Interview with Kim, Jung-Hyun PR Asset Development Division at KOFOTI

한국섬유산업연합회
Korea Federation of Textile Industries

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This interview was conducted with Kim, Jung-Hyun, Director of the PR Asset Development Division at the Korea Federation of Textile Industries (KOFOTI), a leading organization representing Korea's textile and fashion industry.

With professional expertise in apparel studies and fashion marketing, she built hands-on industry experience at global buying offices such as Mast Industries and Youngone Trading. She later joined KOFOTI, where she has spent the past 22 years working at the forefront of the industry, playing a central role in driving the growth and advancement of Korea's textile and fashion sector.

Summary

As the global wave of K-culture continues to elevate the profile of K-fashion, Korea's textile and fashion companies now face the need to move beyond simple exports and develop robust branding and marketing strategies capable of competing on the global stage.

Under the theme "Global Marketing and Branding Strategies for K-Fashion," this interview explores the Federation's support initiatives to strengthen K-fashion's global competitiveness, the latest trends capturing the attention of overseas buyers, and future strategies aimed at amplifying the value of K-fashion in international markets.

The KOFOTI has been actively working to strengthen the global standing of K-fashion. In your view, what is the most significant competitive advantage that K-fashion has secured in the global market today?

The greatest strength of K-fashion today lies in the powerful synergy between Korea's robust textile and apparel manufacturing infrastructure and the soft power of K-culture, which has captivated audiences worldwide. This structural advantage simultaneously supports both the global expansion of K-fashion and its long-term industrial growth potential. Broadly speaking, K-fashion's competitive edge can be understood across four key dimensions.

First, strong cultural impact driven by integration with K-content.

As K-content—including K-pop, K-dramas, and K-OTT platforms—continues to gain explosive global popularity, Korea's broader lifestyle has emerged as a global trend in its own right. Fashion, as a core element of everyday life, naturally aligns with the expansion of the Korean Wave and is rapidly disseminated to consumers around the world. This close linkage between content and lifestyle enables K-fashion to travel faster and resonate more deeply in international markets.

This momentum presents a decisive opportunity for K-fashion to evolve into a high–value-added industry built on storytelling, fandom, and community. Beyond fashion itself, K-fashion is also serving as a catalyst for the broader expansion of Korean lifestyle industries, including K-beauty and K-living, thereby extending Korea's cultural influence on a global scale.

A balanced manufacturing stream combined with advanced digital infrastructure

Korea is one of the few countries in the world with a fully integrated and well-balanced value chain, spanning yarn, fabric, dyeing, sewing, and branding. This structure is further reinforced by global OEM/ODM leaders such as Youngone Trading, S&A Corp., and Hansae, which provide stable, large-scale production capacity. Together, these strengths enable Korea to secure both speed and quality across planning, production, and distribution.

As a global ICT leader, Korea has also seen rapid growth in fashion-tech solutions, including 3D virtual design, digital textile printing (DTP), AI-powered lookbooks, and data-driven marketing. These advances are elevating the digital transformation (DX) of the textile and fashion industry to a world-class level. In parallel, the expansion of digital fashion platforms such as Musinsa and W Concept has become a key driver accelerating K-fashion's global reach.

Advanced K-textile technologies capable of meeting global regulatory standards

At the core of K-fashion's competitiveness lies the technological strength of the K-textile industry. Korean textile companies have proactively secured capabilities in recycled fibers, bio-based materials, and low-carbon production processes, positioning themselves to respond effectively to increasingly stringent global environmental regulations. In addition, Korea's expertise in advanced industrial textiles, such as aramid and carbon fiber, provides a strong foundational backbone that enhances the overall resilience and competitiveness of the K-fashion ecosystem.

High-sensitivity design capabilities and an unmatched "speed advantage"

Korean consumers are widely regarded as among the world's most trend-sensitive and discerning prosumers. Growing within this environment, K-fashion designers have developed exceptional abilities in nuanced taste analysis and high-sensitivity design. When trends emerge—often driven by short-form content—they are translated into products with remarkable speed. This "ultra-fast execution capability" represents a distinctive competitive edge that even global mega-brands find difficult to replicate, firmly establishing speed as one of K-fashion's most powerful differentiators.

