Design Preferences of Non-Caucasian Working Women: A Business Jacket Focus

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Abstract

Based on the latest U.S. Census report, in the near future, African, Asian, and Hispanic-Americans will accumulate substantial income and possess increased purchase power as a result of their economic necessity and higher educational attainment. The purpose of this study was to identify consumer characteristics that are related to the clothing design preferences of non-Caucasian working women as they have the potential to become a valuable target market. The final sample included non-Caucasian working women who wear business jackets to work at least once a week. Although the study did not find significant differences in design preferences affected by ethnicity, the findings displayed the importance of consumer characteristics on design preference formations for the selected minority groups. The results showed a relatively high preference for a

loosely fitted, bust and waist deep neckline jacket style by older respondents. Respondents who work in a larger department with more colleagues preferred a loosely fitted, hip length, waist deep neckline style. Larger consumers displayed a relatively high preference for a semi-fitted, short length, above bust neckline, and a notched collar jacket style. Taller consumers preferred a tunic level, fitted, bust deep neckline, and rounded collar jacket style.

Introduction

In the foreseeable future, according to the figures in the 2002 U.S. Census Bureau, African, Asian, and Hispanic Americans will accumulate substantial disposable income that will result in increased purchasing power. A report by the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia (as cited in Gardyn & Fetto, 2003) also demonstrated that in 2002 the buying power of African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans reached $646 billion, $581 billion, and $296 billion respectively. The same source predicts that the ethnic consumers' share in the marketplace will continue to increase and in 2007 the disposable income of Hispanic Americans will total $927 billion and the disposable income of African-Americans will total $853 billion.

In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics claims that in 2002 females accounted for 43% of the full-time work force and 66 % of the part-time work force. The statistics imply that working women have accrued significant revenue leading to

increased importance of women as consumers. Women of ethnic backgrounds make for an important part of the total female work force. In the previous years, several reports (Chang, 2001; Khan, Chawla, & Devine, 1996; O'Neal, 1998a) indicated that African, Asian, and Hispanic American working women represent a lucrative niche for apparel manufacturers. However, prevailing fashion and styles are in accordance with the physical characteristics and design preferences of American women of European origin, not necessarily the ones with various ethnic origins (O'Neal, 1998a). With this in mind, the purpose of the study was to analyze the effect of personal, physical, psychosocial, and job-related characteristics of African, Asian, and Hispanic-American working women on their apparel design preferences.

Literature Review

The higher growth rate of these three ethnic groups, as compared to the growth rate of the Caucasian-American population, would result in increased ethnic and racial diversity in the emerging workforce. In addition, higher educational attainment of women and economic necessity will provide women of varying ethnic backgrounds with more career opportunities (Chang, 2001; Khan, Chawla, & Devine, 1996).

According to a report by Cotton Inc. (as cited in "African American," 2001), 28% of African-American women and 14% of Hispanic-American women spent more than $200 a month on clothing as compared to 12% of Caucasian women. According to the same report, 24% of Hispanic women and 19% of African-American women purchased clothes in the price range of $101-$200 a month, whereas only 15% of Caucasian women spent the same amount of money per month. A survey done by Simmons Market

Research Bureau (as cited in "Feho, Whelan, & Yin," 2001) showed that 38% of Asian women, 36% of young African-American women, and 32% of Hispanic women are "fashion conscious" as compared to 29% of Caucasian women. Another study by the Simmons Market Research Bureau in the first half of 2002 (as cited in Gardyn & Fetto, 2003) stated that 58% of African-Americans, 46% of Hispanic-Americans, and 46% of Asian-Americans like to dress in the latest fashion compared to only 36% of Caucasians.

The reported statistics indicate that, for apparel manufacturers, non-Caucasian working women are worth targeting. However, these particular consumer groups display major physical differences from Caucasian-American women. More over, design preferences of African, Asian, and Hispanic-American women slightly vary in accordance with their historic and ethnic heritage (Yoo, 2003).

