

Jeans: A Comparison of Perceptions of Meaning in Korea and the United States

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Abstract:

The focus of this research was to determine what similarities or differences in meaning develop when one product, blue jeans, developed in one culture, is used in another. Students' perceptions of blue jeans in the United States and Korea were the focus of this research. A questionnaire translated into the language of the respective country consisted of open-ended, short-answer questions and bipolar word pairs to measure the meaning attributed to jeans within both cultures. A total of 783 students in Korea and the U.S. between the ages of 18 and 24 who wore jeans at least three times a month were participants. Aspects of communication theory provided a theoretical framework for the discussion of responses and cross-cultural interpretations of meaning. U.S. and Korean respondents indicated that jeans are worn for comfort and versatility. For U.S. respondents, jeans symbolize American culture as a whole, whereas for Korean respondents, jeans symbolize a more specific role: participation in youth/student culture within contemporary Korean society. Differences in meanings attached to jeans in Korea as compared to the U.S. indicate a need for considering cultural context when developing and promoting U.S. products for use in other cultures.

Article:

Currently, it is not uncommon for products designed in one culture to be marketed and used across cultures. The design and manufacture of blue jeans originated in the United States over 100 years ago; jeans have become an apparel product with far-reaching influence on other clothing worn in the U.S. The changing meaning of blue jeans within the United States has led some authors to study the different ways that jeans symbolize American culture (Enochs, 1993; Fiske, 1989; Gordon, 1991; Henry & Taitz, 1990; McCracken, 1986; Solomon, 1985; Wilson, 1991). Additionally, jeans have become an increasingly global form of dress and are being worn in cultures all over the world (Miller, 1990). However, in the globalization process a product does not necessarily retain the same meanings across cultures, especially when compared with its originating culture (Eicher, 1992). This study examined what jeans symbolize for Koreans today given the strong association of jeans with United States culture.

Studying how products are used and how meanings accompany or change with their use is integral to effective product marketing across cultures. Asian countries have become the largest U.S. foreign trading partners, making them a great economic interest to the United States both in the public and private sectors. As the United States becomes more globally-oriented in economics, politics, and business, products must be marketed within diverse cultural contexts.

Although technology has provided one means for communication, it is still necessary to build an understanding of products shared between people of different cultures. Questions concerning how the meaning of a product is shaped within a cultural context and how one context differs from another are important to determine whether or not a product will be successful in the global market. How do people in an adopting culture perceive a product compared to people in a product's originating culture? Does the product become a symbol of the adopting culture, or does it retain its meaning from the originating culture?

Blue jeans have been marketed to and worn by South Korean¹ men and women for over ten years. In this study, students' responses concerning wearing jeans in Korea and the United States are compared and interpreted within a framework of communication theory. Specifically, the concept of sign as an expression of cultural values (Fiske, 1990) is applied to blue jeans, and is used to interpret the participants' responses.

Background

Jeans as Cultural Sign

A product's cultural context is a crucial component of the communication process, or the meaning associated with the product (Damhorst, 1985). The wearer makes associations with a product such as jeans based on a particular set of experiences and values that are shaped within a cultural context, which most likely lead to certain expectations about the product (Kaiser, 1997). Yet jeans as a cultural object are comprised of both form and content, components that are often separated during the communication process (Hillestad, 1994). Blue jeans provide the opportunity to study two cultures via a consistent object of material culture as a reference point. In this study, the form of jeans is a constant between the U.S. and Korea. The content of jeans may be considered highly contextual and might include historical, physical, psychological, gender, or social differences within and among cultures.

Fiske (1990) discusses a number of models to understand the communication process based on the premise that the viewer/creator communicates in part because of cultural influences, and that cultures have different underlying codes. Fiske defines a code as a system of meaning that is common to the members of a culture. Thus, all codes depend upon common bonds among viewers. A sign is defined as a unit, component, or object that refers to, represents, or stands for something other than itself; a sign relies on an underlying code to establish its meaning (Berger, 1992). An object of culture, such as jeans, can function as a sign of three types: an icon, an index and a symbol.

Some U.S. authors portray jeans as a cultural symbol. Wilson (1991) describes jeans as "the symbolic vessel into which any and every aspiration about one's identity can be poured, the ultimate conveyer of that greatest fashion paradox : how to be just the same as, yet entirely different from, everyone else" (p. 122). In United States culture, this paradox of individuality and conformity represented by jeans has led to an extensive vocabulary of meanings associated with them for the individual and society at large (Fiske, 1989; Solomon, 1985; Wilson, 1991).

