South Korean Fashion designers' decision-making process:
The influence of cultural values and personal experience in the creative process

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As the world becomes more globally oriented in economics, politics and business, including the fashion industry, it is important to study how cultural meanings accompany or change a designer's ideas with respect to his/her design work. In particular, the most essential competitive advantage in today's apparel industry is that of skilled human resources, such as creative designers who serve as cultural interpreters when designing products (Jin, 2004). Creativity and originality in design are the most important factors in becoming a successful fashion designer rather than a dressmaker. A designer's ideas must be communicated through designs, which meet consumer's needs and express the designer's aesthetics. Therefore, investigating fashion designers' decision-making processes, particularly as affected by the designers' cultural values and personal experiences, are significant to study. This study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by describing how successful South Korean fashion designers solve design problems, and how cultural value and life experiences are related to or reflected in creating fashion apparel.

A qualitative approach with semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one long interviews was used to gain understanding of complex meanings held by participant designers, as well as their cultural values, personal experiences, and the process of creativity in their design process. A sample of 12 South Korean fashion designers (n=12) ranging in age from 26 to 50 years, who had a minimum of three years of experience as designer, were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. During the interview, participants were asked about the design process, creative process, inspiration, and personal optimal experience of flow. Interviews and observations were collected over a 12-week interval. Furthermore, along with the interviews and to further deepen understanding, each interviewee was asked to fill out a personal data sheet that included demographic and background information.

Demographic background information results are based on only 11 participants because one declined to fill out the survey. Four were male designers and seven were female designers. Five designers worked in large clothing companies, and six had their own individual labels. The designers had an average of 9.6 years of experience working as designers. The result reveals that designers with more than 10 years of design experience tend to spend less time on designing compared to that of other designers. Designers were asked to rank the skills that apply to clothing design in order of importance in total of 17 skills. The design concept was named as the most important, and second most important is patternmaking. Fit of the garment and material (fabric) ranked third and fourth, respectively.

Taking a grounded-theory approach, interview data were analyzed using the constant comparison method of qualitative analysis. To increase trustworthiness, multiple procedures were used. First, three researchers discussed and edited the coding guide. Second, an additional coder implemented the coding guide and audited 25 percent of the data. The inter-coder reliability achieved was 93.94 percent.

Eleven overarching themes emerged in the interview data: (1) the uncertainty encountered by apparel designers vs. fashion designers; (2) the creative fashion design process; (3) the designer's role in the system; (4) the designer's skills; (5) fashion as communication; (6) the creative role as a source of inspiration; (7) the fashion system's role; (8) merchandising as a vital entity; (9) role of cultural values; (10) fashion as a global phenomenon; and, (11) individual designers vs. in-house designers.

The findings suggest that cultural values have an indirect influence in South Korean fashion designers' creative design process. Particularly, Confucian philosophy creates an indirect influence on South Korean designer's work environment and creativity. For instance, the Confucian idea of *chaemuyn* deeply affects consumers' taste and style of fashion. Korean target market tastes sometimes limited designers in expressing their creativity, because if a design is too innovative, Korean consumers may refuse to try or purchase something they have not seen before. In addition, designers' creativity is affected by cultural factors, which may include organizational systems, groups, the fashion system, individuals, and family. The overwhelming majority of participants were unaware that they were impacted by cultural values or background. Designers' personal experiences serve as sources of inspiration and may have a direct impact on creative design ideas and creativity. Responses of the designers indicated that they experienced *flow* during the creative design process, when designers have positive circumstances from five categories including barriers, break times, balance, autotelic experiences and happiness from recognition.

Few research studies have been conducted with respect to South Korean fashion designers' creative design processes. The results of this study will help extend knowledge of the relationship between cultural values and personal experience within the creative process. The findings from this study may serve as a foundation for studying South Korean fashion designers and will expand knowledge of design theory, creative and decision-making process, global fashion industry, and design education.

Reference

Jin, B., & Moon, H. C. (2006). The diamond approach to the competitiveness of Korea's apparel industry: Michael Porter and beyond. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, *10*(2), 195-208.