

A Comparative Study of Korean and the US College Female Students' Clothing Buying Behavior

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Abstract

This study analyzed the buying patterns of American and Korean female college students in terms of criteria for clothing selection; store preferences; criteria for store selection; fashion information sources; expressions of customer dissatisfaction; purchasing frequency and motivations for purchasing clothes. The study was implemented through self-administered questionnaires which were back translated for validity. The samples consisted of 730 female college students majoring in the fields related to clothing and textiles: 310 U.S. and 412 Korean students. Likert scales were used for most measures with 1=never or very unimportant and 5=always or very important.

Data were analyzed by factor analysis, analysis of covariance, Duncans multiple comparison, and t-test. Results are as follows:

1) Design factor was the most important criteria in clothing selection with no differences between country groups. There were, however, significant differences for psychological exhibition factors, practical and economic factors. 2) Both groups preferred specialty and department stores, with department stores more popular in Korea. 3) Merchandise was the most important store selection criterion and fashion magazines and self-experience were rated as the most important information sources for the both groups. 4) Korean group expressed their dissatisfaction with and observable problem with a product before purchase more often than U.S. group, but the U.S. group was more vocal about color loss or shrinkage after care procedures. 5) Some clear differences between the two countries emerged. Marketers targeting American consumers should pay more attention to practicality and service; to Korean consumers more symbolic meaning of products.

Key words : clothing buying behavior. clothing selection criteria. store preference.
fashion information source.

1 . Introduction

A deep understanding of the consumer's buying process, of their criteria for evaluation, and of all the variables influencing these factors, is necessary if a company is to successfully penetrate markets on a global level. Consumers' buying patterns are affected by a variety of factors, such as product cue, the level of economic progress, and social, demographic, geographic and cultural situations. Buying patterns are also subject to consumers' personal situations, interests, preferences, values, self-concept and character, all of which are strongly influenced by a given society. Although an international fashion trend can spread all over the world at the same time, yet consumers from different countries can show different acceptance levels.

This lack of consumer unity thus precludes any single marketing strategy; instead, a company must employ a variety of approaches to appeal to consumers in each market, taking into consideration separate cultural backgrounds and characteristics. This marketing theory has been labeled the ethnic perspective. Considering the importance of the ethnic perspective in global marketing, several studies¹⁾²⁾³⁾⁴⁾ related to cross-national comparison of consumer behavior have been made. Yet there are only a few studies to compare the clothing buying behavior between and among countries. And still there is a need for the cross-national comparative research of consumer behavior on continual bases since consumer behavior changes continuously reflecting its environmental change.

The present study attempted to compare the clothing buying behavior of American and Korean female college students in order to better grasp the differences between the two countries' consumers. The study also attempted to collect data which will provide fashion marketers with information necessary for establishing effective global marketing strategies.

The specific research problems of the study were to determine differences between Korean and U.S. female college students' (1) criteria for clothing selection; (2) store preferences; (3) criteria for store selection; (4) fashion information sources; (5) expressions of customer dissatisfaction; (6) purchasing frequency; and (7) motivations for purchasing clothes.

Considering the degree of involvement, risk perception, use of information sources

and selection criteria are different according to the type of clothing item, the present study is limited to the daily outer wear purchase situations only. Motivation for purchasing, situation at the point of purchase, and communication situations are exempted in the present study.

II. Review of Literature

1. Buying Patterns and Culture

A consumer's culture determines the overall priorities he or she attaches to different activities and products. It also mandates the success or failure of specific products and services. A product that provides benefits consistent with those desired by members of a culture at any point in time has a much better chance of attaining acceptance in the marketplace. According to Michael⁵⁾, the relationship between consumer's buying pattern and culture is a two-way street. On the one hand, products and services that resonate with the priorities of a culture at any given time have a much better chance of being accepted by consumers. On the other hand, the study of new products and innovations in product design successfully produced by a culture at any time provides a window onto the dominant cultural ideals of that period.

