019), Executive 1 stated that the changes of colors and visual presentation were a "radical change, but that was also intentional."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Sonja Henning, Nike’s Vice President for North American League Partnerships, stated that “City Edition uniforms were intended to be windows into a city’s culture,” (Nike, 2020). She continued, “The fingerprint that City Edition describes — that unmistakable identity of a place — is dynamic, and it expands beyond basketball” (Nike, 2020). The findings of this study revealed the Hawks organization’s ability to utilize a historical figure with a deeply embedded “fingerprint,” as Henning said, that is uniquely identifiable to the city of Atlanta. Though the team that plays on the court has not had a recent history of success, the organization’s marketing efforts have centered upon being a “community asset” and staying “#TrueToAtlanta” (Vice President 1).

Though the uniform’s origins derive from the history, culture, and heritage that is unique to the city of Atlanta, it seems as though what makes this campaign successful in its approach is the virtually universal recognition and reverence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and a generalizable support for the campaign’s message of equality and educational empowerment. This could support Ries and Trout’s (1986) assertion that positioning is successful when arousing existing imagery in the mind of a consumer. In this case, MLK is globally recognizable in history as a figure for social justice and equality, which finely molds the positioning of the Hawks brand with his legacy.

This study adds to the evidence put forth by McGehee and Cianfrone (2019) and Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) that corporate partnerships can elevate brand equity. There were a variety of pieces – a patch partner, uniform supplier partner, campaign partner, arena partner, etc. – that came together in alignment in order to position this uniform and campaign to

gain the immense coverage and exposure. An example of the amplified message was the release of the MLK Day warm-up shirt available for all NBA players to wear, not just players for the Hawks (Juneau, 2021). Similar to each of the previous Hawks City Edition jerseys, Executive 1 expects this limited-edition series to be sold out. Executive 1 added:

“It’s not just the jersey but it’s also the capsule collection and the merchandise sold around it. That is selling stronger than anyone we’ve had before. People who may not feel they can get a jersey or wear the jerseys, they are still able to be connected to the campaign.”

The capsule collection consists of a variety of apparel and limited-edition collectibles related to the MLK City Edition campaign.

An unforeseen consequence of this uniform design and campaign was an unplanned interaction with Pope Francis, which seemingly widened the breadth of the brand positioning to an international scale. Similar to the Hawks’ involvement with the NBPA, league, and Nike, both of the interviewees championed the strength of the campaign’s central message as to why the Pope became involved. This interaction occurred just a week prior to the team’s January 18 MLK Day on-court jersey premiere. “That amplified our work that we already had planned for January 18 to a whole other level, internationally” (Executive 1). When the Pope had originally expressed interest in the jersey, the Hawks utilized their partnership with the United Parcel Service (UPS) to immediately ship a custom number one jersey with Francis on the nameplate to Vatican City. A result of this effort was the Pope blessing and signing the jersey (Bengal, 2021). Vice President 1 also cited the Pope’s organic, genuine interest of this campaign as a large part to this interaction’s success, rather than the organization attempting to generate the interaction.

Months prior, the Pope had met with players from the league to discuss issues of social justice as a part of the league's larger movement toward creating equality (NBA, 2021).

Limitations

Given the constraint of time to collect primary data, only two interviews were conducted for this study. With subsequent interviews, more data could have been collected to further elaborate on promotional activities, partnerships, and additional branding strategies associated with Atlanta's MLK uniforms and campaign. This would have further solidified certain themes emerging from the interviews and content, enhancing the quality and reliability of the results. The Hawks' historical and racial approach to place branding for City Edition also differs greatly from that of many of the other NBA organizations, especially given that each team's campaign is intentionally personalized to each city or region that teams derive from. Thus, the results of this campaign are not likely generalizable to that of every team's city edition uniforms nor their branding strategies. For example, though the Boston Celtics also applied a historical component to their branding strategies for their City Edition uniforms and campaign, their historical approach relied on their own team heritage as inspiration, as opposed to city or regional heritage. The Utah Jazz and Phoenix Suns used geological elements that derived from their respective geographic regions as inspiration for their City Edition branding choices.

Existing data in the form of web content related to previous campaigns likely exist in higher numbers. By the completion of data collection, the team had only worn the jerseys a total of four times, compared to last season where the Hawks had worn their uniforms several more times. With this in mind, the team is expected to launch more Unity Night games for the latter half of the season, which may utilize different promotions that were not previously mentioned in

interviews or online content. Additionally, this campaign being operated during the coronavirus pandemic may not be fully representative of the “normal” City Edition process.

The success of the MLK uniform’s international reach is unquestionable, but a large contribution to the success of the uniforms may derive from the league’s preexisting efforts to promote equality and social justice. As previously mentioned in the results, the team achieved support from the league and players association for its message, but the same support may not have emerged if the team utilized another approach to represent the city’s culture. Additionally, the non-profit approach does not easily apply to typical marketing strategies, nor does it necessarily fit the more traditional bottom line of a business.

Future Research

Given that the City Edition uniforms and campaigns are mere “fingerprints” of the cities or regions that the teams derive from, each team chooses to depict and brand their respective places in entirely unique, personalized ways. There is no “one size fits all” approach to City Edition or place branding strategies, but each campaign could very well contribute to a larger understanding of best practices for place branding, marketing, and identity. It is suggested that further case studies are conducted on NBA teams and their individual approaches to the City Edition uniforms. A longitudinal study may also be useful in understanding why some organizations decide to maintain similar thematic approaches as opposed to honoring different elements of the city each year (like the Atlanta Hawks).

Regarding visual identity, some teams have drastically diverged from their core visual brand and identity, similar to the Hawks, but this poses the question – why? Given that previous literature shows the inherent importance of maintaining a consistent visual brand as suggested in the literature review, many teams defy this with the City Edition campaign operating as a vehicle

for drastic visual changes. This study merely scratches the surface of utilizing place branding as a means of shifting visual identity, so it calls into question the motive for teams like the Miami Heat, who have never had blue nor pink as part of their visual brand, to incorporate these colors into their uniforms and campaigns. Though many teams may be utilizing City Edition to increase merchandise sales for its limited-edition approach, the Atlanta Hawks' no-revenue, community-oriented approach to City Edition shows that there are, in fact, different motives.

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