¹ Korean data were collected from South Korean respondents; therefore, we will use the term Korea to refer to South Korea throughout the paper. The comparison data from the United States is also referred to as American throughout the paper.

Focusing on the individual, Kaiser, Freeman and Chandler (1993) found that favorite items of clothing perceived by the wearer as meaningful often convey contextualized emotional and/or aesthetic properties or capabilities for the wearer. This idea is supported by Solomon (1985), who reported that individuals value Levi's 501 jeans for giving confidence to the wearer. Moreover, jeans represent a storehouse of memories to be retained over time with increasing value (Solomon, 1985). In United States culture jeans have held a high degree of personal value, primarily because of their versatility and comfort, and the general social acceptance of wearing jeans for many activities.

At the broader social level, Fiske (1989) discussed three foci of meaning in jeans, based in part on their history in the United States: denial of social differences, physical labor, and the American West. Gordon (1991) further followed the changing meaning of jeans in the United States, from their associations with the "juvenile delinquent" look of James Dean in the 1950s to the mechanically aged jeans of the 1980s—a look this author associates with an illusion of experience. Gordon (1991) concludes that over time jeans have communicated various messages within the U.S. and have functioned in different ways—as symbols of rebellion, outlets for personal creativity, emblems of fashionable awareness, and as evidence of generational longing and insecurity.

Craik (1994) suggests that because jeans have gone through these stages, they now symbolize the social acceptance of casual clothing as fashion. However, this phenomenon may be the case only in the United States (and perhaps other parts of the western world), where individuality is both recognized and accepted as a positive quality. It is important to note that as a symbol, jeans communicate multiple meanings that index the values held within that particular social context (Rubenstein, 1995), values that may be radically different in another social context. Jeans are viewed as acceptable clothing for a broad range of activities by individuals of various ages, occupations, and social groups within the U.S. Jeans also have historical relevance to American culture and often symbolize American ideals as a result. But the diversity of meanings symbolized by wearing jeans in the U.S. may not hold true when they are worn in cultures that have only recently begun to wear jeans, such as Korea. It is possible that the meanings communicated by jeans may become considerably altered as jeans are introduced into this new context.

Eicher (1992) suggests that the meanings associated with westernized dress in one culture may become different from its originating culture when this type of dress is adopted for use in another socio-cultural context. Because of this occurrence, Eicher and Sumberg (1995) contend that garments such as jeans do not necessarily connote the West (Western Hemisphere) within adopting cultures. Rather, jeans are considered a form of "world dress" because many people today in both Eastern and Western hemispheres wear them. The possibility of world dress increases the more the media furthers its reach and as clothing like jeans becomes part of a global marketplace (Kaiser, 1997). Today, jeans could be considered an almost universal form of dress, with variations of form including brand name, designer and national brands, surface color, placket, and details like stitching and rivets. But it is still unclear as to whether the meanings attached to the form are also universal.

Although it is generally thought that jeans were first adopted by other cultures so that wearers could identify with an idealized version of American culture, this rationale may not explain their

popularity in Korea. We do not question the capability of jeans to function as a cultural sign, an index, or to symbolize both personal and social meaning within Korea, but have questions regarding how and if these meanings differ from those of the United States. Where and for what occasions are jeans worn in Korea? Are jeans worn to establish a certain kind of identity in Korea, and if so, what is this identity? Does wearing jeans in Korea indicate that one is of a certain status, or are jeans perceived as holding democratic qualities, and if so, are these qualities defined in reference to those of the United States? In light of the interpretations of the symbolic properties of jeans established within and in reference to American culture, this study seeks to determine what meanings are communicated by jeans for Koreans residing in Korea.

The Korean Context

A defining characteristic of Korean culture for the past 30 years has been rapid and pervasive change. Sometimes this change has been called modernization, sometimes westernization. Jacobs (1985) defines these terms as follows:

Modernization [is] the introduction of novel means in order to improve a society's performance, but with the aim that those changes not challenge, and in fact reinforce, certain cherished goals and organizational procedures. Novel stimuli may come from indigenous or external sources, or a combination of the two, the mix varying from time to time in a society....In Asia, when that stimulus has been derived, directly or indirectly, from western Europe or the United States, it is usually termed westernization (p. 6).