Culture, consisting of ecology and social structure, is not static. It is continually evolving, synthesizing old ideas with new ones.⁶⁾ This cultural impact is hard to overlook, although many people do not seem to realize how much their views are influenced by marketers. Many marketers endorse an emic perspective, which focuses on variations within a culture. They feel that each culture is unique, with its own value system, conventions, and regulations. This perspective argues that each country has a national character, a distinctive set of buying patterns and personality characteristics.⁷⁾ An effective strategy must be tailored to the sensibilities and needs of each specific culture. This strategy involves modifying a product or the way it is positioned to make it acceptable to local tastes and buying patterns.⁸⁾

2. Differences of Clothing Buying Patterns according to Cultural Background

Cultural identities of societies are diminishing day-by-day due to the influence of highly technical mass communication and delivery systems. Yet this general trend will not be able to fundamentally stop the fact that the consumer's culture is an

environmental influence that affects consumer behavior.⁹⁾ There are cultural characteristics of each society all over the world, and they are related to clothing. The same item can be interpreted differently by different consumers and in different situations¹⁰⁾ In semiotic terms, the meaning of fashion products often is undercoded - that is, there is no one precise meaning, but rather plenty of room for interpretation among perceivers.¹¹⁾

Korean society has unique characteristics that may affect consumer behavior. Korean culture is influenced by Confucian ideals and collectivism (group consciousness or totalitarianism), instead of the pragmatism and individualism of the U.S. This is supported by previous research.

Kang¹²⁾ indicated Korean female college students regarded modesty most important as a criterion of clothing selection, followed by appearance, easy care, status symbolism, and conformity, in that order. Meanwhile U.S. students considered appearance most important, followed by easy care, conformity and modesty. According to Lee¹³⁾, Korean students have a tendency to consider clothing as a means of showing off their high status, while American students consider clothing as a means to decorate or to improve their appearance. But Jeon & Kim¹⁴⁾ reported both Korean and Mexican consumers are generally quality and price conscious. Korean consumers appeared to be more value-conscious than Mexican consumers. Mexican consumers exhibited high level of brand and prestige conscious behavior.

On the other hand, Chen¹⁵⁾ indicated a difference between western American culture and Chinese culture: Chinese female college students were more concerned about conformity than American students.

Chen & Burns¹⁶⁾ also indicated significant differences between US and Taiwan parent-consumers evaluative criteria used in purchasing pre-school children's apparel. US respondents reported fabric, fabric print, price, and on sale to be more important than Taiwan respondents. Taiwan respondents indicated fiber content, character/logo, brand name, and country of origin to be more important than US respondents. Taiwan respondents also spent more money on identified clothing items than did the US parent-consumer.

The above support that culture bound consumer characteristics vary from country to country, resulting in differences in perception of quality, value and purchase intentions for a particular product.

III. Methodology

1. Research Instrument

An English and Korean self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was first developed in Korean and then translated into English. To confirm the equivalency of the questionnaire, the questionnaire was then back-translated into Korean by a third person who was not involved in this study. It consisted of two parts: clothing buying patterns, and demographics.

Questions regarding buying patterns included clothing selection criteria, store preferences, information sources, motivation for purchasing and frequency, and expressions of customer dissatisfaction. The items measuring clothing buying pattern were developed on the basis of the questionnaire used in previous studies,¹⁷⁾¹⁸⁾¹⁹⁾²⁰⁾²¹⁾ and modified appropriately for clarity and length based on the results of a pre-test. Five point Likert scales were used for most measures with 1=never or strongly disagree, or very unimportant, and 5=always, strongly, or very important. Cronbach's reliability coefficient of the items were 0.75 - 0.87.

2. Sample and Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed to 730 college students after or right before classes in the field of clothing and textiles including: 307 American female college students at six colleges and universities located in the West (San Francisco, 171), the Northeast (Cornell, 41) and Southwest (Arizona and Texas, 95); 423 Korean students at four universities located in the Seoul area. All questionnaires were collected by the instructor of the class.

3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by the SAS Package. Descriptive statistics, t-test, factor analysis, contingency table, chi-square analysis, Analysis of Covariance, Duncan's multiple Comparison, and correspondence analysis were employed.

