

Cultural Influence on Consumers' Product Evaluation

Yi Chang Yang

Abstract—The individualist versus collectivist culture dimension has been frequently used for distinguishing Asian cultures from Western ones, and has proven to be useful as a means of understanding cross-cultural differences. Many researches have been supported this viewpoint by founding that for the same product, the symbolic association and the preferred color can vary considerably from one culture to another.

The study examined the relationships between cultural dimensions and evaluative criteria possessed and used by consumers when comparing and buying luxury fashion products.

This research elicited the key factors contributing to brand choice in the retailing context and measured the impact of both psychological and environmental factors on product perception. Although it has been argued in the literature that in Asian societies, and specifically those influenced by Confucianism, a person's attitudes are greatly affected by the social influences of group conformity and face-saving pressures, current research have some contradictory findings.

The results reveal that Taiwanese consumers tend to give more importance to experiential needs than social cultural factors. The relationship or social affiliation values did not affect consumers' purchase motivation for luxury products in this study. The results also demonstrated that consumer variations in cultural orientations with diverse demographic backgrounds. In conclusion, even in collectivistic cultures, the influences of groups and social norms may vary across segments, and even more their attitudes.

Index Terms—Consumer behavior, consumer value, luxury product, market segmentation.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Collectivist-Individualistic Cultures

Geert Hofstede [1] conducted one of the most comprehensive studies of cultural influences. Most consumer researches conducted in Asia appear to emphasize the importance of family and the influence of groups in terms of purchase decision-making. Nevertheless, many Asian society have changed in ten years from tradition to modernity. Obviously, these changes would be reflected in changing lifestyles and consumption, particularly for the fashion industry, as the products are consider as a public consumption which people communicate to others the image they wish to project. The traditional view of group-oriented effects is fast becoming misleading or confusing in the modern marketplace. Hence, the question needing to be investigated is whether traditional values still profoundly influence young consumers in Asian countries.

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Yi-Chang Yang is with Shih Chien University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan (e-mail: yang.yichang@gmail.com).

B. Confucianism

Confucian philosophy emphasises interpersonal relationships in society and preaches that social harmony must be maintained above all [2]. Confucius identified five principal interpersonal relationships: 1) between sovereign and minister, 2) between father and son, 3) between husband and wife, 4) between older brother and younger brother and 5) between friends. Each of these relationships is based on a hierarchical order of duties and responsibilities [3] that build the structure of Chinese traditional society. The influences of Confucian philosophy on the characteristics of Chinese modesty, humility, or self-effacement are apparent in daily living patterns [3], [4].

In the consumer behaviour context, two salient Confucian concepts: face saving and group conformity have been found to influence consumers' attitudes and behaviours [1]. In fact, the consumption has to conform to an individual's social status. Consequently, the image of a product or brand indicates social status and the acquisition of a luxury product is seen as a low risk investment. Consumption in Confucianism is the search for products of traditional or symbolic value, for example, jewels and branded products [5] [6]. Therefore, this encourages consumers towards purchasing well-known branded products that give a better social image.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

Consumers' variations in cultural orientations and social economic backgrounds may cause the diversity in attitude and motivation, consequently different purchasing behaviors. To meet the above purposes, this study proceeded in the following manner. This research investigated culture and demographic effects on the importance of utilitarian and subjective evaluative decision criteria in brand selection and apparel purchasing.

An empirical study was conducted to measure the influence of culture on consumers' attitudes towards international fashion brands. In the first stage, a review of literature was conducted with the objectives of eliciting the meanings young consumers attach to luxury fashion brands, and relevance of attributes that are important to consumers. This method can help to identify appropriate product attributes, which were later assessed in the questionnaire. In the course of the main study, a questionnaire was developed to collect the data for this study.

A. Questionnaire Design

Questionnaire is the major instrument of primary data collection in quantitative consumer research [7]. This research seeks to develop the understanding of younger consumers' attitudes towards luxury fashion brands,

therefore, a large-scale questionnaire was designed to identify the key factors influence consumers' product evaluation and to obtain information about which product attributes consumers had used when making a purchasing decision. Before initialising the main survey, a pilot study was conducted for testing the survey instruments and data collection method. The questionnaire consisted of scales to identify:

Culture orientation Consumers' evaluation of product attributes.

Demographic information.