To strengthen the global standing of K-fashion, what key initiatives is KOFOTI currently prioritizing, and what objectives does the Federation aim to achieve through these efforts?

KOFOTI is focusing its efforts on expanding Preview in Seoul (PIS)—Korea's largest textile exhibition—into a global sourcing hub, positioning it as a core industry platform that promotes the parallel growth of K-textiles and K-fashion.

Growing Preview in Seoul (PIS) into a Global Sourcing Hub

PIS has firmly established itself as Korea's largest—and one of Asia's leading—textile exhibitions. The 2025 edition attracted approximately 14,000 visitors, including around 1,000 overseas buyers from 30 countries. Global mega-brands such as Nike, On Running, Arc'teryx, Vuori, Li-Ning, Maison Kitsuné, and Ralph Lauren sourced materials directly on-site, validating the technological strength and value of K-textiles firsthand. In particular, Korean materials that combine sustainability and high functionality are gaining strong recognition as premium solutions in European and North American markets.

Exhibition Content Innovation: Launch of the Techsphere Pavilion and Salon de PIS

KOFOTI aims to evolve PIS beyond a conventional trade show into a global showcase that encapsulates the competitiveness of Korea's textile and fashion industry. In 2025, it introduced the Techsphere (AI Fashion Tech Pavilion) and Salon de PIS (Premium Pavilion), presenting Korea's future-facing technologies and premium brand positioning to strong market response. These additions served as a clear demonstration of the industry's technological strengths and brand orientation.

Preview In SEOUL(PIS)

출처: previewinseoul.com

Advancing the Industry Ecosystem through Sustainability and Digital Transformation

With sustainability and digital transformation (DX) as core pillars, KOFOTI is reshaping the industry ecosystem. By expanding digital marketing channels, buyers can now experience the exhibition online, while promotion via YouTube and Instagram recorded a 492% year-on-year increase in views, reflecting surging global interest. The adoption of generative AI for digital lookbooks and the operation of an e-floor map significantly improved sourcing convenience, driving comprehensive innovation in exhibition formats.

In the short term, KOFOTI's exhibition and marketing initiatives are contributing directly to companies' tangible export performance. Over the mid to long term, the objective is to lead global standards in sustainability and digitalization, thereby establishing a sustainable industry ecosystem. Ultimately, the goal is for global consumers to recognize K-fashion and K-textiles not merely as products, but as premium brands imbued with cultural value and identity.

At PIS (Preview in Seoul), what are the latest trends in the product categories that overseas buyers are paying the most attention to?
And in these export consultation platforms, does KOFOTI have any distinctive know-how for successfully connecting international buyers with Korean companies and translating those meetings into tangible export outcomes?

This year at PIS, the product categories that attracted the strongest interest from global buyers were clearly eco-friendly K-textiles and premium sustainable materials. K-textiles are already recognized for their world-class technology and design competitiveness, and demand is expanding further as global environmental regulations continue to tighten.

Key global buyer trend: Eco-friendly and premium sustainable materials

As EU environmental regulations become more stringent, buyers are no longer looking simply for fabrics with a "high eco-friendly ratio." Instead, they are actively seeking materials supported by 100% sustainable content and certified production processes. High-demand items included seasonless products and sustainable materials certified under GRS, OEKO-TEX, bluesign®, and GOTS, while interest in fancy and novelty jacquards and printed fabrics also remained robust.

Continued strength of world-class functional materials

Another major area of buyer interest was high-performance K-textiles. Korean materials offering UV protection, water repellency and waterproofing, antibacterial properties, and moisture-wicking/quick-dry functions are already regarded as globally competitive. More recently, materials that combine these functions with environmental certifications have emerged as premium sustainable solutions in European and North American markets.

In particular, Korea occupies a distinctive position: unlike China's mass-market materials or Japan's ultra-high-performance niche products, Korean suppliers deliver functionality, sustainability, and refined design sensibility at competitive price points, further strengthening their global appeal.