Jacobs (1987) further postulates that the Korean way of modernization is one that accepts change, but always within certain contextual limits, because many Koreans see the struggle of life as one between individual egotism and the demands of reference groups. The subsequent tensions, confusion, and contradictions caused by change will persist as long as the Korean decision-makers use the techniques of western societies in their attempt to modernize the existing ways of doing things.

Modernization brought the pursuit of a western ideal to many areas of life in Korea, one of which was dress. For example, Park, Warner, & Fitzgerald (1993) found that it took barely 20 years for almost all Korean women to adopt western style dress for everyday wear, although they had worn hanbok, a traditional form of clothing for men and women, for hundreds of years. However, the tension Jacobs (1987) notes between established social values in Korea and the influence of western ideals points to differences between Asian and western countries that need to be examined more closely to foster an awareness of the Korean consumer's perceptions and needs. For instance, Korean women who wear western style dress do not necessarily wear jeans. There are a number of factors that may influence who wears jeans and why within contemporary Korea; such factors must be understood as critical to both product design and to the promotion of jeans within Korea by the United States.

In a 1986 study, Shinn sought to compare the influence of various personal and environmental characteristics on the perception of life quality in Korea and the United States. He found that education ranks differently as a source of life quality in these two countries. In Korea, education ranks second, right after family income. In the United States, however, education ranks fourth, after family income, marital status, and place of residence. Shinn (1986) concluded that education as a source of life quality occupies a far more important place in Korea than in the United States. In addition, these two countries differ in terms of how education is associated with

other tangible resources known to be necessary for a good quality of life. The probability that college graduates become a member of the highest income group in their society is more than two times greater in Korea than in America, 40% versus 17%. Thus, the economic difference between those with a higher education and those without might result in the use of certain products, such as jeans, as a means to signify this differentiation.

Koreans have experienced the contrasts of military occupation and independence, imperial colonialism and capitalism, agriculturalism and industrialism, affluence and deprivation, all within the past 100 years. Therefore, the differences between age groups in Korea indicate not only varying degrees of accumulated life experience, but also the experience of various historic episodes (Tai-Hwan, 1989). Because young people in Korea today have grown up in a time of relative affluence, we might expect that they would be more accepting of new products, including products introduced from other cultures, than older members of the Korean population. As Morris and Hallaq's (1994) product country of origin study found, U.S clothing products are preferred by the Korean youth market.

The differentiation between both age and gender roles in Korean society may mean a corresponding divergence in the way products like jeans are used. According to Park, Warner, and Fitzgerald (1993), a traditional Confucian dictum says that when children reach the age of seven boys and girls cannot sit together. Following this teaching men and women in Korea were not allowed to have public interactions in the years before World War II. As a result, from the time she was a young girl, a woman's place in society was pre-determined for her. After the Korean War in 1953, through the course of westernization, Korean women began to gain more rights in society through broader education and more participation in the public workforce. Their societal roles changed radically. For these roles to change, however, the impact of the traditional Asian status for women, bound by centuries of ancient societal hierarchy and duty, had to be overcome (Park, Warner, & Fitzgerald, 1993).

In Korea today, westernized dress is the norm for everyday wear for both men and women; traditional dress is now worn only on special occasions by women, and more rarely by men (Geum & DeLong, 1992). Because jeans have been included in the broad category of westernized dress, it is necessary to find out how and why they are worn and for what occasions or roles. The clear differentiation among Koreans of various educational experience, age groups, and gender roles raises questions about the use of products like jeans in signifying social roles. In the United States jeans have alternately been perceived as signifying the denial of social differences (Fiske, 1989) or conversely as accentuating these differences (Davis, 1989). The indication that Koreans hold education in higher regard than Americans led us to question whether student identity is a form of status in Korean society, and to consider whether the symbolic reference of jeans in contemporary Korean society is related to social conformity or to social differentiation.

Method

University students were the participants of this study, chosen because of our focus on social meaning of jeans in cultural context, and because of our casual observations that in both cultures this group wore jeans frequently. Korean subjects included 202 male and 200 female students from four large universities, all located in Seoul, Korea. The American subjects surveyed for this

study included 180 male and 201 female students from two large midwestern Land Grant universities.

The majority of American students were Caucasian, with the minority from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds. Respondents were from general classes in business administration, liberal arts, and human ecology. Participants were chosen because of the class they were enrolled in, as these courses could be easily matched with similar courses offered at the Korean University. Permission from both the University Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research and the instructor to announce the project were factors in participant accessibility. The Korean students were from similar general classes for students majoring in business administration, liberal arts, human ecology, and engineering. All volunteers were undergraduate students who wore jeans at least three times per month, and were between the ages of 18 and 24.