African-American Women

African-American aesthetics of dress includes individual expression, the tendency to dress up, as well as partiality for bold colors of high visual impact (O'Neal, 1998a). As a result of the distinct African-American cultural background, African-Americans use dress as a display of emotional and symbolic messages as well as solidarity and group belonging (Daniels, 2002; O'Neal, 1998a). However, African-American women are influenced by the standards of beauty imposed by the dominant fashion industry and exhibit high preference for trendy clothes (Gardyn & Fetto, 2003). The 2002 Simmons Market Research Study (as cited in Gardyn & Fetto) showed that keeping up with the latest trends in fashion is important for 34% of African-Americans as compared to 28% of Asian-Americans, 27% of Hispanics, and 25% of Caucasians. Once appropriated, however, trendy clothes are personalized and modified to express individual style and

preferences (O'Neal, 1998a, O'Neal, 1998b). Hamilton (1999) points out that empirical research has overlooked the central role the physical body had played in defining the African-American aesthetics. She claims that sensuality and worship of the body were expressed through cultural artifacts such as clothing.

Hispanic Women

Cultural values play an important role in Hispanics' shopping behavior (Brandon & Forney, 2002). Family influence is one of the key factors that influence purchase behavior of Hispanic consumers. The 2002 Simmons Market Research Survey (as cited in Gardyn and Fetto, 2003) showed that 36% of Hispanic Americans prefer to shop with family members. Higher importance placed on social status results in higher preference for formal rather than casual apparel (Brandon & Forney). Portraying a certain image is also extremely important for Hispanic-American consumers. Previous research done by Oliver and Christian (1994) showed that Hispanic-American women preferred shopping couture designer labels (e.g., Chanel, Yves Saint-Laurent, and Moschino) that convey very high social status.

Asian-American Women

According to the 2002 Simmons Market Research Study (as cited in Gardyn & Fetto, 2003), 43% of Asian consumers give brand priority consideration when shopping. However, this does not lead to brand loyalty, as nearly 25% of the Asian consumers like to change brands compared to 22% of Hispanics, 20% of African-Americans, and 17% of Caucasians. The same study shows that social acceptance is important for Asian Americans: 26% of Asian Americans consider their neighbors' opinion on their purchases. Although little research has been done on design preferences of Asian-

American consumers, Kondo (1992) implies Asian people lack Western tradition but have a heritage rich in Eastern tradition. Thus, as Asian Americans interact with an environment that is culturally different, they adopt a cosmopolitan way of dressing. The Selig Center for Economic Research (as cited in Fetto, 1999) predicts that the above-average levels of education, a young working force, and high household income will increase the importance of Asian Americans as consumers. Increased buying power may lead to higher standards for apparel. Several reports (Skgkao, 1994; Zhang, Li, Gong, & Wu, 2002) already indicate that Asian women rank quality of workmanship as one of the most important criteria for selecting apparel.

With this evidence in mind, the purpose of the present study was to analyze the relationship between the personal, psycho-social, job-related, and physical characteristics of non-Caucasian working women and their apparel design preferences, business jacket design in particular.

Research Design

The research instrument consisted of two elements: visual stimuli and questionnaire. Visual stimuli included 18 black-and-white computer-generated drawings of traditional business jackets. The attractiveness of each design was measured on a 1 (not attractive) to 5 (very attractive) Likert-type scale. The self-administered questionnaire was developed to elicit information about the personal, physical, psychosocial, and job-related characteristics of the respondents.

Final Sample

A total of 130 questionnaires were distributed to non-Caucasian University employees in Texas. One participant-screening criterion involved wearing a business

jacket to work at least once a week. Of the 130 questionnaires, 98 questionnaires were returned by respondents, of which 78 questionnaires were deemed usable, yielding 60.7% response rate. Of the 20 questionnaires that were not usable, 18 questionnaires were Caucasian respondents and 2 were incomplete.

