

An Exploratory Study on the Relationship between Country Image and the Evaluation of Fashion Products Influenced by the Ethnic Dress of Asians

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Abstract

Our study was designed to provide some insights on positive country image and the mechanisms of influence that Asian fashion industries can draw upon for future benefit. We focused on a country image and fashion products with Asian ethnic influence. Asian traditional costume elements reflected in contemporary fashion products may be important representative tools for national cultural identity. This study qualitatively investigated how and to what extent country image and additional information influence the evaluation of fashion products influenced by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean traditional dress. We conducted four focus-group interviews (FGI) with 30 students from a fashion program at a university in the United States. We analyzed the evaluation of fashion products influenced by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean traditional dress, and their associations with country image. Our qualitative analysis offered more developed empirical evidence for the various paths through which country image affects the evaluation of fashion products influenced by the ethnic dress of Asians. The results of our study showed that the more direct the source of prior knowledge, the larger the influence on product evaluation. This study showed that certain cues in the evaluation of fashion products with Asian ethnic influence induce changes in the affective state (that stem from the psychological and social nature of fashion products) and illustrate the necessity of considering the affective processes involved in the appropriate use of the country image. In the fashion industry, extrinsic properties such as the country image significantly influence the attitude and purchasing decisions of consumers. The significance of this study lies in its verification of the relationship between the country image and additional information. Modular and situational-contextual influences are also revealed as important factors that deserve more attention, as well as considerations regarding the dimensions of the country image described in attitude theory.

Key words: China, Japan, Korea, Country image, FGI

I. Introduction

The national origins of global fashion brands have become more diverse. In the last few decades, most fashion companies originated from Europe and the US. However, today, with Asia's rapid economic growth (Brewer, 1997; Cayla & Eckhardt, 2007; Tong & Hawley, 2009), the development of various trans-

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portation and communication methods, and the increasing need for fashion pluralism and multiculturalism (DeLong et al., 2005) are changing the structure of the global fashion market. Some Asian fashion brands, such as those from China, Japan, and Korea, have already embarked upon regional expansion within Asia. In this study, Asian fashion company or brand mean that they headquarters originate from that country, not the country of manufacturing the product. Many younger Asians consider Japan and Korea to be leading Asian countries in fashion (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2007); consequently, Asian and Western fashion brands are now in fierce competition in many of the Asian countries. With the advent of Asian fashions gaining status in the global market, the effort to develop fashion products utilizing Asian cultural elements is expected to increase (Yi, 2008). Since the cultural characteristics of a country are reflected by its fashion products, these can be used as important competitive element by the company and the designer.

Fascinated by the growth of the Asian fashion market, many scholars have undertaken research on the fashion industry in Asian countries. Most of the studies so far have focused on consumer characteristics and behavior in China, Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea (Cui & Liu, 2001; DeLong et al., 2005; Gao et al., 2009; Tong & Hawley, 2009; Walker & Gilbert, 2009). Although there has been much research on macroscopic concerns in the study of globalization in Asia, including the stages or the extent of globalization in general, only a few studies exist that offer Asian countries a direction for developing a global marketing strategy. Thus, we concluded that there was a need for an empirical study on the factors affecting the global competitiveness of fashion companies that originate from Asian countries, and, among these factors, country image was the focus of this study.

A country's image is an important factor not only in terms of the country's overall competitiveness, but also in global marketing. For the fashion industry, in which the products' intrinsic properties, such as quality and functions, can be difficult to differentiate, extrinsic properties, such as the brand or the country image, significantly influence the consumer's attitude and purchasing decisions (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2004).

In the early stages of a fashion business entering into a foreign market, a positive country image may be used to the company's advantage in product development and marketing strategies. Since the entry of Asian fashion brands – with the exception of some Japanese brands – into the overseas market is still in its early stages, the role of country image could be particularly important among those factors that affect the globalization of Asian fashions, since country image may influence considerably the consumer's buying decision through the halo effect or the summary construct effect (Han, 1989; Johansson, 1989). This study wanted to explore whether the country image of Asian countries has an impact on Western consumers' product evaluation, and, if it does, through what mechanisms do these influences work. In particular, we focused on country image and fashion products with Asian ethnic influences. Asian traditional costume elements reflected in contemporary fashion may be important representative tools of cultural identities for countries. In other words, analysis of Asian traditional fashion products may be the starting point to understand the characteristics of fashion products that reflect a country's image.

In this study, three Asian countries, China, Japan, and South Korea, were chosen because of their geographical and cultural proximity, the level of economic growth and the comparable stage of globalization of their fashion industries. The discussion was limited to the topic of the mechanisms through which country image influences the consumers' evaluation of fashion products influenced by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean traditional dress in the global market. Borrowing the basic idea from attitude theory (Bloemer et al., 2009), an in-depth analysis of the relationship between informational cues and product evaluation is provided.

Since the globalization of Asian fashion brands is still a recent phenomenon, it is necessary to link and qualitatively analyze the recognition of and the attitude toward Asian fashion brands in the Western world, Europe and North America, which currently lead the global fashion industry. With this in mind, four focus-group interviews were conducted with 30 students from a fashion program at an American uni-

versity. Through an exploratory analysis of American fashion students' evaluation of fashion products influenced by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean traditional dress, and their associations with country image, our purpose was to provide some insights on a positive country image and its mechanisms of influence, which the Asian fashion industries may draw upon to benefit them in the future. To achieve this objective, we explored the following specific points with our focus group participants:

- 1) The extent of students' prior knowledge of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean fashion brands;
- 2) The impact of additional information cues on fashion products influenced by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean traditional dress; and
- 3) The relationship among prior knowledge of each country's fashion industry, additional information cues and the evaluation of fashion products with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean ethnic dress.