The questionnaire was developed for use in Korea and in the United States and geared toward the student respondents. As the questions were developed, they were tested with both Korean and U.S. volunteer students who were not part of the sample. The questionnaire was developed in English, and care was taken that all questions could be adequately translated into the Korean language. Open-ended questions, semantic scales, and Likert scales were included in the final questionnaire. Open-ended questions were included because it was considered important that participants be able to express themselves in their own words to maximize the validity of the survey. For example, some open-ended questions required a brief response (e.g., When do you wear jeans?). However, closed-ended questions were included so that measurement and a comparison of participants could be made.

Questions using the semantic scale have been used to measure meaning of change (DeLong, Salusso-Deonier, & Lamtz, 1981; DeLong & Lamtz, 1980) and thus were developed to measure meanings of image of both national brand and designer jeans. Word pairs were selected and tested to describe attributes and potential meanings that respondents associated with jeans (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). The questions were selected by conducting small focus groups of Korean and U.S. volunteers.

Once the final instrument had been developed, it was translated into Korean by the Korean members of the research team. American brand names of jeans were given in English in the Korean version of the questionnaire because these brands are widely available in Korea.

Korean data were translated into English by a bilingual Korean researcher and were then coded in the United States by a team consisting of one American and one Korean—the same researchers who coded the U.S. data. Answers to open-ended questions were grouped into similar responses and given the same value. Mean values for semantic and Likert scales were computed. F-ratios, t-tests, and chi-squares were applied to determine the statistical significance of comparisons between the Korean and American groups. Responses of men and women when grouped were sufficiently different to justify separate consideration. Response frequencies for each of the four groups were computed. The following analysis of survey response deals with four groups: American men and women and Korean men and women.

Data Analysis

The responses to each question are analyzed and discussed below.

Question: Why do you wear jeans?

The most common responses to this question are listed in Table 1. A majority in all four groups responded that they wear jeans because they are comfortable. The second most common response was that jeans are versatile, or go with everything. Korean males and females, and American females responded that they wore jeans a little over half of the time; however, American male respondents reported wearing jeans almost 80% of their waking hours. American males in particular find blue jeans to be an acceptable form of dress for most activities.

Respondents' other reasons for wearing jeans included their wearability, durability, and practicality. Jeans are made of denim, a durable heavy-weight twill weave fabric and are available in dark colors, that hide dirt and wear. But even if dirt and wear were visible, such characteristics are not incompatible with the informal image of jeans and are sometimes even encouraged by the U.S. wearer.

Question: What do your jeans mean to you?

The most common response to this question from Ameri-

Table 1. U.S. and Korean male and female responses to the question: "Why do you wear jeans?"

Response Category ^a	Percent Response ^b			
	Americans		Koreans	
	M%	F%	M%	F%
They're comfortable	63.4	77.3	59.3	73.6
They go with anything/versatile	17.1	28.8	22.8	42.6
Easy/convenient to wear	2.9	2.5	26.5	22.3
Casual/relaxed appearance/image	10.3	20.2	2.6	2.5
Durable/practical	20.6	16.2	15.3	11.2

Note. American male $n = 175$; American female $n = 198$; Korean male $n = 189$; Korean female $n = 197$.

^aOnly response categories making up at least 10% of the total response in one or more groups are listed.

^bTotal percentages do not equal 100% because all response categories are not listed, and three responses to this question were allowed.

can females was "Jeans mean comfort," and from Korean females, "Jeans mean everyday dress" (Table 2). A common response from Korean males was that jeans mean nothing; for males in the U.S., they are just another pair of pants, even though this group chooses to wear them the most often.

Female respondents in both cultures more frequently reported specific roles/activities in which they wear jeans, whereas males in both cultures more frequently reported wearing jeans in non-specified situations. Two categories emerged: pertaining to specific roles/activities (for class/

school, to parties/going out, for leisure/play) or pertaining to general situations (anytime/no specific occasion, all the time, depends on my mood). The most common American male response was all the time (34.3%), with class/school a close second (31.4%). A frequent Korean male response was anytime/no specific occasion (43.9%). The most common response from both American (57.1 %) and Korean (33.8%) females was class/school. This response difference indicates that females in both cultures viewed jeans more in the context of appropriateness for particular roles, whereas males in both cultures relied on other criteria for their decision to wear jeans. It has been hypothesized that jeans can accompany so many different roles that they no longer signify any particular role (Solomon, 1985; Wilson, 1991). These data suggest this idea is more true for males than for females, possibly because females in both cultures have more types of clothing to choose from besides jeans. Thus, women may have a wider range between casual and formal clothing categories than males do.

