

Nov 11th, 12:00 AM

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Park, MinJung and Bruin, Marilyn, "Negotiating between Two Identities: A Preliminary Qualitative Exploration of Clothing Practices among Korean Male College Students in the U.S." (2015). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 113.  
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## Negotiating between Two Identities: A Preliminary Qualitative Exploration of Clothing Practices among Korean Male College Students in the U.S.

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Keywords: symbolic interactionism, clothing practices, Korean male college students

**Introduction** Previous research has shown that men have different conceptualization of masculinity, body images, and clothing styles depending on their cultural backgrounds. For example, Western culture tends to promote the muscular images of men (Watt & Ricciardelli, 2012), whereas Korean culture tends to endorse ‘soft masculine’, which reflects a soft, gentle, and pretty man (Lim, 2008). However, little is known about how men from Asia living in Western countries negotiate their identities through clothing choices. Given the fact that Asian men whose ideals images, norms, fashion styles, and appearance may differ considerably from the dominant Western culture (Watt & Ricciardelli, 2012), they may experience the process of identity negotiation living in the U.S. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine psychological aspects of clothing practices among Korean male college students in the U.S. using a qualitative research method.

**Literature Review** Symbolic interactionism serves as the theoretical framework of this study to analyze psychological aspects of clothing practices among Korean male college students in the U.S. The main perspective of symbolic interactionism is that human selves interact with each other relying on the use of symbols and their shared meanings (Stone, 1970). Appearance and clothing have been regarded as important in understanding symbolic interactionism (Stone, 1970). Stone (1970) argued that individual’s clothing represents an important part of a person’s appearance, and the meaning of the clothing is contextually dependent, for example, the place, the time, and the viewers all determine the meaning of one's clothing symbol. There were two modes of identifications of the wearer’s clothing. First one is responses made by others who review the wearer’s clothing and the second one is responses of the wearer about his clothing. When the two modes correspond, the self of the wearer is validated or established. Stone (1961) mentioned that a self acquires identities when “situated – that is cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of his participation or membership in social relations” (p.93).

**Methods** The participants of this study were 3 Korean male college students enrolled in the Retail Merchandising program at a large Midwestern university. Participants were recruited with the email invitation and each participant received a 10\$ gift card as a compensation. The interviews followed a semi-structured format. Each interview was recorded with participants’ consent and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Questions asked in the interviews included information such as their perceptions of what ideal Korean men and American men look like, how they select clothing in the U.S., whether they have changed their clothing styles in the U.S., and specific clothes they would not wear in the U.S. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. To prepare for data analysis, a complete transcript of each of the three participants, a summary of

each case, field notes, and observation notes were prepared. Each transcript was read over three or four times. Similar pieces of the data were chunked to answer the research question of this study and each major code was identified with a concept. As a result, total 4 themes emerged.

## Results

*Avoid being looked like gay* All participants were well aware of strong stereotypes of gay men's fashion in the U.S. Two participants reported that they have experienced being labeled or looked as gay by Americans in the first year of college. One participant shared his experience: During my first semester of college in the U.S., I wore pink shirts and went to clubs in downtown. I chose to wear pink shirts because they were trendy items in Korea. However, I was shocked that I was being looked as gay by other American men. They bought me drinks at the bar and tried to hook up with me. I have realized only gay men wear pink shirts in the U.S., and I have never worn the pink shirts since then.

As consequences of the experiences, one participant told that he threw away most of clothes he purchased in Korea. All three participants reported that they have started to wear darker colored clothes. They told us that they would never wear jeans that are too tight, tops that are too bright because they did not want to be misunderstood as gay.

*Acknowledging physical differences and finding clothes that fit me* Participants talked about Korean men having the naturally smaller born structure and thinner body than American men. Therefore, rather than following the American men's fashion style, they tried to find clothes that suit their "Korean style body".

*Self-reflection and finding new me* All participants reported that they used to be heavily influenced by and follow the major fashion trends in Korea because of the culture. As they have started to live in the U.S which has the independent culture, they felt the need that they needed to develop their own clothing styles. As a last theme, *Having dual identities* was identified.

**Discussion and Implications** Results of this preliminary qualitative study provide insights into understanding Korean male college students' psychological aspects of clothing practices in the U.S. The finding also suggests that clothing plays a crucial mean for Korean male college students to negotiate their identities in the U.S. However, since this study was exploratory in nature, there were only a small number of participants and they were in the same major. Future research is needed that includes participants who are from a wide range of majors to allow generalization of findings.

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