Criteria for clothing selection measured with a Likert-type scale, were factor analyzed using Factor Analysis with varimax rotation as a data reduction technique to group criteria for clothing selection. In order to analyze the differences between Korean and the U.S. students a t-test and contingency table, and chi-square were employed. Correspondence Analysis also was used to compare the response

frequency of Korean and the U.S. by each criteria.

Store preference, store selection criteria, fashion information sources, behavior to dissatisfaction factor of the product were items measuring the same construct.

Contingency table and Chi-square analysis was employed to compare the frequency of casual wear purchase and purchase motives of the two countries' students.

IV. Results

1. Criteria for Clothing Selection

As shown in <table 1>, clothing selection criteria were grouped into four significant factors on the basis of the results of factor analysis. Factor 1 is associated with practicality, factor 2 with psychological symbolic meaning, factor 3 with design, and factor 4 with economy, named practicality; psychological exhibition; design; and economy, respectively. "Very important" was given value 5, "important" 4, "not so important" 2, and "not at all important" 1. Among the four factors, the design factor implying color and style had the highest mean score in both the U.S (4.49) and Korea (4.48), and there was no significant difference found between the two countries. On the other hand, there were significant differences between the two countries in the factor of practicality, psychological exhibition, and economy. The U.S. students' mean score of practicality and economy were higher than Korean students'. The mean score of psychological exhibition was higher in Korea than in the U.S. (refer to table 2). This result supports a previous study²²⁾ saying that Korean students have a high tendency to consider clothing as a means of showing off their high social status. The Korean's higher concern about conformity in clothing can be considered as an influence of Confucian thought. Confucianism is conceived of not in terms of the happiness of the individuals involved, but in terms of the harmonious integration of individuals into a collective whole society. Thus, Koreans are more likely to conform to others in many ways. Moreover, most Koreans are eager to move socially upward²³⁾, so they have the tendency to be concerned about the symbolism of clothing as a way of expressing themselves and their identity.

<Table 1> Results of factor analysis on clothing selection criteria

N=730 (Korea 423,US 307)

Factor named	Content	Factor loading	Eigen Value	Reliability	percent (cumulative percent)
Factor 1 Practicability	Durability	0.734	2.463	0.705	21.05 (21.05)
	Care	0.750			
	size	0.696			
	Fiber contents	0.621			
	Convenience to wear	0.578			
Factor 2 Conformity/ Psychological Exhibition	Fashion	0.775	2.094	0.861	19.67 (40.72)
	Brand name	0.670			
	Similarity to my friends	0.642			
	Expensive look	0.624			
Factor 3 Design	Color	0.798	1.732	0.637	14.52 (55.24)
	Style/design	0.792			
	good fit	0.673			
Factor 4 Economy	Price	0.812	1.724	0.623	7.32 (62.56)
	Usefulness	0.804			
	longlife	0.726			

<Table 2> The difference between Korean and the US college female students' clothing selection criteria

N=730 (Korea 423,US 307)

Factor	Country	Mean	SD	t-value
Practicability	Kor	3.85	0.54	-6.50***
	US	4.12	0.56	
Conformity/ Psychological Exhibition	Kor	3.33	0.67	6.59***
	US	2.97	0.79	
Design	Kor	4.48	0.55	-0.11
	US	4.49	0.59	
Economy	Kor	3.69	0.85	-3.60***
	US	3.96	0.91	

***p<0.001

2. Criteria for Store Selection

From the results of Factor Analysis, four factors were generated for store selection criteria. Factor 1, named Familiarity and Refinement, was associated with customer service, atmosphere and cleanliness of the store, and store image. Factor 2,

named Merchandise Related, was associated with quality, price, fashionability, and variety of merchandise. Factor 3, named Shopping Convenience, was associated with store layout, parking facilities, and location of store. Factor 4, named Service, was associated with service factor. (refer to table 3). Among these four factors, the Merchandise Related factor showed the highest score, and considered as most important. (American, 4.37; Korean, 4.25) The mean score of all the other factors falls between 3 and 4. As shown in <table 4>, no significant difference was found between the two countries in familiarity and refinement factor having a mean score of 3.91 (Korean) and 3.89 (U.S) respectively. But there were significant differences in the merchandise related factor, shopping convenience factor, and service factor. The

