Communicating through Sportswear: An Examination of Self-Perceptions and First Impressions of Sport Participants

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The global sportswear market reached 78 billion dollars in 2016, showing a growth rate of 7 percent for the third year in a row, doubling any other fashion category. The prospect for sportswear sales is estimated to be 165 billion dollars in 2017 and to reach 184.6 billion dollars by 2020 (Euromonitor International, 2017). This growth was driven by consumers’ more active lifestyles and the rise of the “athleisure” clothing category (Mckinsey, 2017).

Meanwhile, consumers purchase sportswear for a variety of reasons, whether it is for a particular occasion (game viewing), for performance enhancement (active wear), or simply as a fashion statement. However, research in the self-expressive nature of consumption has identified clothing as a product that has significant social identity congruence (Bull, 1975; Davis, 1984; Wheat & Dickson, 1999) and is often used as a non-verbal expressive tool (Nielsen & Kernaleguen, 1976). In the current digital age of social networking and abundance of advertisements, the importance of making a good first impression cannot be overemphasized for not only the average consumer, but also brands and endorsers.

Upon review of sportswear literature, most studies were focused on themes such as benefits sought, brand preferences, brand related themes such as brand image or brand loyalty, and their relationships with consumption behavior. Also, first impression studies that do include sportswear in their research design have either forcefully categorized clothing choices into broad categories (i.e., casual look, professional look, sporty look) or have been manipulated to best represent the intention of the user or researcher. Therefore, there have not been any studies that have looked into the everyday sportswear choices of sports participants and the communicative aspects of their clothing choices.

Based on the literature in consumer research and first impression formation, the primary purpose of the current study was to investigate how sports participants’ everyday clothing choices are interpreted by observers. Secondly, to compare the self-perceptions of sportswear users with the first impressions formed by casual onlookers. This study is based in a social identity theory in that people are often known to clothe themselves to acknowledge being part of a group (Satrapa et al., 1992). Further, the field of person impression and person perception theory tells us that people make inferences about others’ various qualities including personality characteristics through the process of categorization (Tajiri, 1969; Rosch, 1973), and it was postulated that first impression judgments of sports participants may vary based on the degree of sport orientation of the clothing.

This study employed a survey-based field study. Standardized photos of sport club participants (target participants) were collected from colleges located in Seoul, as well as the self-perceptions of need to belong (10 items; Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013), consumers’ need for uniqueness (12 items; Ruvio, Shoham, & Brenčič, 2008), athletic identity (10 items; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993), fashion consciousness (4 items; Shim & Gehrt, 1996), and human brand personality traits (5 items; Carlson & Donavan, 2013). Photos were collected at the gatherings of each sport club as social identity theory states that the behavior of signaling an identity depends on the situational salience of a particular identity (in this case the athletic identity). Photos were divided into three clothing categories of active sportswear, casual sportswear, and non-sportswear. Next, survey booklets for observer participants were prepared containing 3 random photos asking for first impression judgments about the target participants on the same variables as the self-perceptions.

The target participant sample consisted of 90 participants who participate in baseball, basketball, soccer, or
weightlifting sport clubs. A total of 444 responses were collected, and after removing incomplete responses, 429 responses were used for final analysis. Each booklet contained 3 random photos of sports club members, generating a total of 954 usable first impression judgments, with approximately 300 first impression judgments per clothing category. Data analysis revealed that all the multiple-item scales reached satisfactory reliability levels with Cronbach’s alpha levels ranging from .83 to .95.

To compare the first impression judgments between the clothing categories, the study conducted one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) using SPSS 21.0. Results indicated significant results in the variables of need to belong \(F(2, 951)=3.71, p=0.03\), need for uniqueness \(F(2, 951)=7.53, p=0.001\), athletic identity \(F(2, 951)=86.92, p<0.001\), fashion consciousness \(F(2, 951)=19.35, p<0.001\), imaginativeness \(F(2, 951)=5.09, p=0.006\), successfulness \(F(2, 951)=10.28, p<0.001\), charmingness \(F(2, 951)=6.81, p=0.001\), and toughness \(F(2, 951)=26.75, p<0.001\), with wholesomeness being the only variable in which significant differences were not found. Subsequent post hoc tests revealed that active sportswear and non-sportswear wearers were rated higher than casual sportswear wearers for most of the variables with the only exceptions occurring in blatantly athletic domains such as athletic identity and toughness.

In comparing the self-perceptions of sports club participants with the first impression averages, independent samples \(t\)-tests were conducted. Results showed significant differences in all variables, which were the need to belong \(t=2.91, p=0.004\), need for uniqueness \(t=3.26, p=0.001\), athletic identity \(t=12.74, p<0.001\), fashion consciousness \(t=4.91, p<0.001\), wholesomeness \(t=2.36, p=0.02\), imaginativeness \(t=8.63, p<0.001\), successfulness \(t=8.03, p<0.001\), charmingness \(8.80, p<0.001\), toughness \(t=3.40, p=0.001\). In all cases, the self-perception scores were significantly higher than first impression averages.

The current study is one of the first attempts to investigate how identities are communicated through sportswear and perceived by others. Results suggest that the first impressions formed about sport club members differ significantly based on the clothing category, as well as the physical traits (body type) of the individual. Also, the current study confirmed previous results indicating the presence of self-assessment bias in a sports context. Some of the managerial implications based on these results suggest that the sportswear industry may wish to create marketing and promotional communications to enhance the image of casual sportswear wearers. Also, for sponsors, not only the characteristics of each individual clothing item, but the overall look should be considered when sponsoring individual athletes. Further applied and theoretical implications are discussed along with future directions for research.