Religious Influence on Sports Apparel Consumption: An Exploratory Study of the Muslim Market Segment

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Entering foreign markets, such as the Muslim market, has become quite important for many companies, including businesses in the sport industry (Luna & Gupta, 2001). Cultural differences force international marketers to explore the variation in consumer needs, wants, preferences, attitudes, and values, as well as in shopping, purchasing, and consumption behaviors, including sports consumption. Marketing strategies need to be modified to fit the specific values and behaviors of the culture (e.g., Peter & Olson, 2008; Luna & Gupta, 2001). The population of Muslim consumers is larger than 1.2 billion, and makes up 20% of the world population (CIA, 2007). A large proportion of Muslims live in the wealthy and oil rich Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman. In addition, there are 8 million Muslim consumers in the US, carrying a total income of about $170 billion a year (Salzman, 2008). Their numbers and purchasing power make Muslims an attractive market segment for international sport marketers. To tap into this market, marketers in the sporting goods industry need to explore consumer behavior of Muslims towards sports apparel, and find out how this behavior is influenced by the Muslim culture. The Australian company, Abida, founded by a Muslim female Lebanese immigrant, is a good example of a company that has started to target the Muslim segment in the West. The company creates a swimsuit, called Burqini, which completely covers the body. As the name suggests, the polyester suit is a cross between a burqa and a bikini, and is designed in accordance with Islamic law requiring women to dress modestly. Since January, 2008 this product has been sold internationally, mainly online (Ahida, 2006).

Scholars of all schools have defined culture with more than 300 definitions (Chang, 2005). According to consumer culture theory (CCT), culture is “a fairly homogenous system of collectively shared meaning, ways of life, and unifying values shared by a member of society” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869). This theory refers to a collection of theoretical perspectives that deal with the dynamic relationship between consumer behavior, the marketplace, and cultural meaning. Both marketplace ideology and consumer culture frame consumers’ perspectives of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behavior and sense making interpretations more expected than others (Askegaard, Arnould & kjeldgaard, 2005). Religion is often a key factor of culture, greatly influencing both behavior and purchasing decisions (Essoo & Dibb, 2004). Various studies have examined religion’s influence upon people’s values, habits, attitudes, and behaviors. Delener (1990) describes religion as one of the most important cultural forces and influences on consumer behavior. According to Shao (2002) there are several ways in which individuals may consume sport. They may attend sport events as spectators, they may engage in physical activities as participants, they may partake in sport via the media, or they may purchase sporting goods. For the purpose of this study, sport consumption is limited to purchasing sporting goods, and more specifically sports apparel. The influence of demographic variables such as income, gender, age, occupation, and race on sport consumption has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Armstrong & Stratta, 2004; Pan et al., 1997). However, the influence of religion, and Islam in particular (i.e., the religion of the Muslims), has - to our knowledge - not yet been studied in the context of consuming sports apparel.

Unlike religion’s role in Western culture, the religion of Islam is a central tenet of Muslim culture and societal behavior, playing an important role in all aspects of consumption including sport consumption (Lindridge, 2005). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of Islam on sports apparel consumption. The study will examine the effect of Islamic religiosity on factors affecting sports apparel consumption, while including demographic variables in the model. Muslim immigrant adults, residing in a medium sized Canadian city, will be invited to complete a written survey. The questionnaire will consist of three sections: (a) Islamic Religiosity, measured through the Religious Commitment Inventory (RC-10; developed by Worthington el al., 2003); (b) factors affecting sports apparel consumption, including price, quality, brand and fashion consciousness, as well as Islamic obligation (adapted from Mokhlis, 2006; and Valor, 2007); and, (c) demographic information including age, gender and income. 300 Questionnaires will be distributed in three Muslim community centers before, during, and after sports events. Analysis of variances (ANOVA) will be conducted to test the effect of Islamic religiosity on each of the five factors effecting sports apparel consumption. In order to obtain relative comparison of the Islamic religiosity effects, and to test for possible interaction effects, the three demographic variables of age, gender and income will be likewise investigated. To examine paired comparisons of categorical means resulting from the variance analyses, post hoc multiple comparison tests will be employed.

The expected results of this study will have both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, it will fulfill the call of consumer culture theory (CCT) to expand the research of marketplace cultures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, this research meets the suggestions of several studies in their encouragement to examine the relationship between religion, as an important element of culture, and sports consumption behavior (Essoo & Dibb, 2004). From a practical
perspective, an understanding of the religion/culture influences will allow sporting good manufacturers to design new products that meet the wants of the Muslim segment and satisfy their needs. This strategy of diversification by combining product development (i.e., creating new products) and market development (i.e., tapping into new markets) allows companies to increase their market shares and become more profitable (Ansoff, 1957).