

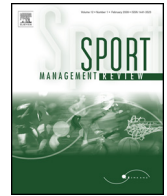


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# Dress for fit: An exploration of female activewear consumption

Xiaochen Zhou<sup>a,\*</sup>, Clare Hanlon<sup>b</sup>, Jonathan Robertson<sup>c</sup>, Ramon Spaaij<sup>b</sup>,  
Hans Westerbeek<sup>b</sup>, Allison Hossack<sup>d</sup>, Daniel C. Funk<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Temple University, School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management, 309 Speakman Hall, 1810 N. 13th St., Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA

<sup>b</sup> Institute of Sport, Exercise and Active Living, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, Australia

<sup>c</sup> Faculty Business and Law, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood VIC 3125, Australia

<sup>d</sup> Think Company, 1315 Walnut Street, Suite 201, Philadelphia, PA 19107, USA

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### ABSTRACT

While the female activewear market is growing rapidly, research on activewear consumption and female consumers is lagging. Existing researchers have failed to produce an in-depth understanding of female consumers' perceptions of activewear, thereby providing limited insights for the activewear industry. Drawing upon brand association theory and the functional, expressive, and aesthetic model, the authors identify important attributes of activewear brands and how attributes lead to benefits pursued by female activewear consumers. Focus groups were conducted with 72 female activewear consumers in Australia. Findings reveal three product-related attributes (functional design, colour, and size and fit) and two non-product-related attributes (price and model imagery) influence the fulfillment of four benefits (mood enhancement, exercise facilitation, healthy and active lifestyle, and physical fit body image). This research contributes theoretical and empirical knowledge about activewear consumption and the vertical structure of brand associations. Findings of this research can help activewear brands deliver benefits to female consumers through improved product designs and marketing strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

Women's apparels have dominated the activewear market. In the U.S., which is the world's largest market for activewear, sales of female activewear totaled \$15.1 billion in 2014, representing half of the U.S. activewear market (Kell, 2014). On the global level, the female activewear market outpaces the male's counterpart and is expected to grow at the speed of 5.7% per year from 2015 to 2020 (Allied Market Research, 2015). Sports apparel brands such as Under Armour, which has traditionally focused on the men's market, are now developing new lines of women's garments. New brands have entered this market, including lululemon, Lorna Jane, and Athleta. As a result, women have emerged as an important and lucrative segment in the activewear industry on a global level.

To succeed in the competitive market, brand managers should focus on design and marketing strategies that specifically address female consumer needs. Women consider a variety of factors, such as fashion and brand name, when purchasing and

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [zxcchen@temple.edu](mailto:zxcchen@temple.edu) (X. Zhou).

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using sport garments, and they require activewear designs that symbolize a modern way of living for active females (O'Sullivan, Hanlon, Spaaij & Westerbeek, 2017). However, the needs of female activewear consumers remain unclear, as existing researchers have yet to systematically investigate this growing consumer segment. Furthermore, past scholars have focused on females' overall attitude toward activewear, providing limited guidance on what activewear brands can or should do to address females' needs (Chi & Kilduff, 2011; Tong & Hawley, 2009). In a review of the relevant literature, O'Sullivan et al. (2017) identify a knowledge gap regarding female activewear consumers and suggest "this gap limits the industry's ability to effectively market to and cater for the activewear consumption needs of females" (p. 11). Further research is necessary to specifically consider activewear consumption from the female perspective.

In the current research, we advance research on female activewear consumption by examining female consumers' perceptions of activewear brands. To guide this investigation, we integrate research on brand association with clothing and textile research to investigate female consumers' perceptions of the attributes and benefits in activewear usage. The paper is organized into four sections. The first provides a review of brand association research and integrates Lamb and Kallal's (1992) functional, expressive, aesthetic model (FEA) to develop two research questions. The second section describes the method used to collect information from female activewear consumers using a series of focus groups. The third reports identified categories and related quotes that emerged from the focus groups. The final section discusses the findings followed by theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## 2. Literature review and theory

### 2.1. Brand association

Brand associations are informational nodes that exist within a consumer's memory network linked to a specific brand (Aaker, 1989). Brand associations allow consumers to develop knowledge about a brand, build brand image, and assign meaning to that brand (Keller, 1993). Strong, unique, and positive brand associations lead to positive market outcomes and facilitate business strategy. Brand associations represent an important concept in sport business because they facilitate the creation of market segments and allow sport entities to market athletes, teams, and sport leagues (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Bouzdine-Chameeva, Ferrand, Valette-Florence, & Chanavat, 2015; Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014).

Brand associations are classified into three categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes (Keller, 1993). Attributes refer to the descriptive features of a brand and include product-related and non-product-related attributes. Product-related attributes represent the inherent features that allow a product to perform while non-product-related attributes are factors that do not impact product performance but affect purchase or consumption experience. Benefits are the values consumers attach to a product and consist of three types: functional benefits, experiential benefits, and symbolic benefits. Functional benefits are the intrinsic advantages derived from product performance (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Experiential benefits relate to consumers' affective state and also include the sensory experience during product usage (Orth & De Marchi, 2007). Symbolic benefits represent the extrinsic advantages related with consumers' self-concepts when using a product (Solomon, 1983). Finally, the third association category is brand attitude and represents consumers' overall evaluations of a brand. Within sport management research, Gladden and Funk (2002) acknowledge sport brand attitudes are abstract which may limit their usefulness when in-depth perceptions of a brand are required. Hence, the current research focuses on attributes and benefits because they relate more closely to basic features and values of activewear garments and can ultimately determine consumers' attitudes toward activewear brands (Gladden & Funk, 2002).

Sport management researchers have mainly focused on developing scales that capture a broad range of brand associations with sports entities (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2014; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). While varying in their scopes, the authors generally draw from the same conceptual framework by assuming attributes and benefits are two types of brand associations that are conceptually horizontal. In developing the team association model (TAM), Gladden and Funk (2002) suggested attributes and benefits are two parallel factors that explain team brand association. The model yielded marginal fit, and the authors reported a number of possible paths that could improve the fit of structural model. Ross et al. (2006) advanced the TAM and identified 11 dimensions of team brand association. However, with a focus on adjusting items instead of modifying the structure, Ross et al. (2006) also assumed a horizontal structure of brand association. In a similar vein, Kunkel et al. (2014) examined brand association at the sport league level. Although being aware of the attribute and benefit classification, Kunkel et al. (2014) have not tested the dimensionality of the 17-item brand association scale developed, thus providing limited insight on the structure of sport brand association. To date, sport management researchers have focused on discovering the content of brand association of different sport brands. Little progress has been made in exploring the relationships between attributes and benefits to understand the structure of brand association.

Brand association might have a vertical structure that allows a cause-and-effect relationship from attributes to benefits. Conceptually, Keller (1993) proposed that attributes and benefits have different levels of abstraction. Attributes are less abstract because they relate closer with the tangible features of a brand. Benefits are more abstract because they connect with consumer values and can be regarded as consumers' evaluations of product attributes. Keller (1993) further proposed that functional and experiential benefits usually connect with product-related attributes while symbolic benefits usually connect with non-product-related attributes. In a similar vein, the means-end chain theory considers attributes and benefits as hierarchically organized (Gutman, 1982). Attributes exist on the bottom level and serve as the means through which consumers achieve higher-level benefits as the desired end of consumption. To illustrate the connection between attributes

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