

# Influence of Cultural Activities on Korean Youth Fashion From 1997 to 2004

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## ABSTRACT

*This study aims to investigate various cultural activities of the Korean youth including the subcultural and popular cultural activities and their characteristics and influences on the youth fashion during the period 1996-2004.*

*This study employs a qualitative approach based on the previous discussions of relevant literatures dealing with Korean youth culture and their fashion styles.*

*The result of the study shows that the most prominent characteristic in youth fashion of the period was "bricolage." The appearance of "Seotaiji" and the activities of his group laid the cornerstone of youth culture in the early 1990's. The influence of postmodernism changed the conventional sexism and androgynous outfit thrived. The androgynous effect also had strong influence on men's fashion in what turned out to be Metro-Sexual in early 2004.*

*During the period 2000-2004 the postmodernism regained its popularity both in culture and fashion. "Body" was also an important part of youth culture and has become the most popular and prevalent word of this era. At the same time the "Well-Being" and sports look were the new trend of youth fashion. Sports look, also known as Caports, is one of these new trends and the most important youth fashion style like mix & match reformation. The youth became more and more aware of the body image and were interested in fashion as well.*

*This trend awareness of their body and Well-Being image as well as their inclination to the fashion in the youth is expected to continue. Therefore the fashion industry, as their marketing strategy, needs to analyze the characteristics of the cultural trends among the youth and to prepare for the future need of youth fashion.*

**Key words :** Korean youth, popular culture, subculture, fashion, style

## I . Introduction

As the culture of an era has an inevitable relationship with the past as historical realities, the

future is predictable by recording, analyzing and evaluating the cultural phenomena of the past and present. In the center of the drastic change in the recent fashion trend is the newly emerged youth generation. The youth generation of Korea, which is considered to be self-centered and to try to seek

variety, has played an important role in the development of popular culture and various subcultures in Korea. The diverse cultural activities of the youth generation show the active and archetypal characteristics of postmodern cultural pluralist society, include the popular culture such as mini-homepage, blog, Eulchang (See note. 1) as well as the subcultures such as Cospla (See note. 2), Hiphop, Skateboard. Among these various cultural activities, such cultural phenomena as Eulchang and Momchang (See note. 3) show that the youth these days have much more interest in the body image, which contributes to the steady growth of the youth-related fashion industry in spite of the current economic recession in Korea.

The previous studies on the youth culture and fashion can be divided into following three types: studies on the foreign subculture, studies on the Korean subculture, studies on the relationships between youth fashion style and the subculture. Most of the studies fall on the first type, which delves into the subcultures of the foreign countries such as England, the United States and Germany through philological research. Studies of second type examine the characteristics and general fashion trends of Korean youth through the analysis of newspapers and magazines. The third type, from the notion that youth fashion style has a close relationship with the subculture of its days, explores the influences of cultural icons such as pop singers and sports stars on the fashion of the youth. All of these three types of studies, however, have concentrated on exploring the artistic traits of the youth outfit and haven't explained enough about the relationship between youth fashion and culture.

Though developed from basic needs to protect the body against the outside environments in the primitive ages, fashion came to be endowed with

aesthetic status as a part of culture in the modern society. It is obvious that we should discuss the relationship between socio-cultural phenomena and the youth to study the youth fashion. Therefore this study will focus on the relationships between youth fashion and the culture from 1996 through early 2004. The additional purpose of this study is to predict the direction of future youth fashion through the analysis of the modern youth culture and fashion. This study is based on the books and papers and sources from the internet, published from 1996 to early 2004. The ground of setting the date is that the late 1990's is the time that Korean youth culture is starting to be stable after the rapid forming and development throughout the several areas including fashion in early 1990's, which began with the appearance of popular musician Seotaiji.<sup>1)</sup> The youth culture is considered to have developed and shown mature attitude during the period from 2000 to 2004.