The Likert Scale was used in the survey. A self-administered survey was conducted around the main shopping areas. Mall intercept has been regarded as a valuable method for data collecting [8]. The quota sample consisted of 624 young people aged between 18 and 40 years old.

B. Conjoint (Trade-off) Analysis

To explore the research hypotheses, this study measures how much consumers value brand benefits and product attributes in their clothing purchasing process. Conjoint analysis was used because this technique is gaining widespread use in marketing research and both empirical studies and academic researches state that the measurement provides a better understanding than other methods of what drives consumer preferences [9], [10].

The reliability and validity of this method has been well documented in the literature [8]-[11]. It is considered the most advanced quantitative tool for analysing the relative importance of product attributes in consumer choice [12]. In addition, the conjoint analysis approach overcomes the problems associated with single-cue and self-report studies by presenting consumer choice as a multi-attribute judgment situation, which represents more realistically the complexity of a consumer's purchasing environment [13], [14]. In fact, the method is based on the premise that consumers' overall evaluation of a product combines the level of performance of diverse relevant attributes [15], [16]. Further, conjoint analysis allows one to test different combinations of the variables that build up the total brand personality [17]. It should, therefore, provide a more realistic assessment of the relative importance of attributes in consumers' brand choice [18].

Furthermore, by reason of the increasing of "hybrid" products, where the brand origin and the country of manufacture are different, which is particularly common in the apparel industry, there is hence a growing need for a multidimensional concept of product evaluation for international brands. The present research hypothesizes that both country of origin and brand origin will affect consumer's evaluation. Therefore, the product evaluation comparison amongst brand origins can provide insights on consumers' perceptions of uni- and bi-national products. Past studies have measured the influence of country of origin on consumers' product evaluation. However, no research has been found focusing on the comparison of the influences of when products were manufactured in different developed countries for a specific product category.

Accordingly, respondents were asked to rate clothing in three circumstances. Firstly, they were asked to evaluate the clothing when the brand origin is congruent with the

country of manufacture. Secondly, they were asked to rank the apparel that was made in another developed country, which is different from the brand origin. Finally, they were asked to value the garments when they were made in a less developed country, China was selected in this study.

This method of measurement, whereby respondents were asked their perceptions for brand origins and country of origins separately, and then brand origins in association with different countries of origin, allowed for a measurement of how consumers adjust their overall perceptions when the attributes are included. The measurement should therefore provide a more realistic assessment of consumer evaluation in complex fashion retailing context.

The study investigates cultural influence on consumers' attitudes towards fashion brands and to gain insight into the motivations of clothing buying. An understanding of consumer attitudes should help international fashion companies to improve their brand/product marketing strategies for the Taiwanese market.

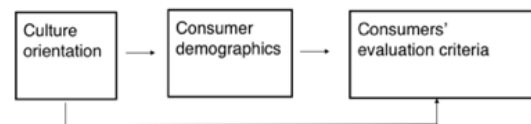


Fig. 1. Research framework.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In an effort to understand how demographic and geographic variables affect the weight of various attributes of clothing in consumer purchasing, this research involved criteria including gender, age, city, level of education and monthly expenditure on clothing. A One-way ANOVA was conducted to test the hypothesis and its significance. The results are summarised in Table I.

TABLE I: THE IMPACTS OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES

Attribute	Gender	Age	City	Education	Expenditure
Brand name			*		**
Brand origin					**
Country of origin		*			
Price		**		**	**
Quality				**	
Style		**	**	*	**

Note: * Significant at $p < 0.05$ level; ** Significant at $p < 0.01$ level

A. Gender Has an Impact on the Importance of Product Attributes

Even though no significant gender based differences in clothing attributes evaluation was found in this research, there remains a slight difference in the priorities given to the various features of apparel in the purchasing decisions between male and female consumers. Male respondents are more likely to emphasise price when they buy a garment; whereas female respondents pay more attention to the style

of clothing.

B. Age Has an Impact on the Importance of Product Attributes

Age has a significant impact on the perceived importance of three attributes: country of origin ($p = 0.38$), price ($p = 0.000$), and style ($p = 0.004$). Furthermore, when using a Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons test, the Scheffe test was selected because this is the most conservative in the sense that it is least likely to find significant differences between groups (Bryman and Cramer, 2001). When a Scheffe adjustment was made for the number of comparisons, only two significant differences were found: within price, the group aged 26-30 was significantly different from the group aged 18-20 ($p = 0.001$) and the group aged 21-25 ($p = 0.000$). In terms of style, the only significant was between the group 18-20 and the group 21-25 ($p = 0.006$). All three age groups value quality as the most important attribute in purchasing clothing. In addition, it was found that older consumers tend to consider price less when they buy clothing.