II. Literature Review

1. The Globalization of Asian Fashion

Asia is becoming the new center of the global fashion market. The success of such brands as Giordano (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2007), Uniqlo, and Muji in the Asian regional market has demonstrated the globalization potential of Asian fashion brands. There has also been a significant increase in the number of Asian fashion designers in the global fashion business; among them, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo, Vivien Tam, Vera Wang, Doori Chung, and Richard Chai (Choi et al., 2009) are the most well-known. In addition, the prominence of Asian fashion has led to the increase in the number of global marketing studies in the Asian fashion industry, especially on China, Japan, and Korea (DeLong et al., 2002; Fernie & Azuma, 2004; Tong & Hawley, 2009).

Previous studies have focused on Western brands' adaptation to the Asian cultural context (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2007), on marketing strategies to build brand equity in the Asian market, or on Asian cultural and consumer behaviors (Cui & Liu, 2000, 2001; Gao et al., 2009; Tong & Hawley, 2009; Walker & Gilbert,

2009; Zhang et al., 2008). Other studies have examined the globalization of Asian fashion (Cho & Lee, 2006) or foreign consumers' perception and attitude toward Asian fashion brands and the design elements of traditional dress (Chang, 2004; DeLong et al., 2002; DeLong et al., 2005; Mears, 2008; Yu et al., 2001). Chang (2004) explored US students' preferences and purchase intention of the Korean traditional motif, and identified the significant influence of the interpretation of the motif type and application level toward the preference. Under low product familiarity conditions (i.e., US consumers' attitudes toward Asian fashion products), it can be more useful to explore the attitudes of ethnic products than to do the standardized one in a real market. Thus, we also used fashion products influenced by traditional dress, as the research object, similar to other previous studies (Chang, 2004; Yu et al., 2001). We explored American consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward fashion products related to countries in the Asian region.

Many previous studies of foreign consumers' behaviors toward Asian fashions have generated limited interpretations either because they were made from a Western point of view, or the topics or methodologies of these studies were rather general or simplistic, which, in turn, limited their ability to broaden our understanding of the context and the various causes of such phenomena (Spiggle, 1994). In order to provide meaningful directions for the globalization of the Asian fashion industry in the future, a qualitative approach to the various causes and the context behind the phenomena is required. Therefore, bearing in mind the need for a detailed examination of the current level of understanding of Asian fashions among consumers in America, one of the leading countries in the fashion industry, this study conducted qualitative research with American fashion students.

Craig and Douglas (1996) developed the notion of the three phases of global expansion: initial entry; local market expansion; and global rationalization. Most Asian companies in the first stage of global expansion (Collinson & Rugman, 2007; Rugman & Li, 2007; Rugman & Oh, 2008) found that the international reach of large firms from Japan, Korea, China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia were not global,

but intra-regional. The same is true for Asian fashion companies. In the initial entry stages, foreign consumers have little prior knowledge about Asian fashion brands. Under these circumstances, extrinsic cues, such as the brand's associations with its country of origin, have a greater influence on consumers' product evaluations. Therefore, studies on national branding strategy for Asian fashion houses are needed to advance to the next step and to enter the global expansion phase.

2. Country Image and Fashion Product Evaluation: Effect and Processing Mechanism

Country image has become one of the key topics within the field of international marketing and consumer behavior (Bloemer et al., 2009; Lampert & Jaffe, 1998). The majority of previous studies have concentrated on the role that country image plays in the consumer's evaluation of products (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Despite considerable amount of research on identifying the effect of country image on product evaluation, there is still much debate on its role, its processing mechanisms, and other variables related to it (Bloemer et al., 2009; Josiassen et al., 2008; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2008). Although the extent of the effect of country image on product evaluation varies according to the context (Josiassen et al., 2008), and in fact there may be none in some cases, it has been reported that country image may exert a significant influence on product evaluation when there is little to no additional information on the product (Bloemer et al., 2009; Han, 1989). Under such circumstances, country image, as an external cue, could be an important informational factor in the evaluation of fashion products in the early phases of a brand's global expansion (Ahmed & d'Astous, 2004; DeLong et al., 2002). It has been noted that American consumers' evaluation of Korean fashion products may be subject to the halo effect, given the previous reports of low levels of knowledge about Korea among Americans (Lee et al., 2008). Besides Japan, the Chinese and the Korean fashion industries are also still in the early phases of globalization, especially when compared to their Western counterparts; thus, it is expected that presently, the American con-

sumer's perception of and experience with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean fashion products and industries will be closely related to the country image of these respective countries.

Verlegh and Steenkamp (1999) conceptualize country image as "not only a cognitive cue for product quality, but also relates it to emotions, identity, pride and autobiographical memories (p.523)." A number of studies suggested that country image is a multi-dimensional concept composed of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Nadeau et al., 2008; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2008). Roth and Diamantopoulos (2008), in their conceptual research that examined the existing literature on country image, formulated the concept of country image through the use of attitude theory, which involves the aforementioned three components. They proposed four types of country-image conceptual models: two-component view; high-involvement hierarchy; low-involvement hierarchy; and experiential hierarchy.

