The Role of Optimal Distinctiveness in Licensed Merchandise Choice

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Consuming sport team merchandise creates or maintains an association with the team. Given the notion that “to have is to belong” (Wattanasuwan, 2005, p. 182), prior researchers report sport consumers purchase or wear sport clothing to express self-identities and to feel a sense of belonging to a sport team (Kwon & Kwak, 2014). However, consumer also possess or display products for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from others (e.g., Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012). Hence, this study examines why sport consumers who support the same sport team purchase different team apparel in order to belong and be distinct.

Literature Review
Consumers signal their group identity to others through the products they own or consume (Berger & Heath, 2007; White & Dahl, 2007). Group identity accounts for how individuals signal the sense of value expressiveness in team apparel choice and enhance self-image by associating with the reference group. Thus, team licensed merchandise preference varies on levels of socially recognized belonging with a sport team. Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) highlights the importance of in-group identity in regards to consumption behaviors. Sport consumers buy and wear team apparel to signal their group status and fulfill group inclusiveness need. However, individuals also simultaneously struggle to differentiate themselves in order to establish uniqueness from other group members in their reference group.

Optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991; 2003) proposes that individuals seek an optimal balance between need for group inclusiveness and need for uniqueness to be satisfied with their group membership. Hence, consumers choose unique or less popular products to promote levels of differentiation and inclusiveness compared to others (Brewer, 1993). In addition, a consumer’s need for optimal distinctiveness depends on social context (Brewer, 2003) and the in-group size would play an important role in determining how a consumer satisfies opposing needs (Badea, et al., 2010). However, the impact of group size has produce mixed results for individuals balancing conflicting needs for uniqueness and inclusion.

One potential explanation for this ambiguity is the role of self-monitoring. Self-monitoring represents the extent to which people regulate self-presentation in groups by tailoring their actions in accordance with immediate situational cues (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). Hence, self-monitoring would mediate the impact of needs for optimal distinctiveness on team apparel choice. For example, sport fans who wish to signal their group identity will choose popular team apparel in smaller groups. In contrast, sport fans who desire distinctiveness will choose unique team apparel in larger groups. However, these effect will be altered by self-monitoring needs. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: In-group size moderates the association between optimal distinctiveness and team apparel choice.  
H2: Self-monitoring mediates the impact of optimal distinctiveness on team apparel choice.

Methods and Results
In order to examine the influence of group size and self-monitoring on optimal distinctiveness and team apparel choice, an online survey with in-group size priming was distributed to NFL fans via MTurk (N=254). All participants were randomly assigned to read a hypothetical scenario in order to create two different in-group sizes (small vs. large). Optimal distinctiveness (OD) was measured by combining two measures. First, group identity signaling (GID) was measured with three Likert items of group inclusion need within group contexts adapted from Sheldon and Bettencourt (2002). Second, personal distinctiveness (PD) was measured with the existing scale of personal uniqueness need and avoidance of similarity (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). OD was operationalized on a continuum bounded by GID and PD with lower values indicating the need for PD is greater than GID (e.g., Badea et al., 2010). Self-monitoring (SM) was measured as the extent to which an individual has the ability to modify how
they are perceived by others (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). Team apparel choice served as the outcome variable and was measured using a 7-point Likert scale about the likelihood to choose a team apparel preferred by fewer fans (i.e., 30% of the same team's fans) ranging from 1=extremely unlikely to 7=extremely likely.

The moderating effect of in-group size was examined using SPSS conditional process modeling procedure. OD had a significant main effect on unique team apparel choice (F(2,251)=20.38, p<.01). An interaction was observed between OD and in-group size accounting for a significant proportion of the variance in team apparel choice (DF(1,250)=14.43, p<.01, b =-.72, t =-3.80, p<.01). People with lower OD (i.e., PD>GID signaling) in the larger stadium group were more likely to choose unique team apparel than the smaller social group, supporting H1. To investigate H2, mediation analysis and group moderation analysis in AMOS was conducted. Results confirmed that direct effect of OD on team apparel choice was statistically significant in both small and large group setting at p<.05 (β[small]=-.19, β[large]=-.55). The mediation effect indicated that in a smaller group, SM partially mediates the effect of OD on unique team apparel choice (β[OD_Small]=.20, β[SM_Small]=.22, p<.05), but the mediating effect in a large group was not significant. The findings demonstrate that SM accounts for more variance in a relationship between OD and uniqueness seeking in a small group setting. H2 was supported in a small group, but not in a large group.

Discussion and Implications
This research demonstrates that sports consumers’ needs for optimal distinctiveness balancing between group identity signaling and personal distinctiveness influence team apparel choice. Specifically, the empirical findings in a sport context confirmed that consumers who desire distinctiveness compared with signaling their group identity were more to likely choose unique products (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2007). Furthermore, individuals’ optimal distinctiveness and the role of self-monitoring in licensed merchandise choice varies by in-group size. Sports fans with high needs for personal distinctiveness in the larger stadium group preferred unique team apparel than the smaller social group (e.g., Badea et al., 2010). However, in a smaller group, sports fans with high group identity signaling regulate their self-presentation in groups, leading to unique team apparel choice. This research extends the existing team merchandise literature in that licensed merchandise preference is affected by variations of group identity signaling and personal distinctiveness needs, as well as by situational cues and individual characteristics (e.g., in-group size or self-monitoring).

Understanding unique team merchandise demand in sports fan behavior may expand the existing perspective of how sport consumers create social standing from others within groups. Applying optimal distinctiveness needs into the context of sport team-related products, the present study provides evidence of why and how sport consumers choose a unique product over a popular team jersey. In practice, sport apparel manufacturers should consider that unique team apparel design should be highlighted to meet more individualized needs as mass market alternatives. Thus, this study can help marketers pursuing a niche marketing strategy and managers to consider conspicuous consumption in team merchandise as a new driver of demand.