## II . Youth Culture

### 1. The Definition of the Youth

A youth, according to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, is a young person between adolescence and maturity. The definition of youth has been various and ambiguous depending on the times and circumstances. It is sometimes confused with the terms such as puberty or adolescence. Even the age group in which a person is considered a youth and thus eligible for special treatment under the law varies around the world. The previous studies have suggested that the age group of Korean youth is approximately from 11-12 to 20, sometimes 30. Among these various definitions, in a study about characteristics and symbolic meanings about the appearance of Korean youth subculture, Namkoong

provides us a worthy definition of an adult considering the unique situation of Korean society. According to her, adulthood is the phase in which a person achieves not only physical but also social maturity. If a person didn't accomplish economic independence, he/she couldn't be considered as an adult regardless of his/her physical maturity. This indicates that the age group of male youth in Korea can be extended from mid-teens to late twenties due to the two-year mandatory military service. So considering the unique social situation in Korea, Nam-koong suggests the broad definition of youth which includes the whole age group of teens and twenties.<sup>2)</sup> To avoid unnecessary terminological confusion, this study will consistently employ Nam-koong's definition for the following discussion.

## 2. Characteristics of Youth Culture

### 1) Characteristics of the Youth Popular Culture

Williams' five senses of the term culture include culture as a privileged set of activities (cultural, artistic, hierarchical, "the best"; and as a "whole way of life". Williams brings these two notions together by thinking of cultural processes as ordinary. "These processes are ordinary in the sense that they are routinely performed by everyone in their daily lives; they are the processes of language and meaning production, of sense-making and interpretation, of communication. "It is above all the ordinariness of communication that defines culture as art and that unites the various elements of a whole way of life."<sup>3)</sup>

So-called popular culture is implicated in William's definition. A best way of life in his definition means the cultural activities such as the subculture of the youth. Artistic activities in it indicates the so-called cultural text which is popular music, film, literature, etc.

Lee et al.<sup>4)</sup> in their study about the reception of

popular culture among Korean youths, suggest the characteristics of youth popular culture as follows. First, youths have been creating a new type of culture using computer network which, unlike the older generation, enables them to make prompt critical response to the products. Second, they have been constructing their cultural identity of their own accord. Third, with the appearance of diverse subculture the youth popular culture is getting more and more multifarious. The internet based get-together or clubs, whose members have the same hobbies or interests, are rapidly increasing, and often get big enough to express their own interests as a powerful pressure group. Fourth, the pursuit of individualism or individuality is an important characteristic of the youth. Their strong inclination to express personal bent forms a new type of culture which enables them to enjoy whatever they want to regardless of other people's judgement. Fifth, youth culture is based on the information-oriented society. Sixth, the youth have the constant tendency to consume cultural products. The youth considers cultural products as the sum of spiritual activities and value them over other things. Seventh, their globalized culture, without deep understanding of their traditional culture, appears to be denationalized. This tendency results in their pursuing the future rather than the past, products manufactured by multi-national companies, and western ways of life, and rejection of authority among the youth.

### 2) Characteristics of Youth Subculture

According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, a subculture is defined as an ethnic, regional, economic, or social group exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society. As a part of a society as a whole, a subculture inevitably shares a

great portion with the dominant culture, but it has its own specific points which sufficiently distinguish it from other social groups. A small group of people can form a new trend of cultural activities by showing a strong interest in an area of which the mainstream popular culture is only partially aware. If this trend successfully gains attention from the dominant society, it is classified as a subculture and sometimes acquires its own title such as Hippie, Punk, and Beats.

The members of a subculture usually show strong sense of identity. As the feeling of identity of an individual with a specific group comes from the sense of belonging to a group or subculture, common thoughts, behavior patterns and philosophical ideas may be clear markers which indicate that the members share the traits of a subculture. A subculture, however, is said to be defined by the differences. By noticing and highlighting the differences of a group from other culture groups, the members of a group feel that they actually belong to a particular group. Just like this, a subculture group also defines its identity by differentiating process. Any subculture defines itself in relation, or rather in contrast to other culture groups. The common codes of behavior which the members of a subculture share can be clearly set off via its confrontation with other cultures.

Hebdidge<sup>5)</sup> used style as common codes such as fashions, slangs, music, etc. Being a culture within a larger culture, a subculture cannot exist isolated, but should be in contact with other subcultures and the dominant culture of the society. In establishing its identity, a subcultural practice constructs new trends, or tries to subvert existing power relations and cultural trends. In the case of fashion design, however, the subculture style has started to be taken into the high fashion since 1980 and the demarcation between the two have been blotted.

This has weakened the foundation of the subculture which has the spirit of resistance and outsideness as its *raison d'être*. As the unique style of a subculture began to appear in the mass media, the public got accustomed to the style and the symbolic meaning, and as the uniqueness faded only the aesthetic intention remained.<sup>6)</sup>

### III. Youth Fashion and Culture

As discussed earlier, cultural identity is defined by differences, and this is prominent in the fashion style. Unlike mainstream styles, subcultural styles are the result of intentional fabrication of a specific culture group. In this era, which has seen the weakening of the subculture, this tendency is still apparent in the youth fashion.