The study by Bloemer et al. (2009), which analyzed in-depth the influence of country image, provides another important theoretical model, the CoO-ELM model. They focused on the cognitive relationship between product evaluation and country image as an informational cue. This model assumed country image as an explicit cue for product evaluation and it took into account the interaction between country image and other cues. According to this model, the incorporation of country image as a cue in product evaluation is influenced by three elements: situational context, underlying processes, and structure. The effects generated by these elements are the halo effect, the summary construct effect, default heuristics, and the product attribute effect. The halo effect and the summary construct effect occur when country image influences product evaluation as the sole cue (Han, 1989). When there is little prior knowledge of foreign products, country image can exert a halo effect on the formation of the consumer's attitude or it can function as a summary construct when there is some familiarity with the product or brand through experience or knowledge (Han, 1989). However, in real-life situations involving product evaluation, many other additional cues, such as brand names (Ahmed

& d'Astous, 1993), product involvement (Tse & Gorn, 1993), and product category (Roth & Romeo, 1992), may also be present, and an expanded examination of the effects of country image that takes this fact into account is necessary. Despite much research on this topic, empirical studies on the role of country image in product evaluation have reported contradictory results (Josiassen, et al., 2008; Pappu et al., 2006), which may be attributed to the interaction between country image and other additional cues (Eroglu & Machleit, 1989; Laroche et al., 2005).

The effect of country image may also differ with each category of goods (Han, 1990), for example, fashion products that fall into the category of high-involvement goods, which means that symbolic and psychological factors are important in buying decisions. This also means that the influence of country image can be greater in some kinds of goods compared to other kinds of goods. Previous studies only focused on the aggregate-level product (Laroche et al., 2005), or car and appliances such as VCRs and TVs (Chao, 1993; Han, 1989; Knight & Calatone, 2000). With this in mind, we limited the scope of the present study to the effects of country image and its processing mechanisms at the level of fashion products.

Another important research issue is possible moderators and antecedents related to the formation of the country image. Liefeld's (1993) meta-analysis indicated that the magnitude and nature of the country image effect is related to product categories, stimuli, demographics, prior knowledge, experience, and information processing style. Various factors may influence country image, such as the country's political, economic, cultural, social, geographical, and ethnic profiles. In addition, existing attitudes toward a country or its people can influence the formation of a country image (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 1993), as do inferences from past experiences, such as travel, and external information, including advertisements and hearsay (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). Kotler and Gertner (2002) emphasized the importance of monitoring the external environment for successful country branding. These antecedents are important to both long-term management and short-term repositioning of the country image.

The present study focuses on the marketing influ-

ence that country image has on foreign consumers' evaluations of fashion products influenced by the ethnic dress of Asians. Hence, we have limited the scope of the research to the role of country image in the evaluation of fashion products with Asian ethnic influence and will attempt to categorize the results of the exploratory research using the theoretical model introduced by Bloemer et al. (2009), which considers the interaction of country image as a cue among other additional informational cues. To summarize, the object of the present study was to investigate empirically how and to what extent country image affects the evaluation of fashion products from Asian countries. More specifically, existing country image was regarded as part of a prior knowledge base that can be drawn upon as an information cue in evaluating fashion products. How the existing country image had been formed was also investigated. In other words, the influential factors and sources that are relevant to the existing country image were identified. Then, how the country image and additional information cues interact in product evaluation was investigated.

III. Methods

1. Selection and Characteristics of Informants

In pursuing the aim of the research, we opted for an interpretative approach. As mentioned before, the globalization of Asian fashion brands is still in its infancy, and it is difficult to obtain meaningful quantitative data beyond present consumer perceptions. In addition, given the current paucity of existing literature on the uses of country image by fashion products with Asian ethnic influence, we felt that a qualitative approach was more appropriate for this study. Our goal was to observe, in as many ways as possible, how country image influences the cognitive and the affective processes involved in product evaluation. To this end, we conducted four focus-group interviews, as extra credit activity, with students majoring in fashion, clothing, and textiles at the University of Georgia in the United States. These students were selected as appropriate subjects because as students of fashion they have a high likelihood of becoming influential members of

the fashion industry as well as opinion leaders for the general public, both of which make them ideal subjects for a qualitative research study. In addition, as suggested by Bloemer et al. (2009), the various cognitive processes related to country image and product evaluation can perform differently according to the subject's possession of prior knowledge; therefore, a semi-expert group, such as fashion students, may illustrate this point well.

Data were collected in four focus groups, which were conducted and moderated by one of the authors during the fall of 2008. The first group consisted of 9 participants; the second group of 11; the third group of 10; and the fourth group of 11. All participants were female. Their ages ranged between 19 and 22 (Table 1). Except for one black participant, one Latino, and two of Chinese background, all participants were white. The participants reported themselves as being from middle to upper class backgrounds.

2. Interview Procedures

We used the interview guide approach (Patton, 1990),

which prescribes in advance only the rough order of questions and topics, with the interviewer formulating the specifics as the interview progresses according to the responses of the informants. We divided the interview into three stages. The key topics and points of each stage are summarized in <Table 2>.

The first phase of the interview was designed to gauge the extent of the participants' prior knowledge of Korea, China, and Japan. With no information provided beforehand, the interviewees were asked to discuss their knowledge of Korea, China, and Japan in general, as well as of their fashions. The second phase was designed to demonstrate how country image affects the evaluation of fashion products with Asian ethnic influence after additional information was provided. The additional information was provided in the form of visual stimuli. The focus group participants were shown three sets of visual stimuli, each consisting of four to five images of fashion collections. The designs in each set were influenced either by traditional dress of China, Japan or Korea, but the name of the influencing country was not

Table 1. Informant characteristics

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Number	9	11	11	11
Age range	19-21	20-21	21-22	21-22
Name ^a	1-1 ~ 1-9	2-1 ~ 2-9	3-1 ~ 3-11	4-1 ~ 4-11