In addition, following recent U.S. reciprocal tariff measures, Korea has secured a relatively more favorable tariff environment compared with China, Vietnam, and Japan. As a result, buyers are increasingly exploring supplier diversification toward Korea. Taken together, K-textiles are beginning to be perceived not just as materials, but as a brand synonymous with sustainability, functionality, and design sensitivity.

2,900 business meetings enabled through the Buyer Matching System (BMS)

At this year's PIS, KOFOTI introduced a Buyer Matching System (BMS), generating strong results. Buyers were able to review participating companies' products in advance and request meetings prior to the exhibition, while companies could prepare more strategically by accessing buyer information ahead of time. This significantly enhanced both the efficiency and depth of consultations, resulting in approximately 2,900 business meetings.

In parallel, KOFOTI has consistently pursued a strategy of inviting key buyers with sourcing decision-making authority, a factor that has proven critical in translating consultations directly into tangible export outcomes for participating companies.

While K-fashion has successfully built a global fandom, localization marketing tailored to country-specific cultures and consumption patterns remains a critical challenge. How does KOFOTI support exporting companies in developing effective, market-specific marketing strategies for their target countries?

KOFOTI supports the industry by helping Korean companies enter overseas markets in a more strategic and data-driven manner. Its initiatives include market analysis based on data insights, support for responding to global supply chain and trade-related risks, buyer and partner matching through local networks, and the facilitation of international partnerships. Together, these efforts enable exporting companies to design and execute more effective, market-specific strategies tailored to their target regions.

Data-driven market entry intelligence

KOFOTI provides companies with precise market-entry insights by analyzing country- and product-level trade flows using Korea Customs Service statistics and global research data. It will also publish the K-Textile Insight Report and Pre-Trend Briefings, which analyze buyer sourcing patterns and consumer trends by market. These resources enable companies to develop region-specific strategies—for example, *functional athleisure for North America* or *recycled denim for Europe*—based on concrete, actionable intelligence.

Global supply chain monitoring and trade issue response

In a rapidly shifting trade environment, sudden regulatory changes and trade barriers pose major export risks. To mitigate these, KOFOTI delivers export/import risk management, one-on-one tailored consulting, and government-coordinated support when regulatory or tariff issues arise. Ongoing initiatives include improving FTA utilization, monitoring and guidance on global regulations such as UFLPA and EU CSDDD, and timely advisories—helping companies manage compliance risks more systematically as they enter overseas markets.

Strategic matching through global exhibition platforms and local networks

KOFOTI organizes Korea Pavilions at major international trade fairs—including Texworld New York/Paris and SaigonTex—and operates 1:1 buyer matching programs connecting Korean companies with influential local buyers. From next year, it plans to introduce a K-Showcase that leverages the global appeal of K-content to capture buyer attention more effectively.

Overseas expansion via global partnerships

By leveraging networks with international organizations and overseas textile associations—such as ITMF (International Textile Manufacturers Federation)—KOFOTI supports companies' global expansion and provides market and investment environment intelligence to facilitate informed entry into target regions.

From an ESG and sustainability perspective, how would you assess the current level of practical implementation across the K-textile and fashion industry? And to help the sector meet global standards and strengthen its ESG competitiveness, what initiatives is KOFOTI prioritizing?

I see ESG in the K-textile and fashion industry as being in a transitional phase, moving from company-level initiatives toward a systemic, ecosystem-wide transformation. Global vendors are already meeting the high ESG standards demanded by international buyers, while domestic brands have also made meaningful progress through product-level initiatives such as the use of recycled materials, vegan fashion, and upcycling.

However, when it comes to data-driven end-to-end traceability—covering the entire lifecycle from raw material sourcing to disposal—and the establishment of closed-loop circularity infrastructures that return post-consumer garments back into resources, Korea still remains at an early stage compared to leading regions such as Europe. Recognizing this gap, KOFOTI has positioned the ESG-driven transformation of the industry structure as a top strategic priority in order to close the gap and meet global standards.