Lee<sup>7)</sup> suggests that the youth receives and modifies popular culture to create their own subculture. The characteristics of this, according to her suggestion, are as follows. First, the youth create their own space and way of self-expression through their acquaintance with the popular culture of their society. Second, they transform the conventional objects and produce a novel meaning out of them. Third, they have a strong desire to express themselves by differentiating themselves from the older generation. They also like to embarrass other people with eccentric behaviors such as wearing outrageous outfits and listening to weird music. The followings are some of the most characteristic factors of the present-day youth culture which influenced on the youth fashion.

#### 1. Popular Music and Sports

Kim<sup>8)</sup> in her study of youth fashion as subculture, suggests that popular music and sports have a strong impact on the youth's subculture style. Kim

classifies street fashion into four types such as Hiphop, Reggae, Kitsch, and Sporty and presents the influences of popular music and sports as the basic background of Korean youth street fashion in the 1990s. Kim considers Hiphop, Reggae, Kitsch Style based on the influence of the popular music, and Sporty Style on sports. Um<sup>9)</sup> who pointed out popular music as the greatest influence on the youth fashion, insists that the music and fashion of the youth are the symbolic activities to escape from the oppressive reality. These studies show that the youth subculture is the hypnotic method for their sobering reality and that popular music is the most prominent factor which influenced on the fashion of youth.

In addition to this, the appearance of popular musician Seotaiji in 1992 had Korean society go through hot debate on the characteristics of the New Generation in Korea. Since then the youth in Korea have played active and leading roles in the formation of distinctive youth culture such as internet-based fandom (See note. 4), communication and entertainment as well as consumer market. The significance of their roles in the society has grown bigger and deeper in many areas.

## 2. Presence of Various Subcultures

Differentiating from the previous studies mostly focusing on the outer looks of the youth, Namkoong<sup>10)</sup> considers youth fashion as a subculture which can be subdivided according to the socio-economic conditions of its members, not as the homogeneous product of single generation. According to Namkoong, Korean youths show strong feeling of affinity with those who live in the same area, and popular music exercises strong influence on their styles. As for the living area, the youth in Kangbuk pursue the eye-catching, up-to-date fashion,

while the youth in Kangnam prefer the fashion which has mutual consent as their own style. Her study shows that the youth culture is composed of other smaller culture groups.

Namkoong's other study about Korean youth's subculture and its symbolic meaning insists that it consists of five smaller subcultures; Street dance, Skateboard, Hiphop, Under-rock, and Cospla. One characteristic of these subcultures is that they present unique features formed by the participants themselves, and they are totally different from either the older generations or their own generation. Second, each subculture has its own distinctive cultural background. Third, the members of each subculture forms its unique looks mainly by the method of bricolage. Bricolage, from the French bricoleur "to tinker" or "to fiddle", is equivalent to the English phrase "Do-It-Yourself" (DIY). In art, bricolage is an artistic technique where works are constructed from various materials available, and is seen as a characteristic of postmodern works. In cultural studies bricolage is used to mean the processes by which people acquire objects from across social divisions to create new cultural identities. In particular, it is a feature of subcultures. Here, objects that possess one meaning (or no meaning) in the dominant culture are acquired and given a new, often subversive meaning. For example, the safety pin became a form of decoration in punk culture

Hong<sup>11)</sup> suggests that the youth express cultural diversities by applying and reforming pre-existing styles and making Do-It-Yourself (DIY) products for themselves regardless of their genders, classes and ages. Hong also says that they show deconstruction, eclecticism, reformation (bricolage) as well as mix and match.

Throughout the previous studies about youth subculture, the styles of the Korean youth share the



<Fig. 1> Cospla (The 21th Comicworld  
Seoul 2002, March, Vol. 2 )



<Fig. 2> Hiphop  
(Fashionfocus 2003. 12, p.7)



<Fig. 3> mix and match  
(Fashionfocus 2004. 2, p.8)

characteristics like alteration and combination by using the method of bricolage.

