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Multi-cultural, multi-course collaborative project: Learning outcomes and project impact

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*Background.* A multi-course collaborative project is an effective way to enhance student learning because it not only facilitates the development of social skills, but also provides students an opportunity to understand the importance of collaboration with people in diverse areas in the industry (Kim, LaFleur, & Schaeffer, 2008). A collaborative project in a multi-cultural setting enhances student learning by exposing students to other cultures and broadening their scope of knowledge and applications (Chen, Hsu, & Caropreso, 2006). Despite the benefits of multi-course collaborative projects within a multi-cultural environment, few studies have examined the effectiveness of such projects in student learning in fashion and merchandising disciplines. Using Facebook as a communication tool, this study developed and tested a model that explains the relationships among students' beliefs about multi-cultural, multi-course collaborative projects; cognitive, social, and emotional learning outcomes; and perceived project impact.

*Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses.* This study is based on the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which suggests that social learning occurs in a social context and that collaborative learning facilitates students' social and cognitive learning through interpersonal communication, support from members, and critical thinking. Although the theory originally included only cognitive and social learning outcomes, researchers have found that emotional learning is also critical in improving student learning in collaborative projects. Compared with cognitive/social learning, emotional learning outcomes were even found to be a better predictor of students' attitude toward multicourse collaborative projects (Byun, Kim, & Duffey, 2012). Therefore, this study examined the influence of project and group activity-related factors on learning outcomes and perceived project impact. Project-related factors included the importance of cultural understanding (CU), understanding of other countries' fashion industry (UFI), and international collaborative project (ICP). Group activity-related factors consisted of international group efficacy (IGE), feedback from international group members (FGM), and sense of community (SC). We tested (1) the influence of these factors on cognitive (COG) (H1a~f), social (SOC) (H2a~f), and emotional (EMO) (H3a~f) learning outcomes; (2) the influence of CU, UFI, ICP, IGE, FGM, and SC on perceived project impact (H4a~f); and (3) the influence of COG, SOC, and EMO on perceived project impact (H5a~c).

*Implementation.* A multi-cultural, multi-course collaborative project was developed to provide students an opportunity to obtain knowledge about global fashion retail environments. Students in two retailing courses and two merchandising courses in the U.S. and S. Korea were involved in the project. Students were given a hypothetical scenario in which they developed business plans and merchandising strategies to expand their business into a foreign country (the U.S. or S. Korea). Four groups were formed in each course and groups worked on different

retailers with different retail formats. Students conducted in-depth market research for the assigned retailer in the home country (Part 1). A project Facebook was created to allow students to share their projects with students in other courses. Based on the information learned from Part 1, students in each country conducted an in-depth analysis of different cultural environments and potential competitors in the country to enter, and created entry strategies (Part 2). Each group created an audio-recorded PowerPoint presentation, converted it into a video, and uploaded it to the project Facebook. Students used Facebook to post questions, feedback, or comments.

*Method.* A convenience sample was used to collect the data. Students in the four courses participated in the survey: Visual Merchandising (n=22) and Global Retailing (n=11) in a Southeast university in the U.S. and Fashion Buying and Merchandising (n=37) and Fashion Retailing (26) in universities in S. Korea. Four bilingual faculty members created and reviewed English and Korean versions of the questionnaire. Each question had two versions for Korean students. The survey was conducted in class after the final project presentation.

*Results.* The average age of the respondents was 22 years old. About 73% of them were female and 82% were juniors or seniors. Factor analysis confirmed uni-dimensionality for each construct used in our model. Cronbach's *alphas* of the measures ranged from .84 to .96. To test hypotheses, stepwise multiple regression was used. UFI ( $\beta^* = .349$ ), FGM ( $\beta^* = .264$ ), and ICP ( $\beta^* = .241$ ) significantly affected COG (H1b, c, e supported). ICP ( $\beta^* = .483$ ) and FGM ( $\beta^* = .201$ ) significantly affected SOC (H2b, e supported). FGM ( $\beta^* = .509$ ) significantly affected EMO (H3e supported). In addition, ICP ( $\beta^* = .421$ ) and FGM ( $\beta^* = .296$ ) significantly affected perceived project impact (H4c, e supported). Finally, COG ( $\beta^* = .290$ ), SOC ( $\beta^* = .351$ ), and EMO ( $\beta^* = .288$ ) significantly influenced perceived project impact (H5a~c supported).

*Discussions and Future Plan.* Our findings suggest that in a multi-cultural, multi-course collaborative project, the feedback from international group members is key to enhance students' cognitive, social, and emotional learning outcomes as well as students' perceived project impact (i.e., students' perception that the project will be beneficial and valuable to their future careers, and students' perceived degree of learning through the project). Students' perceived importance of a collaborative project was also found to be an important factor influencing cognitive and social learning outcomes and perceived project impact. Incorporating Facebook as a communication tool, we will continue to implement this project with different courses and different countries.

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