An Exploration of Brand Associations of Female Activewear Consumer

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In 2014, sales of female activewear totaled $15.1 billion, representing half of the entire activewear market (Kell, 2014). Female activewear market is highly competitive, with brands such as Nike developing new products for women, Lululemon targeting females specifically, and Forever 21 launching activewear lines to acquire market share. To succeed in this competitive market, brands must understand female consumers’ perceptions of activewear to inform product design and marketing strategy. Therefore, the purpose of the current research is to explore the attribute associations and their connections with the benefit associations female consumers have toward activewear brands.

Literature Review

Brand associations represent any attribute, benefit, or attitude a female consumer has toward an activewear brand and is a useful framework to investigate female perceptions of these brands (Keller, 1993). The current research focuses on attributes and benefits since these associations relate closer to basic features and values of activewear garments. In addition, sport brands can leverage attributes and benefits associations to build positive attitudes (Gladden & Funk, 2001).

A majority of sport management studies examine attributes and benefits in a horizontal structure (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2002), neglecting the hierarchical conceptualization proposed by Keller (1993). The hierarchical approach places attributes on a lower level of abstraction than benefits. Attributes are less abstract because they are the product-related or non-product-related descriptive features. Benefits are more abstract because they represent consumers’ evaluations of attributes from functional, experiential, and symbolic perspectives. Attributes function as the meanings through which benefits are achieved such that there exists a positive correlation between attributes and benefits associations (Bauer et al., 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand the attributes of activewear and how these attributes provide benefits to female consumers.

Existing research however, on activewear consumption, primarily focuses on benefits, neglecting attributes as the basic brand associations and their connection with benefits (e.g., Tong & Hawley, 2009; Chi & Kilduff, 2011). In addition, these studies lack an in-depth understanding of the benefit associations. For example, Chi and Kilduff (2011, p. 424) measured symbolic benefits of activewear as allowing consumers to “make a good impression on other people.” However, it is not clear what “good impression” means to activewear consumers. A narrow focus on benefits and lack of clarity in previous research warrants further investigation of the specific attributes and corresponding benefits female consumers associate with activewear brands.

Method

Focus groups were conducted with Australian female activewear consumers. A total of 72 women were recruited through purposeful sampling. Participants resided in metropolitan or regional locations in New South Wales and Victoria, ranging from 16 to 35 years old and engaged in physical activity for at least 150 minutes a week. A total of eight 90-minute focus groups were coordinated by one moderator. A research assistant took note inconspicuously. Discussions were guided by a semi-structured approach. Stimulus materials such as images of activewear advertisement were used (Wibeck et al., 2007). All focus groups were video- and audio-recorded and transcribed. The data was entered in QSR International NVIVO 11 and analyzed using three-step constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two coders analyzed the data to ensure dependability (Patton, 1999). Inter-coder reliability
of identified themes ranged from 0.798 to 0.997, suggesting a high level of reliability (Fleiss, 1981). A total of nine themes were identified.

Findings
Overall, the findings revealed six attributes that contribute to three benefits female consumers associate with activewear brands. Three of the attributes were product-related representing functional design, color, and size/fit. Functional designs received 183 mentions. Participants cared about fabric and practical details such as pockets that made activewear comfortable and convenient to use. Functional designs primarily linked to the functional benefit to facilitate exercise and also influence experiential benefits because participants felt self-conscious of odor and sweat caused by unbreathable fabric. Color was mentioned 59 times, with a predominant preference for bright colors. Color mainly connected to experiential benefits because participants thought bright colors looked attractive and made them feel energized. Size/fit as a theme was mentioned 124 times. Participants associated some brands with carrying small sizes and fit poorly and indicated an aversion to those brands. Poor size and fit hurt the functional benefit of exercise facilitation and also suppressed the symbolic benefit to communicate healthy and active lifestyle.

Three of the attributes were non-product-related representing price, model imagery, and presentation of femininity. Price was mentioned 60 times. Price connected with functional benefits because participants usually evaluate price based on activewear’s functionality in exercise situations. Participants claimed that functional benefits offered by expensive brands could be met by cheaper alternatives and concluded that expensive brands were ridiculously priced. Model imagery was mentioned 245 times. Participants had extensive discussions on model’s body image and authenticity. Model imagery primarily linked with the symbolic benefit because participants thought that the tall and thin models who look fake do not exercise and lack the credibility to promote healthy and active lifestyle. Tall and thin models also hurt functional benefits because they were so different from average female consumers that it is hard for participants to estimate product fit. Presentation of femininity was mentioned 34 times and connected with the functional and symbolic benefits. On the one hand, participants considered female-oriented product design as beneficial because the product can better satisfy females’ physical needs in exercises. On the other hand, participants had negative perceptions of marketing communications that indicate female’s gender role in sport. Participants thought that activewear brands consider female to be physically inferior to male, diminishing the symbolic benefit to communicate a healthy and active lifestyle for women.

Discussions and Implications
Theoretically, the current research provides new knowledge on brand association. The findings demonstrate that female activewear consumers develop benefit associations based on attribute associations, illustrating a hierarchical structure of brand associations. The findings also provide empirical support to Keller (1993)’s proposition on the correspondences between three categories of benefits and two categories of attributes. Additionally, current research contributes to research on activewear consumption by identifying the important attributes of activewear and clarifying the specific benefits female consumers associate with activewear brands.

Practically, the current research informs activewear brands on how to improve product design and marketing strategies to deliver benefits to female consumers. For example, findings indicate a brand that aims to establish healthy and active lifestyle image should adjust size/fit of garments, hire models who are physically fit, and promote the physical power of female in sport and exercise. With current research as a guide, activewear brands can leverage brand associations to achieve positive market outcomes.