^aassumed names for the analysis

Table 2. Interview guide

Phase	Topics	Sub-issues
1	Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Country image, Industry image evaluation (everything positive or negative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extent of knowledge of China, Japan, and Korea in general - Extent of knowledge of the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean fashion industries (everything positive or negative) - Purchase experience with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean products (general product category/fashion product) - Cultural differences among China, Japan, and Korea
2 (stimuli 1)	Perception of fashion products with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean ethnic influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participants' identification of the country of original influence - Identification of the differences among the images - Overall evaluation of the images - Mental associations upon seeing the influences of each country - Willingness to purchase and level of preference
3 (stimuli 2)	Evaluation of fashion products with known Korean ethnic influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examination of mental associations with Korea upon seeing the images - New thoughts or opinions on Korea from the images - Aspects of the products that the participants find the most impressive, or distinctive to Korea

revealed. After examining the stimuli, the participants were invited to evaluate, in detail, the products they saw. First, they were asked to identify, for each set, the particular country that influenced the fashion products, and then they were asked to discuss and evaluate the products from each set in detail. The third phase was designed to measure the effect of additional information and country image on the evaluation of the fashion product with Asian ethnic influence. Working with Korean-ethnic influenced images, the country, Korea, was first revealed. Then, the participants were shown additional stimuli (Stimuli 2) and were asked to examine the new stimuli (Appendix 1, 2). In doing so, we investigated the effect of country image by comparing the cognitive and the affective processes in the third phase with those in the second phase, when the participants viewed the stimuli first and evaluated the products without knowledge of the country of original influence. The focus group interviews, including all three phases, took around 90 to 120 minutes to complete per group. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and were used for further analysis later.

3. Stimuli

The stimuli used in phase two and phase three consisted of images of fashion designers' collections influenced by the ethnic dress of China, Japan, and Korea. We studied fashion designers' collections in *Vogue USA* and in several Internet fashion databases (www.style.com; www.samsungdesign.net) from 2000 to 2007, and selected the stimuli from the images of fashion collections of this period by choosing those that drew upon Chinese, Japanese, and Korean elements (i.e. shape, color, motif, material, and accessory), which are considered the main elements of fashion products (Yu et al., 2001). The images were determined showing Korean, Chinese, and Japanese influences on the basis of the following criteria: first, the types of fashion styles that the above fashion resources mainly report on were considered; and second, the researchers worked together to identify the sample collection of images that reflected distinct characteristics of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean ethnic dress.

This was a method deemed appropriate by previous studies that have also used images from fashion magazines (DeLong et al., 2005; Yu et al., 2001).

4. Analysis

The data obtained were interpreted and evaluated by categorization and integration, which are major characteristics of qualitative analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997). These analytical approaches help systematize qualitative data and lead to meaningful conclusions. The intra-text and the inter-text of the recorded data were repeatedly examined and compared with the cognitive and affective processes described in previous studies (Bloemer et al., 2009; Han, 1989; Manrai et al., 1998). The significant issues were then deduced from the data obtained in this study through the processes of categorization, summarization, comparison, and integration at the individual and comprehensive levels. We used the Delphi method to analyze the data. The Delphi method is a structured communication technique. The Delphi method has been widely used for business forecasting and has certain advantages over another structured forecasting approach, prediction markets. In the Delphi method, the experts are encouraged to revise their initial opinions or interpretations in light of the replies of other members of their study. Finally, the process is stopped after the achievement of consensus (Linstone & Turoff, 1977). Through this technique, we're able to minimize errors in the interpretation of the qualitative data and to enhance the reliability of the result. The main points of the important issues, as agreed upon by the researchers, are discussed below.

IV. Findings and Discussion

1. Phase One: Exploration of Prior Knowledge of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Fashion Products (Without Introduction of the Stimuli)

The impact of country image on the consumer's evaluation of fashion products varies according to

the level of prior knowledge about the country in question (Bloemer et al., 2009). Conceptualizing country image as prior knowledge associated with that country, we investigated the participants' knowledge of China, Japan, and Korea. When the participants responded about Chinese, Japanese, and Korean fashion products, direct/indirect experience, brands, well-known personalities, personal acquaintances from these countries, and people from the above countries in general without having been presented with any additional information, they identified specific associations with Chinese and Japanese fashions, but displayed limited depth of knowledge of Korean fashion. For example, in the case of China, the participants provided detailed descriptions of traditional apparel items and various elements of design, such as textile, silhouette, and motif. In the case of Japan, the participants mentioned the names and styles of famous Japanese designers and recalled Japanese sub-cultural fashions and aspects of traditional culture, such as Geishas, in detail. Besides being somewhat aware of the North-South divide, most of the participants had little prior knowledge about Korea. Only a small number of the participants displayed relatively high levels of knowledge of Korea. The participants processed their evaluation of Korean fashion products differently according to the level of their knowledge of Korea. For example, while one informant (1-9) said, "I guess I would think it (Korean fashion product) would be more low end but I don't think that there would be like an in between," another informant (4-2) said, "I think (Korean fashion product is) high quality." The halo effect and the summary construct effect of country image at work here will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

The participants had built their prior knowledge network on China, Japan, and Korea through several key sources. These included the media, education, and famous personalities (i.e., designers and celebrities). In addition, personal acquaintances, and experience with purchase and usage of products that originated from a particular country, were also cited as important sources. The participants had formed and received specific images and general knowledge of China and Japan through popular TV programs, mov-

ies, and magazines, as well as through the news. For example, the most frequently mentioned TV show was "America's Next Top Model," and the participants claimed that they were exposed to the fashions of China and Japan through episodes filmed in these countries. In addition, the participants had learned about Japanese culture and traditional apparel through popular films such as <The Memoirs of a Geisha>:

"You heard a lot about how like the costumes were fabulous and the settings and like the way it was shot. Like from an artistic point of view it was very like well done. I think they won some awards for costumes. Well the Japanese culture well like really interest me a lot so I just wanted to see it." (1-3)

The influence of designers and celebrities was also tangible. The participants perceived Japanese fashion as innovative and cutting-edge, an impression that stemmed from familiarity with prominent Japanese fashion designers such as Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo. The names of designers, including Alexander Wang and Vivien Tam, were also mentioned in the case of China, as well as Hollywood actresses who wore the Cheongsam, a well-known Chinese dress.