Question: Do you believe jeans are a symbol of your culture ? If yes, how?

Of the Americans, 81.5% of the females and 66.1% of the males answered yes; of Koreans, 49.7% of the females and 26.1 % of the males responded yes to this question. When explaining how jeans are a symbol of their culture, Americans and Koreans gave quite different responses (Table 3). For Americans, jeans are a symbol because everyone wears them and because they are an expression of a “relaxed” culture. For Koreans, the most common answer was that jeans express the youth/student culture. In both instances, jeans communicate a particular meaning for the wearer within her or his own cultural milieu.

Question: What image do you like to express through jeans?

Participants were asked to define the image they like to express when they wear jeans by marking a series of semantic scales consisting of 12 different polar word pairs. Significant differences at the .001 level were found between the responses of male and female Korean and American participants on 6 out of 12 of these scales: youth/maturity, sexy/unisex, expensive/affordable, work/leisure, traditional/ contemporary, rugged/refined (Table 4).

Table 2. U.S. and Korean male and female responses to the question: "What do your jeans mean to you?"

Response Category ^a	Percent Response ^b			
	Americans		Koreans	
	M%	F%	M%	F%
Comfort	21.4	46.8	7.0	9.5
Nothing/not much	14.3	6.4	33.8	13.7
Just another pair of pants	25.6	12.8	3.8	4.2
Everyday dress	3.6	3.7	15.3	16.7
Fashionable/always in style	1.2	12.8	1.3	1.2

Note. American male $n = 168$; American female $n = 188$; Korean male $n = 157$; Korean female $n = 168$.

^aOnly response categories making up at least 10% of the total response in one or more groups are listed.

^bTotal percentages do not equal 100% because all response categories are not listed, and three responses to this question were allowed.

Table 3. U.S. and Korean male and female responses to the statement: "Jeans are a symbol of your culture: Explain."

Response Category ^a	Percent Response ^b			
	Americans		Koreans	
	M%	F%	M%	F%
Youth/student culture	2.8	---	48.4	44.9
Everyone wears them	22.0	30.8	---	4.1
Expresses our relaxed culture	18.3	19.5	1.6	5.1
Culture of consumption	1.8	0.6	15.6	12.2

Note. American male $n = 109$; American female $n = 159$; Korean male $n = 64$; Korean female $n = 98$.

^aOnly response categories making up at least 10% of the total response in one or more groups are listed.

^bOnly subjects who responded 'yes' to the question, "Do you believe jeans are a symbol of your culture?" went on to explain their answer. Total percentages do not equal 100% because all response categories are not listed, and two responses to this question were allowed.

Table 4. Mean scores of scales describing the image that participants like to express by wearing jeans.

	Males		Females		<i>F</i>
	US	Kor	US	Kor	
basic/trendy	3.99	3.72	3.71	3.66	1.54
formal/casual	5.28	5.18	5.32	5.26	.41
city/country	3.07	3.10	3.17	2.68	4.77
indiv/conforming	3.53	3.72	3.08	3.39	6.23
natural/sophisticated	3.34	3.22	3.48	3.46	1.27
flamboyant/modest	4.46	4.79	4.40	4.46	3.52
youth/maturity	4.20	2.72	4.16	2.44	105.13***
sexy/unisex	3.34	4.52	3.62	4.78	37.25***
expensive/affordable	4.11	5.35	4.30	5.00	27.70***
work/leisure	5.03	4.27	5.32	4.33	26.15***
traditional/contemp	4.08	5.07	4.35	5.36	34.64***
rugged/refined	3.60	4.26	3.75	5.02	37.57***

Note. American male $n = 179$; Korean male $n = 199$; American female $n = 200$; Korean female $n = 196$. Scores refer to subjects' responses to a seven point semantic scale between the given polar word pairs. First word = 1 / second word = 7.

*** $p < .001$.

Respondents completed separate scales for designer and national brands because designer and national brand jeans may reflect different images. These word pairs were the same as those used in responding to the image students wished to portray in jeans.

In describing the image they wished to portray in jeans, the four groups responded similarly to 6 of the 12 scales. With respect to the image of designer jeans, responses were similar on only 2 of the 12 (Table 5). With respect to the image of national brand jeans, responses of the four groups on only one scale (Table 6).

