Sportswear Consumption among College Students: A Comparison between the U.S. and South Korea

Min Jung Kim, University of New Mexico
Luke Lunhua Mao, University of New Mexico
Hyun Jung Lee, Sookmyung Women's University
Sangil Lee, Sookmyung Women's University

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Sportswear, including athletic apparel and footwear, is a major sector within sport industry (Heroux, 2017). The annual world sportswear market is estimated to reach $185 billion by 2020 by AlliedMarketResearch (2015) and is estimated at $270 billion already in the year of 2015 by Morgan Stanley Research (2015). This sector has also a strong prospect for continued growth at an estimated rate of 4.3% driven by an elevated awareness of health, the global acceptance of athletic lifestyle (Morgan Stanley, 2017), the rise of athleisure consumers, the surge of female participation in sports, and avid marketing of professional sports teams and sportswear firms (Lim, Kim, & Cheong, 2016; Wu & Chalip, 2013).

On the one hand, the U.S. remains the world’s largest sportswear market. With 60 to 65 million individuals participating in sport activities and strong growth in high school participation, the sportswear sector is estimated at US$97 billion annually (Morgan Stanley, 2017), accounting for 36% of world market. On the other hand, it has been forecasted that Asia is one of the regions that have the most room for growth (Morgan Stanley, 2017). South Korea, for example, as the fourth largest economy in Asia and 11th largest economy in the world (countryeconomy.com, 2016), has become one of the significant sportswear markets. The sportswear market is reached almost US$10 billion in 2016 (Economic Review, 2017). Furthermore, there is an increased demand for sportswear as the consumer lifestyle shifted from less physical activities to more sporting activities. Currently, only about 9% of the entire population participate in sporting clubs, and the government strives to support sports clubs and encourage people to participate in more sporting activities (KOREA.net, 2016; The Korea Bizwire, 2016).

Consumption practice is known to be cultural and symbolic (McCracken, 1990) and sportswear consumption is no exception (Kwak & Kang, 2009). For instance, in the Hofstede’s (1980) typology of cultural differences, South Korea is considered as collectivism oriented and the U.S. individualism oriented. The differences in cultural dimensions have a substantial impact on consumption, innovation, and retailing practices (Mooij & Hofstede, 2002; Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoah, 2007; Steenkamp, Hofstede, & Wedel, 1999). Particularly, South Korean consumers are found to be more sensitive to fashion (Boulked, 2016) and more concerned with the brand name, and after-sales service (Santander Trade, 2017).

Consumers differ in shopping orientations (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994) and some consumers are more hedonistic-oriented while others are more utilitarian-oriented. Hedonistic-oriented consumers seek the potential entertainment value of shopping and the enjoyment arising from the experience (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Utilitarian-oriented consumers concern with efficiency and timely purchasing to achieve goals with minimum irritation. These shopping orientations have both subjective and objective aspects, and they are essentially considered as more abstract constructs than product attributes (Keller, 1993) because they are extracted from both qualitative and quantitative factors (Babin et al., 1994).

Consumers are also benefit seeking (Haley, 1968). They seek for benefits derived from consumption practices (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1983). In sportswear consumption, consumers buy clothing as a means of identifying with roles or prestige associated with its consumption and or to reflect their personality (Shim & Bickle, 1994). Moreover, researchers have stated racial origin may influence use clothing as a means to express ethnicity, prestige, and status (Alexis, 1962; Hirschman, 1980; O’Neal, 1998; Portis, 1966).

Despite the economic significance of this industrial sector, there is limited understanding about how consumers
experience sportswear shopping, how they perceive sportswear attributes and benefits in these two cultural diverse settings. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the sportswear consumption behavior between two different cultural contexts: The United States and South Korea. Specifically, this study investigated how shopping orientations, sportswear attribute evaluations, and sportswear benefits sought influenced college students’ purchase satisfaction and purchase intention.

Participants of this study included 246 college students in the United States and 350 college students in South Korea who had recently purchased sportswear products. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that consisted of six parts: shopping orientation (Babin et al., 1994), sportswear attribute evaluations (Abraham & Littrell, 1995; Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990), clothing benefits sought (Hwang, 2005, 2007; Lee & Lee, 2004; Shim & Bickle, 1994; Shim & Drake, 1988), satisfaction (Morganosky, 1984), repurchase intentions (Macintosh & Lockshin, 1997), and demographics. All items with proven sound psychometric properties were adapted from the existing literature and modified to suit the context of current research.

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to examine dimensionality, convergent and discriminate validity of the scales item. All factor loading scores were greater than 0.70. For the internal consistency of the measurement, Cronbach α scores were calculated, and all scores were showed greater than 0.650. Following an examination of psychometric properties of the instrument, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to compare the differences between the U.S. and South Korean sportswear consumption behavior. The results suggested that there were statistically significant differences for shopping orientations, including hedonic shopping (p=.000), rational shopping (p=.005), and price-exploratory shopping (p=.046); also, there were statistically significant differences in terms of benefits sought, including fashion orientation (p=.001), body appearance and impression (p=.000), personal identity (p=.002), and price (p=.000). And there was no statistically significant on brand value (p=.353). Additionally, there were significant differences on utilitarian attribute evaluations (p=.000) and no differences on aesthetic attribute evaluations (p=.446).

Finally, multiple regression analyses were used to compare the relationships among shopping orientation, sportswear attribute evaluation, and sportswear benefits sought toward satisfaction in the two settings. It is found that in the U.S. setting consumers' satisfaction is primarily driven by hedonic shopping, rational shopping, brand value, personal identity, and aesthetic attributes; and in South Korea setting primarily driven by rational shopping, price-exploratory shopping, body appearance, personal identity, price, and both aesthetic and utilitarian attributes of the product. Given the growth potential in the Asian market, it is critical to understand consumers behavior in these markets. The differences identified in this study can have marketing implications for sportswear businesses in terms of how they can better create, communicate and deliver values to the consumers in these markets. This study is in the final stage of data analysis, we expect to present our final findings in the conference.