C. City Has an Impact on the Importance of Product Attributes

It was found that the weight given to brand name ($p < 0.05$) and style ($p < 0.01$) was significantly different across the cities. Next a Post Hoc Scheffe test was used to find out where the differences lay. The outputs show that no significant difference was found within brand name across four cities. The only significant difference was in respect of style between respondents of Taipei and Tai Nan ($p < 0.05$). Even though the Scheffe test did not prove any significant difference between the means in terms of brand name, the results of the descriptive analyses show clearly that consumers who live in the northern cities, such as Taipei and Tai Chung, pay more attention to style and value brand names when purchasing clothing.

D. Education Has an Impact on the Importance of Product Attributes

The level of education was found to have a significant impact on three attributes: price ($p < 0.001$), quality ($p < 0.01$) and style ($p < 0.05$). While a Scheffe adjustment was made for the multiple comparisons, only two significant differences were found. For price, undergraduate results are significantly different from postgraduate ($p < 0.01$). Another difference was in regard to quality between undergraduates and postgraduates ($p < 0.05$). There was no significant difference between the means of three groups in the evaluation of the importance of style. Generally, the higher level of education the consumers have achieved, the more importance they place on brand name and brand origin, and the less attention to price.

E. Expenditure Has an Impact on the Importance of Product Attributes

Of all the factors examined, people's individual total clothing expenditure is the one that has the most significant influence on the importance of the attributes. The variable was found to have significant relationships with four product attributes: brand name ($p < 0.01$), brand origin ($p < 0.01$), price ($p < 0.01$) and style ($p < 0.01$).

Consumers of the higher spending groups value brand names, brand origins and style, but care less about the price when they buy clothing. Generally speaking, quality is the most important attribute in purchase decision except for the group spending NTD5000 and beyond, who value style as the most important. In addition, they value brand name and care less about price.

From the empirical study, four consumer types were extracted, namely: 1) brand conscious 2) social conscious 3) fashion conscious and 4) pragmatic conscious. The four identified types were coherent with the concepts of the value-attitude-behaviour hierarchy in the consumer research field. The correlation and regression analyses supported the proposed model. There was a positive and statistically significant relationship between culture dimensions, consumer types and product evaluations. However, using product attribute evaluation to predict consumers' purchasing behaviour, there was no clear evidence of causality. The analyses indicated that there were some inconsistencies between consumers' product evaluation and their purchasing behaviour. It is highly probable that the other factors such as monthly expenditure or education might influence the consumers' purchasing decision. Asian consumers as collectivist or relationship-focused and relatively limited attention has been paid to the variation amongst consumers in a society. The study has extracted three factors: Group-oriented factor, Self-directed factor and Social risk sensibility factor. The three identified factors were coherent with the concepts of cultural dimensions proposed by Reference [1], uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism.

The Group-oriented factor was suggested as the most important factor in the influence of culture on consumer values, which explains the relatively large amount of variance. The Self-directed factor was found to be the second key factor and the social risk sensibility factor was the third. Individuals are also members of a society in which they grow up and by whose standards they are influenced. Therefore, it is necessary to extend the analysis to include social and cultural aspects to gain an insight into consumer behaviour.

Group-oriented refers to the interaction of individuals within the groups. People who are group-oriented are more likely to be influenced by others and to care about what others think of them. The study indicated that some younger consumers in Taiwan are somewhat influenced by the collectivistic culture and others to be more self-directed. On the other hand, cultural orientations are affected by many variables, such as age, gender, social group, education, and so on [16]. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that consumers of various demographic backgrounds will share different consumer values in their clothing consumption.

Consumer attitudes in the international marketplace are strongly influenced by the culture of the country. Consequently, this causes the differences in consumer behaviour, which appear particularly in the case of non-durable consumer goods such as clothing [2].