Another source of prior knowledge was the participants' personal contact with people from the three countries. This proved to be a particularly important element in forming their impression of Korea. The general consensus was that Korean consumers were trendy, regardless of their economic status. This impression was formed through contact with Koreans living in the US. Recalling the styles of their Korean acquaintances, the participants felt that Korean and Japanese fashions are distinct. They also formed favorable opinions about Korean fashion because they regarded Korean fashion to closely resemble American fashion. For example, one informant (2-7) said, "Koreans are more, are more similar to American fashion."

The participants' experience from buying or wearing of fashion products and other goods also played an important role. Some of the participants spoke of their experience with counterfeit luxury brand items they had encountered in Chinatowns in the US or in China proper, and this led them to form an impression of Chinese goods as generally "cheap." With regard

to Japan and Korea, the participants had more experience with goods rather than fashion products, such as electronics and automobiles. This led the participants to assume, somewhat vaguely, that high quality was linked to Japanese and Korean fashion products. In this, evidence for the halo effect is clearly demonstrated because the formerly established positive country image via other products influenced the perception of fashion products.

This research found that there was a general lack of familiarity with the fashion products of any of the three countries. In particular, very few participants had direct experience with the purchasing or wearing of the fashion products from these countries, and what previous experience there was consisted of indirect exposure through the media. On the other hand, a relatively larger number of participants mentioned personal experiences with Koreans and their fashion. These differences in the nature of the sources, direct and indirect, reflected the influence of prior knowledge on product evaluation. Many participants expressed positive views on Korean fashions, which were formed through contact with their Korean acquaintances. This confirmed the positive value of prior knowledge formed through personal experience, which was proposed earlier by Bloemer et al. (2009) and suggests that direct experience deserves attention in the future as an area for Asian fashion brands to focus and improve upon.

The subcategories of prior knowledge of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean fashion products discussed above are organized in <Table 3>, according to their sources. The sources were categorized as direct or indirect according to the nature of their formation. Some of

the significant factors illustrated by this data set were the sources of the prior knowledge and their relevance to the product. These variables affect the magnitude of prior knowledge in evaluating products and cause discrepancies in the effect of country image on product evaluation.

2. Phase Two: Using Visual Stimuli, Investigation of the Role of Additional Information on the Evaluation of Fashion Product Influenced by the Ethnic Dress of China, Japan, and Korea

The consumer consideration set was made up of intrinsic and extrinsic cues. Hence, in order to elucidate the influence of country image, the interaction with other additional information and its effects must also be examined. In phase two, image sets of fashion design with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese ethnic influence (sets A, B, and C) were introduced, and then the impact of additional information cues on the evaluation of fashion products influenced by the traditional dress of China, Japan, and Korea were explored. With regard to these stimuli, the additional information that influenced the participants' evaluation of fashion products with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean ethnic influence included design elements such as shape, color, motif, materials, and accessory.

Most of the participants discerned Chinese and Japanese influence in the three sets. The participants stated that sets A and C were similar in the sense that they immediately appeared "oriental," resembled a Kimono, and used bright colors. The participants also commented that in sets A and C the use of Asian

Table 3. Sources of prior knowledge and country image

Country Source		China	Japan	Korea
Indirect	The media/education	Fashion magazines, class discussions	Fashion magazines, TV show, class discussions	-
	Designers/celebrities	Hollywood celebrities wearing Cheongsam	Famous Japanese designers	-
Direct	People	-	-	Fashionable and trendy outfits of Korean acquaintances (residents in the US)
	Experience (buying/use)	Cheap, counterfeit merchandise (from Chinatowns/China)	-	-

characters, the dragon motif, and the maquillage made the designs seem more traditional. The participants recognized items as Chinese because of specific fashion items, such as the Cheongsam, or motifs, such as dragons, flowers and Chinese lettering, as well as through specific design elements, such as mandarin collars, frog closures, and the use of silk and bright colors. For example, one informant (3-3) said, "Like the mandarin collar and the sleeves. How it's very square, kind of right here, in the top portion. And then also the color yellow and red, especially red."

The participants identified Japanese-style fashion design also by particular details such as make-up and emphasized waistlines with wide fabric Obi belts. In addition, they specifically mentioned Geishas as cultural icons of the Japanese culture. They also associated Japanese designers with youth fashions, such as the Harajuku street styles they were familiar with, and commented on the unique sensibilities of Japanese design, in general. In this case, abstract elements such as the perceived image and the mood of Japanese designs served as important associative cues. It is also worth mentioning that the participants' attitude toward "oriental design" was negative in general and they responded negatively to designs that included "too many oriental elements."

In contrast to the Chinese and Japanese sets, the participants selected set B as Korean-influenced design largely through a process of elimination, and many of them responded that they could not discern a consistent element in the images of Korean-influenced designs. Some participants commented that the set was oriented toward "modern fashion;" that it was "organic and flowing;" and that it adopted "free form configuration." The participants responded positively to Korean-influenced designs because they felt it was "wearable," inferring the similarity and cultural prox-

imity with their own society's style of fashion from the design elements. In particular, the fact that the participants formed favorable opinions of Korean-influenced designs because of its similarity to their own style and cultural proximity shows that additional information (i.e., design elements) and consequent inference can elicit affective reactions and affect product evaluation positively. One participant said (2-1), "I just think it's the most on par with like American fashion."