<Table 3> Results of factor analysis for store selection criteria

N: 730

Factor named	Content	Factor loading	Eigen value	Reliability	percent (cumulative percent)
Factor 1 (Refinement/ Familiarity)	Atmosphere of the store	0.827	2.173	0.7467	30.80 (30.80)
	Store image	0.780			
	Cleanliness of the store	0.743			
	Familiarity with the store	0.700			
Factor 2 (Merchandise Related Factor)	Fashion of merchandise	0.772	2.162	0.7067	13.69 (44.49)
	Variety of merchandise	0.738			
	Price of merchandise	0.692			
	Quality of merchandise	0.622			
Factor 3 (Convenience of Shopping)	Location of store	0.789	1.661	0.8007	8.93 (53.42)
	Store layout	0.673			
	Parking facilities	0.570			
Factor 4 (Service)	Store hours	0.817	1.430	0.8122	7.85 (61.27)
	Customer service	0.729			

<Table 4> The difference between Korean and the US college female students' store selection criteria

N: 730 (Korea 423, US 307)

Factor	Country	Mean	SD	t-value
Refinement and familiarity of story	Korea	3.91	0.70	0.43
	US	3.89	0.79	
Merchandise related factor	Korea	4.25	0.56	-3.13***
	US	4.37	0.47	
Convenience of shopping	Korea	3.54	0.83	4.88***
	US	3.22	0.93	
Service	Korea	3.16	0.83	-3.42***
	US	3.39	0.93	

*** P<0.001

U.S. students consider service and merchandise more important than Korean students do. On the other hand, Korean students consider shopping convenience more important than the U.S. students.

3. Store Preference

Many Korean students show the tendency to use department stores often (39.81%) or very often (35.07%). Discount stores (36.49%), Specialty stores (30.8%), warehouse stores, off price stores and outlet stores (23.70) also are used often by Korean students. But they hardly use boutiques, mail order, Internet and TV shopping system.

Specialty stores show the highest frequency in the US. The U.S. students show a tendency to use Department store often also. Discount Warehouse stores and Internet/TV shopping shows very low frequency of using.

Both Korean and the U.S. students show a tendency to prefer speciality stores and department stores in general. The preference level of the specialty store, outlet and mail order were higher in the US than Korea. However, the level of the department store and TV shopping preference is higher in Korea than in the U.S. The results also indicate that such stores providing low prices as off-price stores and outlet stores in the U.S., discount stores, off-price, and outlet store in Korea are not used often among the two countries' students. Neither group shops often in boutiques, although American students tend to shop there slightly more often than Korean students.

Comparing with a previous study²⁴⁾ which reported the use ratio of specialty store (47%) of Korean college students was higher than that of department store (26%), the department store use ratio increased while the specialty store use ratio decreased. This trend is shown also in the report from the magazine Fashionbiz²⁵⁾, saying that department stores took the Korean market possession of 44.5% in 1997, 50.5% in 1998, 57% in 1999, and reached around 80% of Seoul area market as of May 2000. The Fashionbiz also indicated that the reason why the specialty stores carrying one brand are losing their market share is a shortage of merchandise variety. Also the present study observed that variety of merchandise is considered as a very important store selection criteria. In view of this, it can be inferred that the concept of a "one brand, one shop" cannot efficiently meet such diverse needs of consumers today. It is also worth noting that most of the department stores are located near subway stations in Seoul. Since location is considered as an important store selection criteria of Korean students, the location of the department store might make a contribution to its increased market share.

4. Fashion Information Source

Among the 15 kinds of fashion information source investigated, those having mean score above 4 (meaning "use often") in both countries are fashion magazines, and knowledge acquired by self-experience of buying or use of the products (refer to table 5). This means fashion magazines and self-experiences are the fashion information source used most often by the two countries' students. Since self-experience plays an important role in fashion information, there is an increasing need for the management of customers after purchase.

