

The Cultural Meaning of Bralessness to Consumers: Feminism, Freedom, and Challenge

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Keywords: bralessness, feminism, freedom, challenge

Since the women's liberation movement began, bralessness has been regarded as a symbol of social equality against men (Hinds & Stacey, 2001) and freedom from the stereotype perpetuated by men (Wahlers & Barker, 1973). Nonverbal functions of bralessness mainly focus on women's need to seek genial female liberation. However, as the entry of women in public affairs accelerated and became generalized in present society, the perception of bralessness has diversified into a fashion statement by virtue of celebrities, who utilize it as a way to flaunt their figures (Lester, 2018). In addition, the COVID-19 lockdown has increased the amount of time women stay at home, which has led to a growth in the braless population (Devine, 2020).

Besides the efforts towards liberation from the social pressure on females, bralessness can also be an attempt to overthrow societal norms of modesty. It is one of the cultural and societal norms that all members agree with. Depending on the place or season, certain attires are congruent with modesty while some are not (Goffman, 1963). This is particularly influenced by cultural differences. According to Kim, Michelman, Seock, and Koh (2007), American students associate modesty with individual behavior, but Korean students understand it as a collective norm. This indicates that in American culture, modesty depends on personal behavior and choice; however, Korean culture propagates such powerful social perceptions or prejudices that being modest is nearly mandatory for every member of society. Thus, this study aims to compare and analyze the perceptions of Korean and American consumers on bralessness and to confirm whether cultural influences interest toward bralessness.

Prior to beginning the research, this study defined the term bralessness as the state of not wearing or refusing to wear brassieres as undergarments. In the US, it is called being "braless". On the other hand, in South Korea, it is termed as "no-bra." The collected data - between January 1st, 2018 to January 1st, 2021 - comprised 1,310 web documents with the keyword "braless" from Google and 1,599 web documents containing the keyword "No-bra" from the Korean portal sites Naver and Daum.

In the text mining process, we analyzed the morphemes of the collected data and got rid of the stop words. The top 100 words based on co-occurrence were selected for analysis and implemented in an undirected matrix to measure centrality. The Python 3.7 program was used for data collection and morpheme analysis, and the NodeXL 1.0.1 program was used for centrality measurement and network visualization. To find interest in individual keywords, we observed

Google keyword searches for “braless” in English and “no-bra” in Korean through monthly data from January 2011 to January 2021. Finally, the statistical relationship between the keywords was examined through the SmartPLS 3.0 program.

Fashion, trend, experience, attention, street, public, workplace, comfort, worry, criticism, controversy, challenge, movement, feminism, and freedom were the common keywords in Korean and English, comprising about 25.71 percent of the keywords on the perception of bralessness. This indicates that in both cultures, bralessness is not only a social movement for feminism (Hinds & Stacey, 2001), but also a fashion trend (Lester, 2018) and a means for a comfortable lifestyle (Devine, 2020).

Based on degree centrality, among US consumers, the keywords that appeared were related to actual clothing items or situations for different dress codes, such as blouse ($C_d=.44$), outfit (.41), bikini (.31), dance (.26), shirts (.23), school (.15), dress (.15), gym (.10), swimwear (.10), beach (.10), travel (.08), wedding (.08), bodysuit (.05), sports (.05), and party (.05). However, in the case of Korean consumers, keywords related to situations for different dress codes did not appear; instead, the keywords were night (.65), t-shirts (.49), and sleeveless (.25). Accordingly, it was confirmed that US consumers considered bralessness more routinely. In their case, keywords such as clean (.05), benefit (.05), confidence (.03), and love (.03) appeared as positive keywords. However, nipslip (.18), f**k (.15), criticism (.13), controversy (.13), worry (.03), and stigma (.03) were also found as negative words.

Korean consumers' perception of bralessness was more polarized. For Korean consumers, bralessness was associated with positive keywords such as –belief (.83), freedom (.75), challenge (.57), participate (.54), support (.52), comfortable (.51), my way (.33), brave (.30), respect (.23), and active (.07), which were recognized as subjective and with active meaning. At the same time, it was also recognized as an outrageous issue, an object of swearing and ridicule through keywords such as– controversy (.93), criticism (.74), discussion (.70), issue maker (.61), uncomfortable (.57), outrageous (.46), problem (.43), worry (.42), prejudice (.33), embarrassed (.28), misunderstanding (.26), gossip (.26), sniggery (.22), displeasure (.19), and harm (.14). In addition, sexual keywords such as body exposure (.61) and sexual level (.23) were linked to negative keywords such as rape (.46), drunken (.45), accident (.36), drug (.33), alcohol (.25), and sexual harassment (.22). Therefore, we confirmed that bralessness was perceived extremely negatively in Korea.

Among the common keywords that emerged in both the two nations' consumer perceptions, feminism, freedom, and challenge were assumed to reflect the social meaning of bralessness. As a result of analyzing the relationship between each keyword, it was understood that the interest of US consumers in bralessness and feminism ($\beta=.26, p<.001$) was higher than that of Korean consumers. Also, it was confirmed that interest in freedom ($\beta = .50, p < .001$) and challenge ($\beta = .20, p < .05$) leads to interest in bralessness. In the case of Korean consumers, as the interest in feminism increased, the interest in bralessness also increased ($\beta = .59, p < .001$), but no significant influence was found in the relationship between the interest in freedom and challenge.

Social changes are usually accompanied by controversy. Bralessness is considered iconic in the women's liberation movement and a trend in fashion, but it still instigates social controversy. Since bralessness has become a part of the daily life of American consumers, a lot of fashion items are now associated with bralessness. On the contrary, bralessness is a subjective female movement associated with rape, sexual harassment, alcohol, and drugs for Korean consumers. Therefore, Korean consumers still have a remarkable tendency to view bralessness as a negative deviation. In addition, in the case of American consumers, their interest in feminism, challenge, and freedom led to an increased interest in bralessness. In the case of Korean consumers, their interest in feminism led to an interest in bralessness; however, it has not yet developed into a meaningful relationship with an interest in challenge and freedom. The study reflects the reality that the meaning of bralessness is diversifying. It has confirmed the perception of consumers in real countries through an exploratory approach, and therefore, is of academic significance.

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