The design elements and inferred similarity and cultural proximity can each be categorized into cognitive and affective processes evoking cues influencing product evaluation (Fig. 1). Physical elements such as the aspects of design and visual stimuli factored into the cognitive process involved in product evaluation, whereas intangible and perceived elements, such as similarity and cultural proximity influenced the affective process and elicited like or dislike for Asian-influenced fashion.

This also means that, as in the case of Korean-influenced design, Asian-influenced fashions would do well to focus on elements that have more of a global appeal and currency. One participant's (2-5) comment that "if the images of sets A and C (Chinese and Japanese-influenced) could be labeled as Western-influenced Asian fashions, those of set B could be considered Asian-influenced Western fashion" is particularly illuminating.

3. Phase Three: Interaction between Country Image, Additional Information, and Time Intervals

In the present study, country image, participants' prior knowledge of China, Japan, and Korea, and additional informational cues influenced the evaluation of

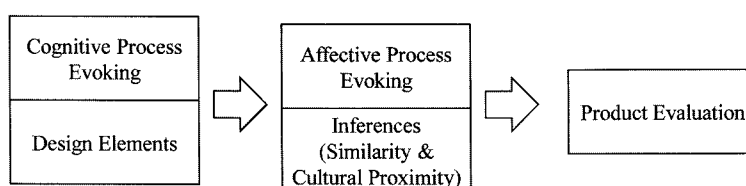


Fig. 1. Additional information cues on Asian ethnic-influenced fashion product evaluation.

fashion products in the stimuli in several specific ways. First, there were several interesting findings relating to the Japanese case. When probed about the reason for identifying certain designs as Japanese-influenced fashions, the participants replied that although they did not exactly know why they thought the stimuli were Japanese-influenced, they assumed that they were because they seemed to be the most resembling high fashion:

"I really didn't know. I just guessed because I just, I just know more Japanese designers so I could just see this on the runway so I just associated that with designer." (3-9)

In other words, when the participants evaluated unfamiliar fashion products, existing country image appeared to have been a factor in judging additional informational cues, which may be the default heuristic effect of country image explained in previous studies (Bloemer et al., 2009; Manrai et al., 1998). The default heuristic effect here means that the prior knowledge of a country aids the interpretation of additional informational cues, and thus indirectly influences product evaluation. Such cognitive processes may play a significant role when the consumer cannot make a purchasing decision based on the available information (Manrai et al., 1998). Another default heuristic effect was also found; some of the participants identified certain designs as Japanese-influenced because the design elements present in those designs, such as the dark colors, for example, reminded the participants' of the styles of a prominent Japanese fashion designer, Yohji Yamamoto. In these examples, the participants' prior knowledge of Japan and Japanese fashion influenced the interpretation of additional informational cues, such as the design elements of the stimuli presented.

Second, in the Chinese case, there was evidence indicating the role of the product attribute effect, a concept proposed by Hong and Wyer (1990), who suggested that the information on a product's country of origin is not regarded as one of the many attributes; rather, it generates interest and induces the interpretation of other property information. The interviewees had extensive prior knowledge of specific items and design elements of the Chinese-influenced stimuli.

This high level of prior knowledge allowed the participants to attempt detailed analyses of the design elements of the Chinese-influenced stimuli. The participants examined in detail the design elements of the cheongsam and mentioned their evaluation of various aspects of it. They discussed the differences in length, fabric, and silhouette, and responded positively to the more modernized version of it. One participant said (1-5), "I like number three or set A. I like the colors and I can like definitely see like the Asian influence but I think it's also kind of Americanized too."

Another significant finding from our data was the identification of the impact of product evaluation on country image. In the case of Korean-influenced stimuli, most of the participants did not know which images were Korean-influenced at first, and they selected the Korean-influenced set through the process of elimination. After they had been exposed to Korean-influenced designs, the participants formed positive opinions of the Korean-style fashion products. This means that the properties of the products themselves played an important role in the positive evaluation of Korean-influenced fashion products by the consumers who had little prior knowledge of Korean fashions. In particular, the participants responded positively to the bulky silhouette of the skirt of the Hanbok, the traditional Korean dress. One participant said (3-11), "I just associate Korea with being more organic within their approach. It's still fashion forward and edgy but it's more flowy and like [building on it] volume and stuff, free form configuration I guess." In addition, vis-à-vis the Chinese- and Japanese-influenced designs, the reason for the participants' preference for the Korean-influenced designs was cited as the relatively restrained use of "oriental" elements in the latter. The participants agreed that the Korean-influenced designs were "cutting-edge," "wearable," "elegant," and styled after "high fashion." This favorable evaluation, in turn, resulted in positive associations overall with Korean fashions.

This reverse process can be understood from the viewpoint of the attitude theory (Bloemer et al., 2009; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2008), which posits country image as consisting of

cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Of the four models constructed by Roth and Diamantopoulos (2008) to reflect the relationship among the cognitive, the affective, and the behavioral elements, the process described in this study, in which the product evaluation influences country image, matches the experiential hierarchy model. According to this model, consumers behave following their affective response and form their cognitive conception of a country as a result. The impact of affective response in this study can be understood as being related to the symbolic property of fashion products.

Lastly, in phase three, the participants were provided with another set of images of Korean-influenced designs. The participants had been told that the images were related to Korea before they further discussed the images. With this, our intention was to investigate the time interval effect by comparing the results of phase three with those of phase two, when no such prior information was provided. The concept of the time interval effect suggests that the relationship between country image and additional informational cues can vary according to the order they are presented. According to the CoO-ELM model, proposed by Bloemer et al. (2009), presenting the country image first and the additional informational cues later have the effect of strengthening the cognitive process. In phase two, the participants had so little prior knowledge of Korean influences in fashion

designs that they were forced to rely on the process of elimination to identify them, and, this also affected their product evaluation. On the other hand, in phase three, when the Korean influences were acknowledged from the beginning, specific characteristics of the Hanbok, which were absent from the discussions in phase two, were mentioned, such as its high-waisted silhouette, volume, and bulkiness. One participant (4-4) described the Hanbok as “And I like the front bows that it has on all of them (yeah) and I like the layering and like the little, it looks kind of like a little jacket, I mean it might not be but that's how it and like the asymmetrical.” This demonstrates that when consumers have little prior knowledge of a country, the presentation of the country's image before other information can motivate the consumers to engage in an active cognitive process.