Those falling between 3 and 4 in both countries are friends, actors and actresses on TV, fashion ads on TV, printed catalogs, store displays, and observation of other's attire, meaning that these are also used often as information sources. On the other hand, the mean score of family members, salespersons in stores, newspapers, and fashion shows fall between 2 and 3 in both countries, indicating a low frequency of use. Those falling between 1 and 2 are video catalogs and Internet sites, meaning that these two are rarely used as fashion information sources by the two countries' female college students.

No significant differences were found between the two countries in fashion magazines, family members, actors on TV, fashion ads on TV, video catalogs, printed catalogs, Internet sites and fashion shows. However, there were significant differences in salespersons, newspapers, movie actors, store displays, observation of other's attire, and knowledge acquired by self-experience of buying or use of the products. Korean students (mean score 3.81) use store displays more often than the U.S. students (3.46). On the other hand, the U.S. students (mean score 4.31) use self-experience more than Korean students (mean score 4.12). Observation of other's attire (U.S 3.78; Korea 3.55), movie actors and actresses (U.S 3.25; Korea 2.88), newspapers (U.S 2.64; Korea 2.12), salespersons (U.S 2.50; Korea 2.04), and friends (U.S 3.72; Korea 3.47) also are used more often as a fashion information source by the U.S. students than by Korean students.

<Table 5> Fashion information sources of Korean and the US college female students

N: 730 (Korea 423, US 307)

Variable	Country	Mean	SD	t-value
Fashion magazine	Korea	4.02	1.00	0.10
	US	4.01	1.15	
Friends	Korea	3.47	0.85	-3.26**
	US	3.72	1.13	
Family members	Korea	2.71	0.99	-0.81
	US	2.78	1.26	
Sales persons in stores	Korea	2.05	0.95	-5.84***
	US	2.50	1.09	
Newspapers	Korea	2.12	0.95	-6.36***
	US	2.64	1.17	
Actors and actresses in movies	Korea	2.88	1.08	-4.25***
	US	3.25	1.23	
Actors and actresses in TV	Korea	3.18	1.13	0.34
	US	3.15	1.29	
Fashion ads on TV	Korea	3.00	1.11	-0.13
	US	3.02	1.25	
Video catalogs or CD-ROM	Korea	1.81	0.93	1.32
	US	1.72	0.98	
Printed catalogs	Korea	3.12	1.07	-1.14
	US	3.22	1.21	
Store displays	Korea	3.81	0.88	4.47***
	US	3.46	1.12	
Internet sites	Korea	1.93	0.94	0.18
	US	1.92	1.13	
Observation of other's attire	Korea	3.55	1.06	-2.87**
	US	3.78	1.09	
Fashion shows	Korea	2.73	1.10	-1.93
	US	2.91	1.38	
Knowledge acquired by self-experience of buying and use of the products	Korea	4.12	0.85	-2.95**
	US	4.31	0.89	

*** P<0.001 ** P<0.01 * P<0.05

5. Expression of Customer Dissatisfaction

It was observed that both countries' students express their dissatisfaction more or less positively in case of damage found before purchase, shrinkage, and color loss.

In case of dissatisfaction with a product such as wrong size or damage which could be observed easily even before purchase, Korean students showed a tendency to express their dissatisfaction more often than American students. While in the case of dissatisfaction with a product such as shrinkage or color loss which could be observed after purchase, American students more often complained than Korean students. This

is similar to Japanese student behavior. And this results support a previous study²⁶⁾ indicating the fact that Korean consumers, in general, are more apt to hesitate in seeking for redress when they found problems in the process of use. According to Day²⁷⁾, those who do not seek redress show exit behavior or third party complaining behavior. Kim and S. Lee²⁸⁾ reported that the consumers having positive attitudes toward complaining behavior showed more repurchase intention. Therefore, there is a need for marketers to promote Korean consumers' positive complaining behavior through the management of customers after purchase.

