

A Cross-Cultural Approach on Consumer Information of Websites : Comparison of Apparel Brand Websites of America and Korea

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The apparel category of e-commerce is showing to be a major new development of e-commerce transaction. The measurement data from Nielsen//NetRatings reported in February 2003 indicated that shopping sites were among the most popular destinations for women, particularly for clothing (Greenspan, 2003). In addition, e-commerce of clothing and fashion products in 2004 rose very quickly in Korea, with a gain of 37.0% versus 2003 level (The Korea National Statistics Office, 2004). However, many consumers are still reluctant to purchase apparel products on the Internet due to a lack of consumer information. Therefore, to develop efficient apparel websites for future e-commerce growth, it is worth of investigating the content and extent of consumer information being provided in present apparel websites. In addition, because the Internet is one of the most significant and greatest marketing tools for a global marketplace, e-commerce research in cross-cultural context is needed for a better understanding of consumer behaviors for global marketing.

The purposes of this study were two fold; one was to investigate the consumer information available on apparel websites in US and South Korea, and the other was to examine whether cultural differences between these two countries might be an explanation of any differences.

The research method of this study was content analysis. The sample was 50 brand websites of casual apparel products within U.S. and South Korea, and these websites collected by major search engines in two countries. In addition, 4 product categories, knit shirts and casual pants for men and women, were selected in each website and the number of product was limited as maximum 15 products per each category to reduce the bias that may be occurred by difference of the number of selected products among websites. The total number of products collected from every 4 categories of 50 websites is 1756 (USA: 925, Korea: 840).

A coding instrument for this study was developed to capture the consumer information of apparel websites, based on the coding instrument used by Park and Stoel (2002) for Internet shopping of apparel product. The consumer information collected in this study was classified into 4 categories: brand/company information, customer service information, purchase information and product information. On the other hand, to prevent change of consumer information over time, the whole content of 50 selected websites for this study were saved on a hard disk by two computer programs, Grab-a-Site (version 5.0) which is developed by Blue Squirrel Software Co., and HyperSnap-DX (version 5.60.03) which is developed by Hyperionics Technology Co.

To test inter-coder reliability, 4 coders and 2 test measurements, percent agreement and PL Index, were used. In the results of inter-coder reliability test, percent agreement were 93.89~100.00 and PL Index were .93~1.00. Thus, the results showed that inter-coder reliabilities were highly acceptable. For data analysis, frequency counts and chi square analysis were conducted to assess the availability and content of consumer information for American and Korean websites, and to compare the consumer information of apparel websites of two countries.

The results for this study are as follows.

First, American websites have an informative characteristic and focused on sale of their products, whereas Korean websites have an engaging and entertaining characteristic and focused on advertisement of their brands.

Second, the consumer information provided by most American apparel websites was very concrete and informative, whereas the consumer information, especially product information, provided by most Korean apparel websites was too simple and very lack. However, the sensory and experimental information of apparel products was still insufficient in both countries.

Third, many Korean websites provided community, membership system, fashion information, sitemap, and multi-media information to provide their customers convenient and pleasant shopping experience, comparing to American websites.

Fourth, the results of content analysis on the 26 websites that sell product via online were almost same with the results of content analysis on whole 50 websites for this study. This result showed that the difference on consumer information between American and Korean websites occurred by cultural difference, not by the availability of online shopping.

In conclusion, the results of content analysis showed that there were many differences on consumer information of apparel websites between two countries. The differences between two countries can be explained by cultural differences in terms of Internet environment and cultural value. Especially, cultural value can be an important factor to explain the differences between two countries. Korean consumers, as collectivists, tend to place more importance on others' suggestions and experiences when making decision. Thus, Korean websites well provided the information about community and product review, comparing to American websites in individualistic and low context culture. In addition, Korean' preferences for heavy graphics and entertainment elements on websites can make a difference from content of American websites.

This finding showed an example that cultural value has an effect on a website' content and design. Therefore, Web interface designers need to understand which audiences they are targeting and what their potential cultural responses may be.

References

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