Based on the findings in this study, a Country Image-Product Evaluation model <Fig. 2> is proposed. <Fig. 2> visualizes the relationship among prior knowledge concerning a country, additional information, and product evaluation discussed thus far. Product evaluation is the outcome of country image and additional information. The present study applied the four conceptual models of cognitive process, proposed by Bloemer et al. (2009), to the data obtained in this study, which was limited in scope to fashion products with Asian ethnic influence and the countries of China, Japan, and Korea. Based on the results of the study, we pro-

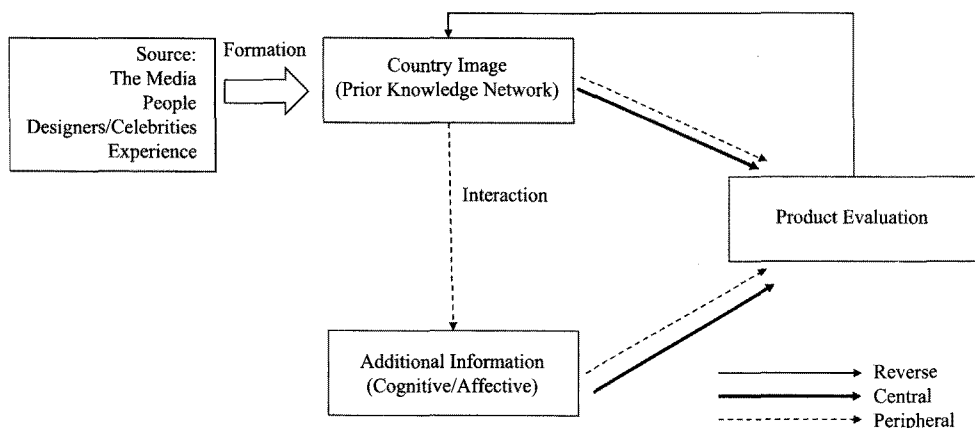


Fig. 2. Process of country image effect on the evaluation of fashion product with Asian ethnic influence.

pose several research propositions about the effect of country image on the consumer's product evaluation. The first part of our proposition is related to the various sources of country image formation. Informants had built the country image of China, Japan, and Korea through four major sources such as the media, designers and celebrities, personal contacts, and product-related experiences. The impact of the sources on the formation of the country image may vary according to the type and nature of the sources:

P1. Country image formed through a direct channel, such as personal contact or experience will be more positive and longer lasting than any other channel.

Secondly, country image interacts with additional information. The discovery of the fact that country image influences product evaluation through both cognitive and affective processes evoking additional information is a significant finding of this study which focused on fashion products as a category. We propose the following two processes to likely occur in the evaluation of a product:

P2a. Intrinsic attributes of a fashion product with Asian ethnic influence, such as design elements, will affect the evaluation of the fashion product through the cognitive process.

P2b. Extrinsic attributes of a fashion product with Asian ethnic influence, such as inferred similarity and cultural proximity, will affect the evaluation of the fashion product through the affective process.

Thirdly, the participants evaluated unfamiliar products using country image to stereotype, as a mode of default heuristic effect. Also, in the cases involving extensive prior knowledge of a country and its products, including its design elements, the prior knowledge network served to facilitate a detailed evaluation of the designs in the stimuli as well as the discernment of differences. In other words, prior knowledge caused the product attribute effect:

P3a. Country image related to the product will influence the interpretation of additional information cues, such as design elements, within the default heuristic process, if the consumer is unfamiliar with the prod-

uct of that country.

P3b. Country image related to the product will generate interest and induce the interpretation of other property information, if the consumer has extensive prior knowledge of the product of that country.

Finally, we also propose a reverse causal relationship between product evaluation and country image. In our interview, a positive product evaluation created positive country image or modified the existing image positively. It is a significant finding of this study that well reflects the high involvement nature of fashion products as a category. Thus, we propose the following last research proposition:

P4. The favorable and affective response of a product will have a positive impact on the formation and adjustment of a previous perceived country image of the product.

V. Conclusions and Limitation

This study investigated qualitatively how and to what extent country image and additional information, such as design elements, influence the evaluation of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean fashion products with ethnic influence. Our qualitative data and analysis offered more developed empirical evidence for the various paths through which country image affects product evaluation, as well as confirmed the conceptual models proposed theoretically by Bloemer et al. (2009). The results of our study also showed that the more direct the source of prior knowledge, the larger its influence on product evaluation is. These are significant findings for Asian fashion brands as they provide fashion houses with suggestions on how to utilize country image, especially traditional cultural elements, in marketing.

The significance of this study lies in its verification of the relationship between country image and additional information. It discovered that certain cues in the evaluation of fashion products induce changes in the affective state, which stems from the psychological and social nature of fashion products and illustrates the necessity of considering the affective pro-

cesses involved in the appropriate use of country image. The results are also relevant to attitude theory, which posits cognitive and affective elements.