Operation of the SCT (Sustainability & Circularity in Textiles) Forum

In 2023, KOFOTI launched the SCT Forum, a public–private collaboration platform designed to drive ESG transformation across the industry. Serving as a central hub that connects the entire textile and fashion value chain, consumers, and government, the forum operates through four working groups—policy reform, circular ecosystem development, carbon neutrality, and eco-design. Key initiatives include analysis of global regulations and development of domestic response guidelines, building foundations for textile waste valorization, expanding low-carbon technologies and process efficiency, and promoting sustainable product design frameworks. Through these efforts, KOFOTI aims to organically connect upstream and downstream sectors while accelerating R&D and investment in sustainability and circularity.

(좌) 2024 SCT 포럼, (우) 스마트 의류수거함

출처:www.kofoti.or.kr

Response to the EU Digital Product Passport (DPP)

The DPP is set to become a mandatory requirement for entry into the EU market. In response, KOFOTI, together with leading companies such as BlackYak, is conducting pilot projects to standardize full lifecycle data—from production and distribution to repair and recycling—and to implement this information as QR-code–based digital product profiles.

Pilot projects for textile waste collection, sorting, and recycling

KOFOTI is also advancing pilot programs to shift the industry from a linear "produce–consume–dispose" model to a closed-loop circular system. By stepwise building collection networks, sorting systems, and recycling processes for post-consumer textiles, these initiatives aim to establish a practical foundation for a functioning circular ecosystem within Korea.

What do you see as the most urgent condition that must be secured for K-fashion to establish itself not as a short-lived trend, but as a sustainable, long-term industry?

For K-fashion to grow into an industry that drives the national economy—on par with France or Italy—a fundamental transformation of the industry's structure is essential. In particular, this requires accelerated digital transformation, the establishment of robust sustainability infrastructure, and the strengthening of the fashion–textile value chain as an integrated ecosystem.

Structural shift toward a digital industry powered by data and AI

Relying on intuition and experience alone is no longer sufficient to compete with the speed and price competitiveness of cross-border platforms such as Shein and Temu. K-fashion must transition to a data-driven model across the entire value chain—from planning and production to distribution. This includes AI-based demand forecasting, the digitalization of design and prototyping (including 3D), and the establishment of smart manufacturing systems that connect these processes to production sites in real time. To support this transition, KOFOTI is advancing AI and data network initiatives, providing demand-forecasting services and piloting microfactory-based digital production systems. In parallel, it is actively cultivating specialized talent in AI utilization and 3D production through the Tex+Fa Academy.

Building sustainability infrastructure to overcome global trade barriers

Sustainability is no longer a marketing differentiator—it has become a license to export. As environmental regulations, particularly in the EU, grow more sophisticated, digital traceability systems that transparently track the entire lifecycle—from raw material sourcing to disposal—are becoming mandatory. Equally urgent is the development of a circular economy ecosystem that returns post-consumer garments back into resources. The industry must recognize that failure to meet these standards risks exclusion from global supply chains.

Strengthening the K-fashion–K-textile value chain

Unlike Japan, Korea has yet to fully establish robust collaboration structures between fashion brands and material suppliers. For K-fashion to achieve long-term growth, strong alignment with the domestic manufacturing stream is essential. Brands must actively adopt high-quality Korean materials, while textile companies secure stable demand through closer collaboration with fashion labels—reinforcing the value chain on both sides. Korea needs cluster models akin to Toray–Uniqlo. To accelerate this, KOFOTI is promoting initiatives that award a “Korean Material Certification Mark” to products made with domestic materials, strengthening the trust and premium value of “Made in Korea” in global markets.

Looking ahead to 2026, which trends or key keywords do you believe will draw the most attention in the fashion industry? And could you explain why you expect these shifts to emerge, as well as what they will signify for the industry as a whole?

Global consumer trends are moving toward the “end of the mass market” and the fragmentation of taste. Within this shift, K-fashion is increasingly positioned not merely as apparel, but as fashion consumed as content.

Fragmentation of taste and the strengthening of brand identity

As consumers’ value systems shift away from mass popularity toward highly personal preferences, brands with clear and distinctive identities are gaining momentum. Rather than pursuing broad appeal, many emerging designer labels are building strong brand languages and narrative worlds, cultivating highly loyal customer bases. This is an area that large-scale SPA brands find difficult to replicate.