There was more variance in the responses of the four groups on the scales measuring the images of designer jeans and national brand jeans than on the scales measuring the image participants wished to portray. Significant differences were found between Korean and American responses on 10 of the 12 scales measuring the brand image of designer jeans (Table 5), and on 11 of the 12 scales measuring national brand jeans (Table 6). These data suggest that Korean and U.S. students have different perceptions about the image of designer and national brand jeans.

The responses of the four groups concerning the image of designer jeans are listed in Table 5. The two scales in this series of 12 with similar responses among the four groups measured the sexy/unisex and the expensive/affordable image of designer brand jeans (Table 5). All four groups found the image of designer brand jeans to be more sexy than unisex, and more expensive than affordable.

Table 5. Mean scores of scales describing the image of designer brand jeans.

	Males		Females		<i>F</i>
	US	Kor	US	Kor	
sexy/unisex	2.35	2.79	2.38	2.77	5.69
expensive/affordable	1.89	1.99	1.66	1.66	3.70
youth/maturity	3.92	2.60	4.02	2.85	38.47***
basic/trendy	5.89	5.47	6.06	5.41	10.00***
formal/casual	3.54	4.17	3.42	4.25	15.18***
work/leisure	5.53	4.87	4.89	4.94	8.75***
traditional/contemp	5.63	4.84	5.65	4.96	15.08***
city/country	2.07	2.63	2.01	2.32	9.10***
indiv/conforming	3.82	2.97	4.05	2.72	21.36***
rugged/refined	5.23	4.26	5.15	4.79	13.77***
natural/sophisticated	5.31	4.63	5.44	4.71	12.84***
flamboyant/modest	2.43	3.23	2.76	3.28	13.54***

Note. American male $n = 176$; Korean male $n = 193$; American female $n = 195$; Korean female $n = 194$. Scores refer to subjects' responses to a seven

Table 6. Mean scores of scales describing the image of national brand jeans.

	Males		Females		<i>F</i>
	US	Kor	US	Kor	
work/leisure	4.18	4.35	4.81	4.25	6.28
youth/maturity	4.02	2.70	3.70	2.90	37.25***
basic/trendy	2.91	5.05	2.20	4.37	151.20***
sexy/unisex	4.22	3.08	5.09	3.63	70.59***
expensive/affordable	5.31	2.83	5.76	3.17	205.87***
formal/casual	5.41	3.93	5.92	4.19	106.33***
traditional/contemp.	3.14	4.15	2.56	3.82	39.03***
city/country	4.37	2.99	4.71	3.23	70.26***
indiv/conforming	4.11	3.37	4.12	3.74	9.76***
rugged/refined	3.12	3.99	2.68	3.92	44.27***
natural/sophisticate	2.77	4.07	2.33	3.80	77.11***
flamboyant/modest	5.03	3.54	5.26	4.11	66.51***

Note. American male $n = 176$; Korean male $n = 193$; American female $n = 195$; Korean female $n = 194$. Scores refer to subjects' responses to a seven point semantic scale between the given polar word pairs. First word = 1 / second word = 7.

*** $p < .001$.

Significant differences between the responses of the four groups were found on ten of the 12 scales (Table 5). One difference between participants in the two cultures was that American men and women regarded the image of designer jeans as more formal. Another difference noted was on the semantic scale measuring the individualistic/conforming image of designer jeans. For Korean men, ownership of designer jeans was least common and the image of designer jeans was most individualistic. In contrast, American women, who own the greatest number of designer jeans, reported that the image of designer jeans was slightly more conforming than individualistic.

The scale measuring the work/leisure image of national brand jeans yielded responses that were similar among the four groups (Table 6). Although all four groups found the image of national

brand jeans to be slightly more leisure- oriented than work-oriented, significant differences among the four groups were found on 11 of the 12 scales.

In comparing differences between the groups' responses to the image of national brand jeans, the American group and the Korean group may have interpreted the term national brand differently. Korean informants for this study indicated that in Korea there are different images associated with American national brands than there are with Korean national brands. Although no specific brand names were given as examples for this question, the examples used to define the term national brand for previous questions were American national brands on both the English and Korean versions of the questionnaire. Thus, for this question, Korean participants may have interpreted national brand to mean American, and not Korean, national brands.