In fact, consumers who are more group oriented appeared to be more fashion conscious and pragmatic conscious. This type of consumers' awareness of fashion trends may be because of the desire of approval of others or the importance

of group integration. They try to reassert their similarity with members of their reference groups by wearing a similar style clothing. Conformity to group norms brings social approval and reassurance to an individual [16]. In addition, these consumers value the quality of product and are concerned about pragmatics. Their fashion brand preferences were based on the evaluation of functional aspects of clothing.

On the other hand, consumers of self-directed characteristic are highly correlated with brand conscious, fashion conscious and pragmatic conscious. Furthermore, these consumers appear to be more pragmatic conscious and fashion conscious than group-oriented consumers. The finding is congruent with a cross-culture study [17], which concluded that Korean consumers realized their self-directed values through fulfilling both experiential and functional needs. It is reasonable to assume that consumers of this cluster are likely to use the symbolic meanings of luxury fashion brands to construct, maintain and express their identities and wear trendy clothing to satisfy their desire for change or newness. Reference [16] also confirmed that these people seek to express their personalities by adopting clothing styles. This finding seems to challenge the fundamental presumption about buying behaviour in East Asian countries, that collectivist consumers use luxury brand to reassert their similarity with members of their reference groups [18]. The changing nature of consumers' cultural values in their buying behavior may due to the rapid economic development, urbanization, and the infusion of Western culture in today's globalized world [17]. Meanwhile, under the influences of Buddhism, the consumption patterns appear to be based on practical needs. Consequently, young consumers look for the functional and fashionable clothing that they can wear every day.

The "social risk sensibility" factor had a statistically significant influence on social conscious and fashion conscious. Consumers of this cluster care about what the others think of their clothing and believe that fashion brands can enhance their personal image and provide prestige. Therefore, they buy branded clothing and follow the fashion trends to avoid being different and losing face. A study conducted in China [18] also stated that friends' influence and a desire-to-conform influence the consumers' purchasing decision.

F. Consumers Discriminate amongst Different Countries in the Evaluation of Product Attributes

In this research, respondents were asked to rate six brand origins against five features of clothing: brand origin, country of origin, expected price, perceived quality and style. The mean rating was used to understand how Taiwanese consumers perceive international fashion brands across product attributes and to compare consumer perception of these six countries.

ANOVA was used to assess the differences in the evaluation of brand origins and its significances. The output is presented in Table II and shows that there was a significant difference in the evaluation of the six brand origins ($p < 0.001$). The results of the ANOVA for within-subjects variables show that in terms of brand origin, Japan has the highest score (mean = 3.71), with France and Italy in

second place (mean = 3.54), follow by U.K. (mean = 3.49), U.S. (mean = 3.42) and Germany as the least favoured brand origin (mean = 3.29). Furthermore, it was found that the standard deviation is relatively high within Japan (0.857) and low within Germany (0.668). That is, there is a great deal of variability between respondents in their evaluation of Japanese brand origins, but not of German brand origins.

In respect of COO, again, Japan has the highest score (mean = 3.85), follow by France (mean = 3.77), Italy (mean = 3.70), United Kingdom (mean = 3.65), Germany (mean = 3.61) and U.S. (mean = 3.53). Compared with Table 5-15, there is a slight difference in consumers' brand origin evaluation when the information of country of manufacture was provided. Consumers evaluated Italy and France as the second favoured brand origins, whilst they thought the clothing made in France is better quality than that made in Italy. When respondents were asked to evaluate brand origin alone, U.S. had a more favourable image than Germany. Yet, when the information of country of manufacture was given, Germany was rated more favourably than the U.S.

Regarding both expected price and perceived quality, the significance of F indicated that there was a significant difference amongst six selected countries ($p < 0.001$). France was scored the highest and the U.S. the lowest. That is, French brands were perceived to be the highest price and quality whilst U.S. brands were expected to be the lowest price amongst the six countries and the quality was evaluated very poorly. In terms of style, it was concluded that there was a significant difference between style evaluations of various countries ($p < 0.001$). Actually, Japan was rated highest (mean = 3.77), followed by Italy (mean = 3.63), France (mean = 3.62), U.K. (mean = 3.57), U.S. (mean = 3.46) and Germany (mean = 3.35).

As expected, Japan was rated as the favourite country by Taiwanese consumers in three out of five features of clothing, comprising brand origin, country of origin, and style.