We have encountered several problematic issues with the methodology and interpretation of the findings that arose because of the qualitative nature of the study. As mentioned previously, we intentionally used research stimuli reflected by Asian country image, i.e., fashion products with influence of traditional dress, to identify the relationship between country image and product evaluation. In accordance with previous studies (DeLong et al., 2005; Yu et al., 2001), we chose the stimuli. However, several limitations of the selection and interpretation of our stimuli should be noted. First, they may have a different level of application for traditional design elements. Second, fashion products with ethnic influences are different from standardized fashion products. Thus, our result should be more deliberately interpreted. Future research should use fashion products which are distributed in the real market to improve the external validity of the studies.

We believe that an expanded study involving more measurements and variables, such as the number of countries examined, the nationalities of the participants, and the use of real product images, is required. In our study, more than 90% of participants were white. Considering the total demographics of the United States, the composition of our participants reflects somewhat biased sampling. Therefore, the result may not be generalized to all American female college students.

We also recommend more quantitative research on the relationship between country image, additional information, and product evaluation investigated in this study. Certain modular and situational-contextual influences also deserve more attention, as well as considerations regarding the dimensions of country image laid out in attitude theory. Roth and Diamantopoulos (2008) suggest that the influence of concepts such as consumer ethnocentrism, consumer cosmopolitanism, and consumer animosity should be examined alongside the research on cognitive and affective attitudes in country image. In other words, those consumer characteristics that mediate the impact of country image on fashion products should also be

factored into future studies. In addition, demographic variables such as age, education and income should also be considered. A promising avenue for future research on country image is therefore to connect beliefs and attitudes toward a country with normative constructs, such as consumer ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987), consumer cosmopolitanism (Shankarmahesh, 2006), or consumer animosity (Klein et al., 1998), and to evaluate the combined versus separate impacts of these constructs on consumers' behavioral intentions.

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Appendix 1.

year	Designer	Source	
		URL	Column/raw
'03 SS	Gucci	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2003RTW-GUCCI?page=2	5 th /2 nd
'08 FW	Vivienne Tam	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/F2008RTW-VTAM	1 st /1 st
'03 SS	MiuMiu	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2003RTW-MIUMIU?page=2	3 rd /3 rd
'04 FW	Yves Saint Laurent	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/F2004RTW-YSLRG?page=2	1 st /3 rd
'03 SS	Roberta Cavali	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2003RTW-RBTOCVLL	1 st /2 nd
'04 FW	Pollini	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/F2004RTW-POLLINI	2 nd /4 th
'03 SS	Blumarine	http://www.elle.com/Runway/Ready-to-Wear/Spring-2003-Ready-to-Wear/BLUMARINE/BLUMARINE#mode=base;slide=0;	1 st /7 th
'02 SS	Gucci	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2002RTW-GUCCI?page=2	1 st /4 th
'07 FW	Lee Younghee	http://www.leeyounghee.co.kr/	1 st /1 st
'02 FW	Gucci	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/F2002RTW-GUCCI	6 th /3 rd
'02 SS	Yohji Yamamoto	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2002RTW-YJIYMOTO?page=3	1 st /1 st
'04 FW	Issey Miyake	http://www.elle.com/Runway/Ready-to-Wear/Fall-2004-Ready-to-Wear/ISSEY-MIYAKE/ISSEY-MIYAKE#mode=base;slide=0;	3 rd /5 th
'04 FW	Cividini	http://www.elle.com/Runway/Ready-to-Wear/Fall-2004-Ready-to-Wear/CIVIDINI/CIVIDINI#mode=base;slide=0;	3 rd /3 rd
'03 SS	Christian Dior	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/pow-ersearch?designer=design_house27&event=show919&page=2	3 rd /1 st
'07 SS	Christian Dior	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2007CTR-CDIOR?page=2	3 rd /1 st

Appendix 2.

year	Designer	Source	
		URL	Column/raw
'02 SS	Gucci	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2002RTW-GUCCI?page=2	1 st /4 th
'03 FW	Rochas	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/F2003RTW-ROCHAS?page=2	1 st /3 rd
'02 SS	Louis Vuitton	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2002RTW-LVUITTON?page=2	4 th /1 st
'03 FW	Romeo Gigli	http://www.elle.com/Runway/Ready-to-Wear/Fall-2003-Ready-to-Wear/ROMEO-GIGLI/ROMEO-GIGLI#mode=base;slide=0;	4 th /1 st
'07 SS	Lie Sang Bong	http://liesangbong.com/gb/index.php	1 st /1 st
'03 FW	Alberta Ferretti	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/F2003RTW-AFERRETT	2 nd /1 st
'03 FW	Vivien Westwood	http://www.elle.com/Runway/Ready-to-Wear/Fall-2003-Ready-to-Wear/VIVIENNE-WESTWOOD/VIVIENNE-WESTWOOD#mode=base;slide=0;	3 rd /16 th
'03 FW	Vivien Westwood	http://www.elle.com/Runway/Ready-to-Wear/Fall-2003-Ready-to-Wear/VIVIENNE-WESTWOOD/VIVIENNE-WESTWOOD#mode=base;slide=0;	3 rd /15 th
'07 FW	Lee Younghee	http://www.leeyounghee.co.kr/	1 st /1 st
'03 SS	Blumarine	http://www.elle.com/Runway/Ready-to-Wear/Spring-2003-Ready-to-Wear/BLUMARINE/BLUMARINE#mode=base;slide=0;	1 st /7 th
'00 SS	Philosophy	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/S2000RTW-PHILOSOP	6 th /2 nd
'04 FW	Pollini	http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/F2004RTW-POLLINI	2 nd /4 th
'00 FW	Lie Sang Bong	http://liesangbong.com/gb/index.php	17 th /1 st
'03 FW	Romeo Gigli	http://www.elle.com/Runway/Ready-to-Wear/Fall-2003-Ready-to-Wear/ROMEO-GIGLI/ROMEO-GIGLI#mode=base;slide=0;	4 th /2 nd