Data Collection

The data collection method followed Sallant and Dillman's (1994) drop-off survey technique with three office visits. The first office visit was to distribute the survey. The second office visit followed in three business days after the first one and was a reminder. The third office visit took place three business days after the second one, and its purpose was to collect the survey.

Reliability of the Scales

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to calculate instrument reliability. Overall alpha coefficient for the instruments tested exhibited high reliability ($\alpha = .87$): self-confidence in dressing ($\alpha = .85$), perceived importance of clothing ($\alpha = .88$), self-monitoring ($\alpha = .82$), and job satisfaction ($\alpha = .88$).

Results

The respondents ranged in age between 20 and 60, and the mean age was 37.4 years. The educational level of the respondents follows: some college work (30.38%), associate degree (11.39%), bachelor's degree (19 %), some graduate work (6.33%), and master's degree (11.39%) (See Table 1).

Pearson Correlation Coefficient was utilized to test the relationship among design preferences and consumer characteristics. Based on the correlation analysis, age ($r = .38$,

p = .0005) was positively related to jacket #21220 (tunic level, loosely fitted, above bust neckline, no collar); weight (r = 0.30, p = 0.0071) was positively related to jacket # 01121 (short, semi-fitted, above bust neckline, notched collar); size of work place (r = 0.29, p = 0.0098) and number of colleagues encountered daily (r = 0.38, p = 0.0005) were positively related to jacket # 12201 (hip level, loosely fitted, waist deep neckline, notched collar); height (r=.29568, p=.0082) was positively related to jacket # 21012 (tunic level, fitted, bust deep neckline, rounded collar); age (r = .29756, p = .0077) was positively related to jacket # 00210 (short, loosely-fitted, bust deep neckline, no collar); age (r = .33458, p = .0026) and number of colleagues encountered daily (r = .43295, p=.0001) were positively related to jacket # 11202 (hip length, loosely-fitted, waist deep neckline, rounded collar) (see Table 2).

Discussion

The findings were in agreement with earlier findings by Yoo (2003) indicating that consumer characteristics play an important role in consumer design preferences. A relatively high preference by older respondents for a loosely fitted and without collar jacket style may be attributed to the changes in body structure and lifestyle of the older respondents. A relatively high preference by larger respondents for the semi-fitted, short length, above bust neckline and notched collar jacket style may be due to the specific design features that camouflage a large body to appear slender. The fact that the respondents who work in a larger department with more colleagues prefer the loosely-fitted, hip length, and waist deep neckline jacket style may be because the particular jacket style portrays a more traditional business jacket. A relatively high preference by

taller consumers for a tunic level, fitted, bust deep neckline, and rounded collar jacket style may be due to specific design features that add curve and volume to a tall body thus making it look shorter.

Therefore, based on the study results, this study concludes that personal, physical, and job-related characteristics of non-Caucasian working women are related to their apparel design preferences. Due to the small sample size, we could not run repeated measures ANOVA that could have identified individual design element responsible for the findings. With a larger sample size, future study could distinguish specific design elements responsible for design preferences and their relationships with consumer characteristics. Future research could also analyze each ethnic group (African, Asian, and Hispanics-Americans) separately by involving more respondents in each ethnic group. Interactions among design elements and interacting forces surrounding consumers could also be investigated to better understand various ethnic groups' aesthetic evaluation process and design preference formation. The results imply that body size and certain design elements (e.g., garment silhouette, length, neckline drop, and collar style) are very likely to be associated with design preferences of non-Caucasian women. To add more practical value to these findings, further study should also examine body configuration differences of these three groups from Caucasian women, so apparel manufacturers and designers could design business wardrobes tailored to the physical differences of these three consumer groups.