For example, Marithé François Girbaud Korea (Marithé + François Girbaud) transformed a simple floral graphic into a powerful brand signature, growing into an *"open-run brand"* at Japanese department stores and select shops. Matin Kim, meanwhile, has surpassed KRW 100 billion in annual revenue with its practical, minimalist designs and is now accelerating its expansion into the Japanese market in partnership with Musinsa. These cases illustrate that a well-defined brand identity is becoming a critical asset for global expansion.
Taken together, these trends suggest that the fashion industry in 2026 will increasingly reward brands that operate at the intersection of distinct taste, storytelling, and cultural relevance, signaling a structural shift away from scale-driven success toward identity-driven competitiveness.

Expansion of short-form–driven digital commerce

Short-form content—led by TikTok—has become a true game changer in fashion e-commerce. With its strong visual appeal and storytelling potential, K-fashion is inherently well suited to short-form formats, where influencer try-on videos and styling content can convert directly into purchases. As a result, shoppertainment—where consumers watch, engage, and buy seamlessly—is set to become a core marketing mechanism in the fashion market.

Growing influence of collaborations with influencers and creators

The increasing appointment of K-pop artists and Korean influencers as ambassadors by global luxury brands signals more than promotional activity—it reflects a shift toward content-led influence as a central pillar of brand strategy. Looking ahead, partnerships such as co-created collections and creator-exclusive lines are expected to expand further, deepening the role of creators in shaping brand narratives and commercial outcomes.

Accelerated global expansion via fashion platforms

Major fashion platforms such as Musinsa, W Concept, and ABLY are already scaling rapidly in Japan and North America. By providing overseas logistics, marketing, and customer service—areas that are difficult for individual brands to manage independently—platforms are enabling a platform-led co-expansion model. This approach holds significant strategic value, as it establishes a more efficient and scalable export structure, allowing K-fashion brands to grow faster and more sustainably in global markets.

Finally, how do you view the role of young designers who will lead the next generation of K-fashion? And what kinds of support do you believe are most essential for them to grow and succeed in the global market?

Korea's young designers are now the most powerful growth engine of K-fashion. Moving beyond the traditional model of mass production and mass consumption, they are demonstrating new forms of global competitiveness rooted in digital fluency, fandom-building capabilities, and distinctive brand storytelling. As true digital natives, they are inherently comfortable operating in online environments—communicating in real time with global consumers through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest. Rather than selling products alone, they share brand worlds, sensibilities, and narratives, organically building fandoms. It is no exaggeration to describe them as "born to be global," given how naturally and closely they engage with international markets.

Digital-native designers as a core competitive advantage

Since 2019, KOFOTI, in collaboration with the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, has operated a 3D virtual apparel designer training program. To date, the program has produced 217 professional 3D designers, many of whom are now active at leading companies such as Samsung C&T, LF, Youngone Trading, and Japan's Uniqlo, driving digital transformation across the industry. The 3D- and AI-based design capabilities of Korea's young designers represent a significant national competitive asset for the future of K-fashion.

Distinctive scalability through convergence with K-content

Young designers also show a strong aptitude for integrating fashion with K-content, including K-pop and K-dramas. For example, the accessories brand NONON gained explosive international visibility after being worn by global artists such as BTS and NewJeans, rapidly expanding its brand value through direct engagement with fans on social media. This content-driven scalability—where fashion, fandom, and storytelling intersect—is a uniquely Korean strength that is difficult for other countries to replicate.

Taken together, these characteristics position Korea's next generation of designers not only as creators, but as cultural entrepreneurs who will shape the future trajectory of K-fashion in the global market.

Expanding support for the growth of young designers is essential.

While a wide range of initiatives—such as K-fashion auditions, emerging designer acceleration programs, digital and 3D design training, support for entry into global fashion platforms, and opportunities to participate in overseas showrooms and exhibitions—are already being implemented by the central and local governments, there remains a clear need for more systematic, integrated, and scalable support frameworks to sustain long-term growth and global competitiveness.