Participants' interpretation of the question may have influenced some of the differences among the American and Korean responses on the scales measuring the basic/ trendy and expensive/affordable image of national brand jeans. Compared to U.S. respondents, Korean respondents found national brand jeans to be much more trendy and expensive.

The level of disparity between responses from Korean and American participants suggests that both national brand and designer brand jeans have different images in Korea and in the United States, and different images for men and women. In general, differences between the responses of the two cultures were greater than gender differences, and Korean gender differences were greater than American gender differences.

Discussion and Interpretation

From the participants' responses of both cultures in this study, jeans are perceived as comfortable in that they signify a high degree of informality and versatility (Tables 1 and 2). Yet psychological comfort is also a factor in the adoption of any new clothing style, whether it be the adoption of western-or world-dress in Korea, or the adoption of pants by women in the United States (Hollander, 1978). The American participants indicated more of an awareness that comfort and versatility extend beyond the physical, to become an important factor in an individual's dress, lifestyle, and society as a whole (Table 2). As such, although jeans may signify the widely perceived informality of U.S. society, Korean students nevertheless wear jeans within what most Americans would view as a more formal social context. Indeed, the more abstract notion of comfort, or the feeling that one has the freedom to choose to wear jeans wherever and whenever, is more of a reality in the U.S. than in Korea. Korean social relations are more formally structured than those in the U.S.; thus the notion of comfort, with respect to clothing occurs and is interpreted according to clearly defined social categories, age in particular, and is reinforced within the cultural milieu of contemporary Korea.

In the U.S., jeans are often modified to suit the individual wearer and their particular identity motivations. For example, personalizing one's jeans, either by tearing, patching, pinning, or bleaching them results in a look that differentiates one individual or one group from another. Wearing jeans that are ripped and frayed has not yet become fully acceptable in Korea, and students returning to Korea after adopting such a custom in the U.S. have reported some negative reactions from their parents and peers. This phenomenon illustrates the difference between the way the two cultures use the jeans as object; in the U.S. the emphasis is on individuality in the

details of jeans and in Korea conformity is emphasized. Perhaps because jeans are so widely accepted in the U.S. people feel more comfortable altering their jeans to signify a sub-group. In Korea, however, those who wear jeans in general are students and thus are already identifying with a sub-group (Table 3). In both instances, jeans represent a cultural sign that communicates information about the wearer as well as what is valued in a culture, such as individuality or conformity within and across groups.

Education is important in Korean culture in both tangible and intangible ways (Shinn, 1986). In addition, various age groups in Korea differ significantly in socially meaningful behavior and attitudes (Tai-Hwan, 1989). It appears that Korean students wear jeans in a deliberate effort to differentiate themselves from their elders; jeans are an index of both the wearer's age and student membership (Table 3). As in the U.S., certain brands of jeans can also function as an index of socio-economic status in Korea. The designer label adds another dimension to the meaning of jeans as a cultural sign that is understood through an established value system. In the U.S., national brand versus designer brand meaning has been characterized as a contest of polarities, with one pole (national brand jeans) emphasizing jeans as a symbol of democracy, utility and classlessness, and the other (designer brand jeans) seeking to reintroduce traditional claims to taste, distinction and hierarchical division (Davis, 1989).

In Korea today, both designer and national brands of jeans are imported from the United States. National U.S. brands, such as Lee and Levi's, are widely available, as well as designer label jeans, such as Guess and Calvin Klein. In the U.S., price points varying through discount sales could lower the cost of such items, making them even more affordable to American buyers. In Korea, American brand jeans such as Levi's and Guess are about twice as costly as Korean brand jeans, whereas in the U.S., Levi's tend to be priced lower than other brands such as Guess and Girbaud. It is possible that Koreans who choose to pay more for American brand jeans wear jeans as an index of participation in a particular trend within the basic jeans-wearing student population in Korea, and that responses suggest these jeans are seen as more "trendy" (Table 5).

Jeans have a long history in the United States, with their mass popularity dating back about thirty years. They are seen as a product that symbolizes American values: ruggedness and honesty, practicality and individuality. It has been argued that when people in other cultures wear jeans, they are practicing contagious magic, subconsciously believing that the power and virtue of America is contained in those jeans and will rub off on the wearer (Lurie, 1981). This belief is due in part to the power of advertising to sell an image. This imagery, however, may not always accurately reflect the wearer's intentions.