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Table 1. Personal and Physical Characteristics of Non-Caucasian Working Women

Characteristics	n	%
Age (M=37.42, SD=10.12)		
18-25 years	12	15.18
26-35 years	25	35.43
36-45 years	20	25.33
46-55 years	21	26.58
56+	1	1.27
Height (M=62.52, SD=7.57)		
5' or shorter	4	5.07
5'1"-5'4"	43	54.43
5'5"-5'7"	18	22.79
5'8" or taller	6	7.6
No response	1	1.27
Weight (M=145, SD=38.57)		
101 lbs-120 lbs	16	20.26
121 lbs-140 lbs	22	27.87
141 lbs-160 lbs	21	26.6
161 lbs-180 lbs	7	8.87
181 lbs-200 lbs	8	10.14
201 lbs or more	3	3.81
No response	2	2.53
Body Frame Size		
Petite	12	15.19
Small	11	13.92
Medium	38	48.1
Large	10	12.66
Extra-Large	8	10.13
Generally Purchased Garment Size Category		
Petite	34	43.04
Tall	3	3.8
Misses	27	34.18
Women's	15	18.99

Characteristics	n	%
Generally Purchased Dress Size (M=11, SD=5.97)		
Size 2 or smaller	3	3.8
Size 3-Size 4	7	8.89
Size 5-Size 6	8	10.16
Size 7-Size 8	7	8.89
Size 9-size 10	9	11.43
Size 11-Size 14	27	34.29
Size 16-Size 20	8	10.16
Size 22-Size 26	7	8.89
No response	3	3.8
Hair Color		
Brown	45	56.96
Black	32	40.51
Red	2	2.53
Eye Color		
Brown	69	87.34
Blue	2	2.53
Green	2	2.53
Black	6	7.59
Figure Type		
Ideal	16	20.25
Triangular	12	15.19
Inverted-triangular	3	3.8
Rectangular	4	5.06
Hourglass	14	17.72
Diamond-shaped	7	8.86
Tubular	6	7.59
Rounded	14	17.72
No response	3	3.8
Ethnic Background		
African-American	20	25.32
Hispanic	46	58.23
Asian	13	16.46

Characteristics	n	%
Marital Status		
Single, never married	27	34.18
Divorced	7	8.86
Married	40	50.63
Separated	3	3.8
Cohabiting	2	2.53
Education		
High school	13	16.46
Some college	24	30.38
Associate degree	9	11.39
Bachelor's degree	15	18.99
Some graduate work	5	6.33
Master's degree	9	11.39
Doctoral degree	3	3.8
Other	1	1.27
Employment Status		
Full-time	71	89.87
Part-time	8	10.13
Career Orientation		
Just-a-job	40	50.63
Career	39	49.37%
Percentage of Financial Contribution to the Total Household Income		
10% or below	5	7.04
11%-20%	2	2.82
21%-30%	6	8.45
31%-40%	6	8.45
41%-50%	6	8.45
51%-60%	10	14.08
61%-70%	5	7.04
71%-80%	4	5.63
81%-90%	7	9.86
91%-100%	19	26.76
No response	1	1.41

Note. The percentage total for each characteristic may not add up to 100 due to the rounding. The no response rate was excluded from the frequency and percentage calculation.

Jacket Designs	Jacket Descriptions	Characteristics				
		Personal	Physical		Job-related	
		Age	Height	Weight	Firm Size	No. Colleag.
	• tunic level • fitted • bust deep neckline • rounded collar	—	r=.29568 p=.0082	—	—	—
	• hip level • loosely fitted • waist deep neckline • notched collar	—	—	—	r = .29 p = .0098	r = .38 p = .0005
	• short • loosely fitted • bust deep neckline • no collar	r = .29756 p = .0077	—	—	—	—
	• short • semi-fitted • above bust neckline • notched collar	—	—	r = .30 p = .0071	—	—
	• hip level • loosely fitted • waist deep neckline • rounded collar	r = .33458 p = .0026	—	—	—	r = .43295 p = .0001
	• tunic level • loosely fitted, • above bust neckline • no collar	r = .38 p = .0005	—	—	—	—