6. Frequency and Motivation of Clothing Purchase

More American students replied at twice (Korea, 2.84%; U.S, 4.92%) or once (Korea, 6.62%; U.S, 10.82%) a week and every two weeks (Korea, 18.68%; U.S, 22.95%) and every three weeks (Korea, 13.24%; U.S, 18.03%), while more Korean students replied at once a month and every two months, indicating that American students purchase clothes more often than Korean students do. Most respondents replied that they bought clothes once a month (Korea, 35.46%; U.S., 26.23%) or every three weeks (Korea, 13.24%; U.S, 18.03%).

In the case of Korean students, the change of the season was the most common reason for buying new clothes (84.87%), followed by replacing worn clothes (76.60%), and finding something eye-catching (53.43%). Other major motivational factors included coming into extra money (47.75%), sales (50.10%), cheering oneself up (48.94%), and for the sake of something new (50.59%). The results support partially the study of Kim²⁹⁾ indicating that the biggest reasons for new clothes for Koreans are shortage of clothes matching the clothes they have, and low price.

In the case of American students, extra money came first (88.85%), followed by change for the sake of change (85.57%), sales (82.303%), change of season (80.00%), finding something eye-catching (80.00%), and special days (71.48%).

Change of season, and replacing worn clothes play a greater part in motivating Korean respondents to buy new clothes than they do American ones (This result is limited to California). American students, on the other hand, more often buy new clothes for special days (such as holidays, graduation ceremonies, etc.), or following a change in size, than Koreans do for the same cases.

V. Conclusion and Implications

(1) Design factors, including color/style and size was regarded as the most important criterion for clothing selection among both countries students. Practicality and economic factors of clothing concerned more American students. Conformity and psychological exhibition factors were considered more important by Korean students.

(2) Both Korean and the U.S students show a tendency to prefer specialty store and department stores, in general. The level of the department store preference is higher in Korea than in the U.S.

(3) Both countries' students regarded the merchandise factor including product quality, assortment, and price most important as a criterion for store selection. Fashionability, location, store display and store atmosphere/reputation were considered more important by Koreans than by Americans. Americans considered price, parking facilities, and service hours more important than Koreans.

(4) Major fashion information sources both countries' students use are not only the information sources led by consumers including self experience, friends and observation but also the information sources led by the industry, including magazines, printed catalogs and store displays.

Korean students use store displays more often than American students, while the observation of other's attire, actors and actresses, newspapers, salespersons, and friends are used more often by American students than Korean students.

(5) Both countries' students express their dissatisfaction more or less positively in case of damage found before purchase, shrinkage, and color loss.

In case of dissatisfaction with a product, such as wrong size or damage which could be observed easily even before purchase, Korean students showed a tendency to express their dissatisfaction more often than American students did. While in case of dissatisfaction with a product, such as shrinkage or color loss which could be observed after purchase, American students more often complained than Korean students.

(6) American students purchase clothes more often than do Korean students. Change of season and replacing worn clothes play a greater part in motivating Korean respondents to buy new clothes than they do American ones. American students, on the other hand, more often buy new clothes for special days (such as holidays, graduation ceremonies, etc.) or following a change in size, than Koreans do for the same cases.

Based on the results mentioned above, the following recommendations are

suggested:

① Marketers targeting Americans should pay more attention to the practicality of the products, and while targeting Koreans they ought to consider more psychological and symbolic meaning of the products.

② Comparatively, marketers targeting Korean students than targeting Americans should pay more attention to store display and the location of the store, and try to maintain a good store reputation through efficient ads and a good quality of after-services.

③ In light of the observed tendency of Korean's expression of customer dissatisfaction, store marketers should try to secure a facility for making partial adjustment of sizes such as shortening sleeve length, etc.

④ Relatively, marketers targeting Korean students than targeting Americans should try more to promote consumers' positive complaining behavior through the management of customers after purchase.

⑤ This study considered only daily outdoor wear. The situation at the point of purchase and communication situations were not explored in the survey of motivation for purchasing. More comprehensive and detailed studies should be made before marketers apply the results of this study to apparel markets.

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