Activewear Brand Associations Structure: A Comparison across Contexts

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Athleisure, a trend of wearing activewear in a non-fitness contexts, has become popular and helped the U.S. activewear grow into a $44 billion industry (NPD Group, 2016). To optimize competitive advantage, athleisure brands require deeper insight into activewear consumers with a consideration of the context in which consumers use activewear. Brand associations represent a beneficial means to provide this insight given the marketing information it provides sport brands (Gladden & Funk, 2002). The current research investigates the structure of activewear brand associations and compares the structure across consumers who use activewear in fitness and non-fitness contexts.

Literature Review

Brand associations represent ideas, thoughts and images that exist in a consumer’s memory linked to a brand. Associations are traditionally grouped into three categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes (Keller, 1993). Attributes are the product-related and non-product features that describe an activewear product or brand. Benefits are consumers’ perceptions of what the activewear product can do for them. Attitudes are consumers’ overall evaluations of an activewear product or a brand. A majority of sport brand association studies have assumed attributes, benefits, and attitudes as three distinct categories and neglect to understand their structural relationships (Gladden & Funk, 2002). Conceptually, the brand association structure is represented by a chain that links attributes to attitudes through benefits. This structure has been tested in a sport team brand association study (Bauer et al., 2008). Therefore, it is hypothesized that the structure will exists for activewear brands:

H1: Activewear brand association has a structure in which perceived product-related and non-product-related activewear attributes positively influence perceived benefits, and perceived benefits positively influence attitude towards activewear.

However, the context in which activewear is used may influence the brand association structure by altering connections from attributes to benefits (Gutman, 1982). According to Keller (1993), product-related attributes tend to generate benefits related to consumers’ physical needs, while non-product-related attributes contribute to social-psychological needs. Within fitness contexts such as running on a treadmill, there are considerable physical performance requirements that could result in greater influence of product-related attributes on perceived benefits. In contrast, in non-fitness contexts such as shopping or dining which has a significant social component, non-product-related attributes may exert greater influence. Therefore, the following hypotheses test these potential structural differences:

H2: The influence of product-related activewear attributes on perceived benefits is greater for consumers who wear activewear primarily for fitness contexts.

H3: The influence of non-product-related activewear attributes on perceived benefits is greater for consumers who wear activewear primarily in non-fitness contexts.

Method

Data were collected from female activewear consumers in Australia using an online survey. The survey was distributed through an online survey panel that consisted of adult females who had purchased activewear in the past 2 years. Female consumers were chosen as the research subjects because of their increasing relevance for activewear marketing (Zhou et al., in press). A total of 1,025 usable surveys were collected. The survey instrument included:
Activewear brand associations comprised of a) three items for perceived product-related attributes which focused on product quality (i.e., fabric, durability, fit-for-purpose); b) three items for perceived non-product-related attributes that focus on consumers’ perceptions of how well brands have delivered marketing messages related to wellbeing, physical exercise, and positive feelings about oneself; c) three items for perceived benefits which reflected how activewear has contributed to consumers’ physical appearance, confidence, and healthy lifestyle; and d) two items to assess attitudes toward activewear over other clothing options and attitudinal loyalty toward activewear brands. The activewear use context was measured as the frequency of wearing activewear in fitness (e.g., sport and exercise) and non-fitness (e.g., shopping, dining out, and work) contexts.

To test H1, structural equation modeling using Amos 24 was employed. The results indicated a satisfactory fit (χ²(40) = 130.59, χ²/df = 3.265, p < .001; RMSEA = .047, CFI = .982) revealing that the influence of non-product-related attributes on benefits is significantly larger than that of product attributes (βnonproduct = .616, βproduct = .202). Hence, H1 is supported. To test H2 and H3, respondents were placed into either a fitness or non-fitness category based on composite scores and frequencies of wearing activewear resulting in a sample size of 449, with 289 in the fitness group (coded as “0”) and 160 in the non-fitness group. Moderation analyses in AMOS showed no significant interaction between perceived product-attributes and the consumer group (p = .602) or between perceived non-product-attributes and the consumer group (p = .125). Hence, H2 and H3 were not supported. However, a marginally significant result was observed for the influence of consumer group on perceived benefits (β = .310, p = .057), indicating that when holding other variables constant, the non-fitness group perceived a greater level of benefits than the fitness group.

Discussion and Implications
The current research provides new insight on the structure of brand associations in an activewear context. Results of the current research indicate that brand associations have a structure in which attributes lead to benefits, and then attitudes. Specifically, consumers’ perceptions of the quality of activewear and brands’ marketing messages influence the degree to which consumers feel that activewear has improved their physical appearance, confidence, and healthy lifestyle, and these perceived benefits lead consumers to prefer activewear over alternative clothing options and become loyal to specific activewear brands. Results also suggest that wearing activewear in non-fitness context contributes more to consumers’ perceived physical appearance, confidence, and healthy lifestyle. Future research can further compare consumers’ perceptions and usage behaviors in different contexts.

Practically, the results indicate that activewear is more effective in creating benefits when consumers wear activewear in non-fitness contexts rather than the fitness contexts. This means that to attract consumers and build loyalty, brands should promote activewear in non-fitness settings such as providing suggestions on how to wear activewear as casual outfits when consumers go shopping or dining out. Moreover, sending the right marketing messages is more useful to create positive consumer perceptions than showing product features. Hence, activewear commercials should demonstrate how activewear relates to physical appearance, confidence, and lifestyle instead of describing the fabric or designs.