### 3. Postmodernism

Postmodernism is an artistic, architectural, philosophical, and cultural movement or condition, said to arise after and in reaction to modernism. A feature of postmodernism is the destruction of the boundaries between men and women, dominant and subordinate classes, the younger and the older. Postmodernism is concerned with the subversion of all the authorities.<sup>12)</sup> Hong suggests that the vagueness between genders, ages, and classes is the characteristics of postmodern society and that these features are represented in the youth fashion style in Germany.

Korean society in the late 1990s showed the same tendency. First phenomenon was the public preference for pretty and beautiful boyish males called K'onminam (See note. 5) or Misonyun, which originated from the male image in the comic

books for girls. This phenomenon was related to the subversion of the fixed gender image, which made the fashion industry to release shirts with lace or fishnet, tight-fitting T-shirts and shiny fabric which had been thought to be feminine until then. The cosmetics industry launched brands only for men and advertised the images of narcissistic young men vigorously. Cultural beings have revealed their nature or the sexual preference without suppressing their inner tension or ambivalence, which facilitated the prevalence of androgynous styles.<sup>13)</sup> Especially the androgynous image in men's fashion have developed into what turns out to be Metrosexual (See note. 6) of early 2003 in Korea.

Secondly, during the time period 2000-2004 the tendency of retro revived in school uniforms, compilation albums of 1970s and 80s popular music, old history dramas as well as retro fashion. We can consider these string of events to be the breaking of the boundary between past and present influenced by the postmodernism of the 1990s.

Thirdly, Kidult, a portmanteau combining kid and

adult, appeared in 2003. This term derived from the tendency of a group of adults who showed the disposition to be a kid again, and it led to the reappearance of old-time street munches, school supplies and magic shows.<sup>14)</sup> Kidult syndrome also is closely associated with the postmodern phenomena featuring the destruction of the boundaries between an adult and a child.

#### 4. The Image of Body

The body has become the most powerful cultural icon in Korea since early 2000. This is shown as the thriving nude picture albums of female artistes, cosmetic surgery, Well-Being, Eulchang, Momchang syndrome. This prolific body images imply that Koreans are getting much more interested in external appearance.<sup>15)</sup> Eulchang and Momchang can become celebrities just because their photos happened to be on the internet without any substance and essence, which subverts the traditional image of the analog celebrities. Digital image became the most important means of communication in this era.<sup>16)</sup> It is fairly foreseeable that this reverence for outer images will increase people's interests in fashion in the near future. With this craze for the body image, it is very likely that the fashion style will have youthful, childlike elements like those seen in the Sports look.

#### 5. The Image of Sports

Sports look underwent dramatical changes in Korean society not only in its meaning but in the style itself. Sports wear, training wear, Baek-su (meaning bum) fashion, Azumma(See note. 7) fashion was other names for Sports look and most of them actually had contemptuous connotations. In the year of 2000, however, Caports look became

one of the most up-to-date fashion in vogue. Caports, the term combining casual and sports means that it comprises the two styles in it. According to Ha<sup>17)</sup> who suggests that Sports look is different from sports wear both in styles and the purpose of wearing. Ha proposes that the Sports look is inspired by the practical elements designated for playing sports. Only the aesthetic factors of sports wear, not the actual function of it, are adopted in the details, colors and shapes of Sports look. The basic purpose of Sports look is not to perform sports play. It's just a kind of casual look with a touch of sports wear.

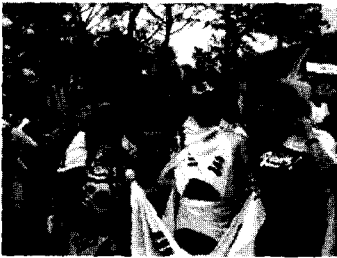
Concept of the Sports look first appeared in 1996 with the release of the fourth album of Seotajji. He showed Snowboard look which doesn't have any practical purpose on stage, which induced enthusiastic approval from the majority of the youth and from the mass media. His Snowboard look can be recorded as the first example of Sports look.

The hosting of 2002 Korea-Japan FIFA Worldcup provided a momentum for Sports look. Korean youth cheering their soccer team wore hand-made, self-made outfits adopting the elements of uniform such as Taekukgi and jersey uniform number of the players.<sup>18)</sup>

After that, in 2003 when a drama called Octapbang Goyangee (Cat in the Rooftop Room) aired on Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation in Korea, the leading actor and actress were wearing various styles of Sports look for the most of the time, and this boosted the look to the culmination of popularity.<sup>19)</sup>

The prevalence of Sports look came from the changes of people's life style. The generalization of 5-working days a week and concept of well-being made Korean people came to treasure the quality of life.<sup>20)</sup> The youth are enjoying the sports-related images such as energetic, active, sportive and fair.