For example, American jeans advertisements promote symbols established through the use of imagery of the rugged Wild West and the American ideal of the rebel youth. Such meanings may be fully interpreted in the U.S.; the American consumer is the intended audience. However, when these advertisements are used in other cultural contexts, such as Korea, meanings may be only partially understood in a similar manner. Further, new meanings may develop when these messages are read within a new cultural context. Success in the global advertising market is the result of an accurate understanding of a given market (Blackwell, Ajami, & Stephen, 1994, p. 221). Jeans advertisers rely on the American image to sell jeans in Korea, often using Caucasian rather than Korean models, translating the English text into Korean script, and promoting images

that may appeal to the young people of Korea. Meanwhile, the older members of the Korean population are not addressed, and thus this kind of advertising may not be effective enough to promote widespread interest in wearing jeans in contemporary Korean society. Most members of the older generations in Korea do not currently wear jeans for casual kinds of activities, such as sporting events, playing golf, or hiking, but instead wear cotton “chinos.”

Using U.S. advertisements to sell American jeans in Korea assumes that the reasons for wearing jeans in Korean culture are the same as in the United States. Koreans may in fact be motivated to wear jeans by the American cultural images portrayed in such advertisements to some degree, however, it is beyond the scope of this study to fully address this issue. Yet Korean responses do not specifically indicate that jeans are a symbol of American culture (Table 5). Rather, the meaning jeans hold in Korea is clearly defined in relation to Korean culture, and symbolize the young age of the wearers as a select group within the whole of Korean society. This notion reflects the early use of jeans in America and perhaps also a Korean perception that the relationship between comfort and jeans is founded on youth. More likely, it is an indication of the shorter history of wearing jeans in Korea when compared to the U.S.

Participants’ responses illustrate how the use of a product in two different cultures occurs through a complex process, wherein a complete assimilation of meanings that an object, such as jeans, signifies in one culture may not occur when used in another. Instead, certain meanings attached to the object are manipulated in order to suit the new cultural context, especially those that may be more acceptable given the period in which the object comes into use. Koreans indicated that although they wore jeans for reasons similar to United States respondents, such as for comfort and versatility, jeans symbolized youth culture and specifically indexed participation in the student segment of that population. In contrast, American responses focused on the widespread use of jeans as a direct symbolic expression of a cultural trait-being relaxed- which reflects the widespread social acceptance of jeans in the U.S.

Conclusions and Implications for Further Study

This study has provided insight into how a product with a strong tradition of meaning in one culture is understood and used in another culture. The way in which a specific product is perceived by the wearer in two different cultures was examined: the culture of the product’s origin as well as a culture that has more recently adopted the product. These data support the importance of studying product perceptions through participants’ responses in cultural context. Also, this study indicates the potential implications that the role of clothing has as a mode of communication within and across such contexts.

In this study, the perceptions held by the culture adopting the product were different from those of the originating culture. The distinct differentiation between what jeans mean in the United States and in Korea reflects the different value systems in both contemporary societies. For Koreans, jeans symbolize membership in a portion of the adopting culture (youth) and express the lifestyle of those who consistently wear the product. Regardless of brand name, jeans communicate the wearer’s age and student status, and thus function as an index for membership within that group. For the U.S. participants, jeans symbolize American cultural values and social expectations such as comfort, informality, and versatility.

The first jeans wearers in Korea were young people who grew up in a time of relative affluence, as compared to older generations of Koreans. They appear to be more accepting of new products, like jeans, than previous generations. Thus, to broaden the jeans market in Korea to appeal to a larger segment of the population, social perceptions about jeans wearers must change to allow for their use among a wider variety of age groups. Perceptions of jeans held by non-jeans wearers in Korea could be examined to determine how to make jeans appeal to diverse groups of people in contemporary Korea.

In both countries brand names of jeans are an index of the wearer's socio-economic status as well as participation in sub-groups and social trends. The questionnaire did not directly address whether jeans are worn for status; rather, questions were related to image and national/designer jeans. At the early stages of adopting jeans in Korea, imports were not permitted even from travelers and thus jeans became a status symbol when worn by students. In the 1980s the first imported jeans were U.S. national brands such as Levi's, Lee, and Jordache followed later by such brands as Calvin Klein and Guess. Today jeans imported from the United States remain more expensive on the Korean market than the Korean national brands such as Bang Bang and Tomboy. While a discussion of Korean brand name jeans and their relationship to social status was outside of the scope of this research, it is an area of further research that would increase understanding of the cross-cultural differences in meanings of dress, and the process through which such meaning is developed. This increased understanding would contribute to effective product development and promotion of products in diverse cultural contexts.

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