THINK BIG ⊕ WE DO℠

Momentum:
Research & Innovation

fall 2017

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Welcome to the latest issue of *Momentum: Research and Innovation*, the research and scholarly activity magazine of the University of Rhode Island. We are proud to share with you the unique accomplishments of the faculty, students and staff in developing scholarship that will help to change the world. The responsibilities of a research institution such as the University of Rhode Island include teaching and the discovery of new information. Sharing that new information with others allows it to be applied, leading to improvement in our daily lives. *Momentum: Research and Innovation* is one of the ways we can share our new information and new scholarly activities with the world. We hope you will enjoy the adventures.

Sincerely,

Gerald Sonnenfeld, Ph.D.
Vice President for Research
and Economic Development

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What's inside

Influencing Factors
ON FASHION CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

written by **EMMA GAUTHIER '18**

> **"ONE ISSUE IN PARTICULAR IS CHILD LABOR. SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE IT SHOULD BE OUTLAWED BECAUSE IT EXPLOITS CHILDREN."**
>
> – JI HYE KANG

People decide to buy certain products based on many aspects such as color, price, fabric, or fit. Noticing discrepancies in consumers' reactions to business practices in the global fashion market, Ji Hye Kang, assistant professor of textiles, fashion merchandising and design in the University of Rhode Island, College of Business Administration, decided to investigate one group of factors: cross-cultural consumer and business issues at work in the global fashion industry.

"Globalization is one of the most powerful forces in the fashion market," Kang says.

Kang brought her culture and research into the classroom to create what she calls a cross-cultural teaching experience. She partnered with Yonsei University, South Korea where classes had the same assignments and shared students work via an online meeting system – to follow consumer behavior with global brands. One team of students in the U.S. and one team of students in Korea followed Nike, and compared how the branding strategies and consumer behavior toward the product are similar or different in each country. Both groups of students learned about each other's cultures, as well as how branded products are consumed around the world.

"It's not study abroad; it's cost-effective," Kang says. "The course allowed students to have a little taste of international experiences, and get more information about international consumer markets."

Recently, Kang expanded her consumer research on sustainability. Using data from 164 U.S. respondents and 217 Korean respondents, Kang examined how mass media and education influence each group of consumers' emotions and cognition – their understanding, perception or experience. She looked at how these factors influenced a person's purchase

of apparel manufactured in socially sustainable ways. Interestingly, the research found that knowledge of sustainability is a strong influence on the purchasing decisions of U.S. consumers. Kang found that the positive emotions Korean consumers feel when they buy the socially sustainable apparel products was of greater influence on them than cognition. Consumer decision-making processes are influenced by differences in an individual's cultural and social environment.

"Sustainability is an important issue," she says. "Especially in the apparel and textile industry."

Apparel is a commodity that takes up quantities of resources such as labor, water, chemicals and materials. Kang found that consumer consideration of the benefits stemming from ethical consumption can serve as a factor in leading retailers to employ more environmentally-sustainable manufacturing processes.

"One issue in particular is child labor. Some people believe it should be outlawed because it exploits children," she says.

Kang has been researching the impact of morals on Korean female consumers' purchasing behavior since 2013. She also researches organic and naturally dyed fashion products, and found what she calls "culturally sound situational involvement."

In 2013, the data of 372 Korean responses in online surveys was analyzed, revealing that interest in environmental issues increased. Responders consider the environment to be a public well-being issue, and believe social and individuals efforts should bring positive outcomes, such as reducing pollution.

"As ethic-related decisions are known to vary across culture, tradition, products, an investigation of culturally different consumers on specific products

will contribute to a richer understanding of ethical consumption," Kang says.

But what makes consumers purchase fashion products online? Online consumer behavior ties into another aspect of her research: big data. Kang especially interested in consumer-generated data such as comments posted online.

Kang analyzed fashion products sold at Macy's and Amazon through customer reviews, including numerical data and text data. She and her colleagues in computer engineering and marketing collected consumer reviews on 39 fashion items, including designer handbags, jeans, and shoes posted from 2005 to 2017. They analyzed 116,773 reviews, the team found that different consumer expectations directly related to the retailers. Amazon expanded its business to fashion in 2009. It accelerated by launching seven private brands in

2016 (Business Insider 2016). Amazon's clothing and accessory sales are expected to grow nearly 30% next year, to $28 billion. By comparison, Macy's apparel sales are expected to drop by 4%, to $22 billion during the same period (Business Insider 2017).

"If people have certain expectations, retailers need to review the product descriptions to promote and appeal to their own consumers," Kang suggests. "Manufacturers should also have ideas as to how they can promote ideas to different retailers."

Kang says stores use two primary methods to collect online customer feedback: surveys prompting customers from the website and customers' voluntary reviews. The reviews customers take are one of the most effective ways to get accurate responses from customers about their experiences. She analyzed the retail reviews directly.

Ji Hye Kang
assistant professor of textiles, fashion merchandising and design

"When consumers are participating in the survey, sometimes they adjust their responses to be nice or they do not exactly know how to answer the questions. For example, it could be hard for consumers to answer how much money they are willing to pay for an ethically manufactured item," Kang says. "When we analyze their review, we can see the outcomes about their reactions to the product."

Kang draws from her experience in the fashion marketing industry, where she worked as a consultant and a merchandiser prior to joining academia. She says that these insights from customers are exactly what businesses should capitalize on. By analyzing a variety of data and buyers' decision making processes, retailers can improve their services to benefiting not only the customer, but the profitability and marker reach of the global fashion industry.

In the future, Kang hopes to expand her research to include more cultures and clusters of people for a deeper understanding of consumers behavior.

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