TABLE II: COUNTRY PERCEPTIONS OF VARIOUS PRODUCT FEATURES

Country	Brand Origin	COO	Expected	Perceived	Style
			Price	Quality	
United Kingdom	3.49 (.716)	3.65 (.736)	3.72 (.735)	3.82 (.686)	3.57 (.732)
U.S.	3.42 (.733)	3.53 (.727)	3.32 (.723)	3.48 (.700)	3.46 (.741)
France	3.54 (.749)	3.77 (.773)	3.90 (.783)	3.94 (.712)	3.62 (.760)
Germany	3.29 (.668)	3.61 (.729)	3.56 (.721)	3.69 (.716)	3.35 (.660)
Italy	3.54 (.764)	3.70 (.772)	3.86 (.820)	3.89 (.740)	3.63 (.775)
Japan	3.71 (.857)	3.85 (.810)	3.54 (.846)	3.79 (.789)	3.77 (.856)
F	52.305	80.242	220.267	133.972	83.312
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Notes: obtained from 5-point (expected price: 1= very low price /5= very high price 1=bad/5= excellent;

perceived quality: 1= very poor quality /5= very high quality; style: 1= strongly dislike /5= strongly

favour)

When there is congruence between brand origin and country of manufacture, and both are developed countries, the product was scored the highest by the respondents. Then,

the second ranked were brands originating from the developed countries but products manufactured in another developed countries like Italy. The products made in a less developed country, China, were ranked least favourably, regardless of the brand origin country (mean < 3). That is, a favoured brand origin may not be able to overcome the liability of being made in a poor image country

IV. CONCLUSION

This study investigates cultural influences on consumers' product evaluation and attitudes towards luxury fashion brands. The results of this study contribute to 1) an understanding of young consumers' attitudes towards luxury fashion brands; 2) identify the linkages between culture dimensions and product attributes; 3) elicit the main beliefs affecting consumers' product alternative; 4) analyse the variation of consumer across demographic segments and the latter influence on the critical attributes of apparel.

The survey results have also demonstrated the variation of consumers' evaluation of product attributes across brand origins. In the context of globalization, a growing number of fashion companies are expecting more of their profits to be derived from international sales. However, consumer's product evaluation may base on both brand origin and country of origin (country of manufacture). Consumers make inferences about fashion styles and product quality based on their perception of country image. This is congruent with previous research [19], which stated that country of origin is likely to affect interpretation of information about specific product attributes. Consumers generally prefer the product made in the country of the brand origin. The lack of information of brand origin, consumer tend to accord more importance to country of origin as an indication of product quality.

It is generally argued that consumers make their purchase decisions on the basis of their evaluation of, and knowledge about, the product attributes. However, an inconsistent relationship was found in this research and several possible reasons are discussed.

Unlike prior studies that distinguished consumers' behaviour only by individualism/collectivism culture context, the current study focuses on consumer demographic profile that are hypothesized to be theoretically linked to the dimensions of culture. Since even in collectivistic cultures, the influences of groups and social norms may vary across segments, and even more their attitudes.

The study identified and denominated three cultural dimensions: group oriented, self-directed and social risk sensibility, and confirmed that there are some significant relationships between cultural dimensions and consumers' evaluation criteria. In fact, the consumers who rated highly in self-directed value appear to be more brand conscious, fashion conscious and pragmatic conscious. The research indicated that younger consumers appear more self-directed than group oriented and they buy branded clothing to convey a brand personality that satisfies their individual self-concepts, which challenges the fundamental assumptions about buying behaviour in East Asian countries. Previous studies [2], [20]-[25] suggested that in a collectivist society, consumer purchasing behaviour focus

more on the satisfaction of group needs rather than individual requirements. It appears that today younger consumers are more likely to use the fashion brands as a form of self-expression than a manifestation of social status and affiliation. The findings may have detected the changing nature of consumers' cultural values in their buying behaviour. These changes may reflect the growth of economic development and the influences of Western culture; Asian society is transforming from a traditional to a modern model. The importance of group conformity may now decline. Accordingly, the study suggests that both luxury brand companies and retailers need to acknowledge changes that reflect underlying consumer behaviours and attitudes in order to adapt their lines and supply chain strategies to stay current with market trends.

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Yi-Chang Yang is an assistant professor in marketing at the Faculty of Culture and Creativity, Shih Chien University. He obtained his Ph.D. degree from Manchester Metropolitan University, England in the area of international marketing. His research interests include international marketing, brand management and consumer behavior.