



Innovation and Distribution of a New Look: A-JAE Fashion in South Korea

Yoon Kyung Lee and Marilyn DeLong, University of Minnesota

Introduction

Future Drivers 2022, a recent feature of WGSN examining business opportunities states: “It’s time for brands, services and marketers to redress their perceptions of ageing and the accompanying needs and desires of older consumers – the rule book is being rewritten.” (Shin, 2019). Active retired seniors are those in their 60s who participate in social activities based on increased leisure time and economic well-being. In South Korea, the spread of senior men’s wear, ‘A-Jae (meaning Uncle) fashion’ has newly appeared in men’s clothing, and the emergence of ‘A-Jae fashion’ as an innovative trend may cause a reinterpretation of the fashion distribution system in Korea. This senior fashion not only offers a new market with sustainable implications, but younger generations are taking note and following this trend.

Men’s fashion innovation in South Korea

This senior fashion is a phenomenon worth pursuing as it has implications for where fashion originates and who becomes an innovator in terms of both gender and age. In a study of fashion leaders and followers, the group of “fashion innovators” was composed of about three times more females than males, and in the group of “early adopters” almost two times more females than males (Beaudoin, Lachance, & Robitaille, 2003). As a result, the “late majority” and “laggard” categories were significantly more represented for males than females. However, as men retire and stay socially active, they may become fashion innovators as they mix and match clothing from pre-retirement with that purchased in post-retirement. At this time, over 60s males in South Korea are creating a new fashion stream. Their movements in terms of fashion models and fashion innovators at fashion shows and fashion markets are not only leading older people but they may also influence a younger generation as well.

The clothing behavior of men can be explained by social and economic changes that are breaking down traditional enclaves, exposing workers to new cultural influences, and creating social and political tensions (Crane, 2012; Lee & DeLong, 2020). In a recent study of Korean retired men, 82% of the participants answered that their lifestyle had changed after retirement. Before retirement men were not selectors of the clothing they wore and now in retirement, they have become selectors. Based on their altered lifestyle, their clothing changed from suits, shirts, and neckties to outdoor wear and functional pants. As they do not wear formal suits as frequently as office goers, they need to find a way to use their idle clothing efficiently in their altered lifestyle and renting it was not considered an option by these men. A solution may be to mix their idle clothing with other more casual pieces (Lee & DeLong, 2020).

A-Jae fashion looks to be an innovative fashion trend

This style called ‘A-Jae(uncle) Fashion’ and ‘Halbae’(grandfather) in South Korea is especially noted on Dongmyo, a shopping street for grandmothers and grandfathers located in the north of Seoul. Recently when Kiko Kostadinov visited Dongmyo, he was hailed as the “world's best street dresser” by posting streetscapes and photographs of pedestrians in his Instagram story. Kiko is currently leading the KIKO KOSTADINOV group and the designer line, Mackintosh 0001, for the heritage brand Mackintosh in Scotland. Pedestrians posted by Kiko Kostadinov at first glance looked like "A-Jae(uncle)" wearing colorful outdoor wear with their high waisted pants, resulting in a bold and unique appearance. Dongmyo is very close to Dongdaemun, a major shopping center in South Korea.

The age of “ugly-pretty” is regarded as fashionable in the broader fashion world. (Shin,WGSN, 2019) Instead of wearing neat and stylish off-the-shelf outfits, the customer is creating a unique look that is personally appealing, combining rustic colors and casual clothes. This broader fashion is currently called 'Gorpcore'. Originally, this term was used to refer to nut snacks for outdoor activities and camping, but currently is also used to refer to outdoor clothing. Gorpcore posits that there is nothing more stylish than clothes that aren't stylish at all (Wallance 2017 Vogue Australia). This fashion bears resemblance to the ‘A-Jae Fashion and ‘Halbae’ in South Korea. In the 2020 Milan fashion showings, Gorpcore was a dominant theme for Armani (Priya, 2020). Another trend is motivated by an informed cohort called “Zentrepreneurs” who are engaged with the resale market. This group arises from Gen Z digital natives and is motivated by the ability to cash in on streetwear's hype. There is evidence that retailers are finding ways to include resale markets in their offerings; for example, depop stores are trying to satisfy the demand for Ralph Lauren in a second-hand clothing market. (Napoli and Craggs 2.2.20)

Methodology

For this paper, we visited Dongmyo street to analyze A-Jae Fashion in South Korea and described the streetwear recognized as ‘A-Jae-Si’. In addition, we surveyed fashion mainstream participants on-line for their awareness and perception of A-Jae Fashion as well as related “ugly” looks such as 'Gorpcore'. Survey participants totaled 173 (45 males and 128 females) with an age average of 23.2 (range, 20 to 33) years old.

Results and Discussion

From our observations on ‘Dongmyo’, there were many ‘A-Jae-Si’(uncles)and ‘Halbae’ (grandfathers) wearing colorful looks in their outdoor wear. A-Jae at the Dongmyo market shows innovation in pairings, such as a colorful windbreaker with sweatshirts and suit pants. From our systematic observations in visiting Dongmyo, it looks as though they tried to mix and match unknown new purchases with existing items in their own wardrobes, i.e., with new fashionable

items such as luxury ugly sneakers and prestige outdoor wear. Their outfits looked timely: a rider jacket with a soft hat, a long-length wool coat with mountain-climbing boots and a soft hat, an out-of-fashion windbreaker with a fashionable colorful cap. These senior fashionistas create unfamiliar fashion styles by mixing what they have with new items and they choose to wear these combinations in their daily life.

Dongmyo is becoming more well known to young people, as recently they have been shopping for 'rescue' clothing—the second-hand clothing of older men. From the survey asking about A-Jae fashion at Dongmyo, participants answered Innovative (42.5%) and Very Innovative (39.1%). Also 49.4% of them responded they would be willing to wear A-Jae fashion. In particular, wool, leather, and denim clothes are desirable and often sold second hand. Typical items include reasonably priced leather rider jackets and coats, denim jackets and jeans, and fedoras. For example, the Versace sheepskin rider jacket, which costs a few million won (1,000 USD), can be purchased at a price of about 50,000 won (50 USD) if you buy it used after 10 years of life.

Conclusion

An innovative A-Jae fashion is flourishing among senior men in South Korea. This new fashion stream means that fashion is no longer the exclusive possession of some fashion experts, nor pursued only by the young. Fashion in South Korea may no longer be perceived as special and inaccessible, but a transition to the question of whether individuals can pursue innovation by wearing their own unique style, regardless of age or gender.

References

- Beaudoin, P., Lachance, M. J., & Robitaille, J. (2003). Fashion innovativeness, fashion diffusion and brand sensitivity among adolescents. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*.
- Crane, D. (2012). *Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender, and identity in clothing*. University of Chicago Press.
- Napoli, C and Craggs. 2.2.20 “Gen z: Male Streetwear Tribes” WGSN.
- Priya, E. January 13, 2020. “Giorgio goes gorpcore: Armani channels The Matrix in Milan”
- Shin, J. 11.21.19 Future Drivers 2022. Business Opportunities: Balancing Age. WGSN.
- Wallace, F. June 22, 2017 “Gorpcore is the new normcore: everything you need to know about fashion’s newest phase.” *Vogue Australia* www.vogue.com.au > Fashion > Trends