

## Understanding College Students' Attitudes toward Made in USA Apparel Products: Exploration of Projective Techniques

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**Introduction** In recent years, manufacturing of apparel products in America has been increasing due to growing consumer demand, changing business models, and rising government support. Although previous research in country-of-origin (COO) literature has examined consumers' attitudes towards American made products, many studies have focused on how consumers utilized country information as a product attribute to help them evaluate the quality of the products and to understand consumers' views about products manufactured in developed countries vs. developing countries (e.g., Samiee, 1994). Reasons for consumers to buy Made in USA products vary from supporting domestic economy to concerning product safety (Muir & Noll, 2012). Known for their social consciousness, Generation Y consumers (i.e., college students) have also been interested in buying Made in USA products (Perception Research Services, 2013); however, little research has been conducted to understand Gen Y consumers' attitudes towards Made in USA products. The purpose of this study was 1) to explore college students' attitudes toward "made in USA" apparel products by investigating the meanings they associate with those products and by understanding their perceptions about consumers who purchase American made apparel products and 2) to uncover whether the "made in USA" label is truly important among college-aged consumers for their apparel purchase decisions.

**Theoretical Framework** According to the attitude literature, consumers' attitudes include both affective and cognitive responses to an attitude object (Verplanken, Hofstee, & Janssen, 1998). Affective responses to an attitude object are referred to as the feelings or emotions. Sensorial, social, and symbolic aspects represent the affective part. Cognitive responses would include consumer's beliefs, thoughts, or rational arguments. Functional and extrinsic aspects (e.g., price or beliefs about quality) represent the cognitive part (Sijtsema, et al., 2007). It is proposed that consumers would associate with and develop attitudes toward "Made in USA" apparel products that reflect both affective and cognitive dimensions.

**Method** Projective techniques often are helpful to enter the private worlds of subjects to reveal their inner perspectives in ways they feel more comfortable (Donoghue, 2000). Considering that socially desirable bias may potentially exist because buying "Made in USA" may imply supporting a social cause, this study utilized projective techniques, specifically word association and projective questioning (Donoghue, 2000), to explore consumers' associated meanings with and attitudes towards "made in USA" apparel products. Qualitative data were gathered based on the word association technique by asking the participants what "Made in USA" means to them. Participants were instructed to write down as many thoughts that came to mind as possible. Through projective questioning, participants were also asked to indicate what they thought the reasons would be for consumers to purchase Made in USA apparel products. Additionally, the

participants were asked to rate the importance (1 = least important to 7 = very important) of 11 apparel attributes for their apparel purchase decisions. Qualitative data were analyzed to identify significant ideas mentioned among participants. The ideas were categorized based on the content phrases picked out of the data. Then the researchers reviewed the list of items and assigned them into categories based on similarities, resulting in an inter-rater reliability of 94%. Differences in categorization were discussed between the researchers until a consensus was achieved.

**Results** One hundred-thirty college students were recruited ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21.08$ , 83% female). Data analyses based on the first question revealed eight themes which were categorized into either the affective or the cognitive dimension. The affective dimension included 1) Consumer Pride and 2) Social Image; the cognitive dimension consisted of 1) Manufacturing – Everything American vs. Only Produced in the US, 2) Support for the Economy, 3) Product Quality and Safety, 4) Sustainability, 5) High Price, and 6) Uncommonness. Similar themes emerged from the analyses of responses from the second question although there were variations (e.g., loyalty to American brands). Quantitative data analyses revealed that the top two important attributes were fit ( $M = 6.55$ ) and style ( $M = 5.94$ ). The Made in USA attribute came in the second last ( $M = 3.00$ ).

**Discussion and Conclusions** This study explored college students' attitudes toward "Made in USA" apparel products through understanding their associated meanings with those products and uncovered their perceptions as to why consumers purchase those products. Results show that college students have developed both affective and cognitive attitudes toward Made in USA apparel products, as suggested in the literature (Verplanken, et al., 1998). Regarding apparel attribute importance, although millennial consumers have favored Made in USA products, the specific attribute may not be as important partly due to the higher price perceptions as shown in our data. Theoretical implications include 1) to the researchers' knowledge, this is the first study utilizing projective techniques to study consumers' attitudes toward Made in USA products; 2) the themes emerged from the data can serve as a framework to further understand the influential factors for consumers to purchase Made in USA apparel products.

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