They are wearing the image of sports, not the sports itself. Therefore the popularity of Sports look is predicted to last much longer than expected.



<Fig. 4> Korean youth cheering their soccer team during 2002 FIFA Worldcup(<http://imagesearch.naver.com>)



<Fig. 5> sports look (Fashionfocus 2003, 11, p.7)

<Table 1> presents the appearance year of cultural factors and related youth style factors influenced by those factors discussed earlier. Popular music and sports include the Seotaiji effect originated in 1992. The specific elements of Various Subcultures are Street dance, Skateboard, Hiphop, Under-rock, and Cospla. The following appearance and developing date of youth style factors generally came later than the cultural factors approximately two or three years.

#### IV. Conclusion

In this study investigating various cultural forms of Korean youth during the time period 1997- 2004, it is focused on the cultural activities and their characteristics and influences on the youth fashion.

The definition of youth in this study is the age from around mid-teens to late-twenties due to mandatory army service for Korean men. The research questions are like followings. First, what's the characteristics of youth culture? Second, what's the characteristics of youth fashion based on this first issue? Third, what would be like future youth fashion depending on the first and second issue?

The most prominent characteristic of youth fashion was "bricolage" which comprises "deconstruction" and "reformation" of the conventional culture. The results of this study also show that the most dominant cultural factor which influenced on the youth fashion was popular music and sports. With the appearance of Seotaiji in the early 1990's, various subcultures showed up and set the cornerstone of developed youth culture like what it is seen now.

Due to the influence of postmodernism, conventional sexism has changed and unisex or androgynous outfit has thrived. On the same basis, androgynous has influenced a lot on men's fashion. This trend still goes on in what turn out to be Metro-Sexual in early 2004.

Body is also an important part of the youth culture and has become the most popular and prevalent word in that era. In the same context, sports image has become the new trend of youth fashion. Sports look, also known as Caports, shows youthful fashion style like mix & match and reformation which is similar to bricolage.

As the results of this research show the youth

<Table 1> The appearance year of cultural factors and related youth style factors

| Year      | Cultural Factor                        | Youth Style Factor             |
|-----------|--|--------------------------------|
| 1992-1995 | Popular Music and Sports               | Hiphop, Reggae, Kitsch, Sporty |
| 1996-1999 | Various Subcultures, Postmodernism     | Metrosexual, Bricolage         |
| 2000-2004 | The image of Body, The image of Sports | Sportslook                     |



has become more and more aware of the body image, so it can be predicted that they are going to become much more interested in fashion as well. Consequently, it is needed to provide useful information for the fashion industry to establish marketing strategy which can meet the various tastes of the youth consumers. This will be possible through theorization based on qualitative & quantitative methods at the same time.

## Notes

1. Eulchang is a term combining Eul, the abbreviated form of Korean word which means "face", and Chang, the Korean youth slang which means "cool". Eulchang is a good-looking youth whose picture happened to be on the internet site and got a lot of attention from other youths and the public.
2. Cospla is abbreviated form of the term, Costume play, which originated from Comic market in Japan where the youth disguise themselves as the favorite or famous comic characters by make-up, wearing the characters' costumes and sometimes impersonating the characters' behavior.
3. Momchang is a star similar to Eulchang. Mom is a Korean word equivalent to "body" and Momchang literally means a person with a well-built body.
4. Keen aficionados of any phenomenon such as authors, hobbies, ideologies, genres or fashions can collectively considered as fandom. Fans (or the plural fen) typically are interested in even minor details of the object of their fandom; this is what differentiates them from those with only casual interest. The objects of fandom are typically artistic, sporting or entertainment related.
5. K'onminam is a word for a pretty, handsome

man with a slightly feminine look. It literally means a beautiful man like a flower originated from comic books for the girls. Misonyun has the similar meaning with it.

6. Metrosexual, a portmanteau combining "metropolitan" and "heterosexual", was first used in 1994 by British journalist Mark Simpson, who coined metrosexual (and its noun, metrosexuality) to refer an urban heterosexual male with a strong aesthetic sense who spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle. He is the fashion-conscious target audience of men's magazines. Typical Metrosexual is an urban male with a strong aesthetic sense who spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle.
7. Azumma is a Korean word indicating married woman.

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