



Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Byoung-ho Jin, Jin Yong Park, Jay Sang Ryu, (2010), "Comparison of Chinese and Indian consumers' evaluative criteria when selecting denim jeans", *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 14 Iss 1 pp. 180 - 194

Permanent link to this document:

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Comparison of Chinese and Indian consumers' evaluative criteria when selecting denim jeans

A conjoint analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – US apparel firms have been relatively slow exploring Chinese and Indian apparel markets, despite the countries' tremendous growth potentials. To help US apparel firms successfully enter these promising markets, this study aims to compare evaluative attributes that Chinese and Indian consumers utilize when purchasing denim jeans.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected in Shanghai, China and Bangalore, India.

Findings – The results of the study confirmed that Chinese and Indian consumers ranked attributes differently. Chinese consumers placed the highest importance on price, followed by fitting, brand country of origin, quality, and design, whereas Indian consumers placed importance on fitting, brand country of origin, design, price, and quality, in descending order.

Research limitations/implications – Caution needs to be exercised in generalizing the findings since the data for this study were collected from one city in each country. The study tested the idea that the importance of attributes would be different between Chinese and Indian consumers as their cultures and retail development stages differ. This idea was supported in conjoint analysis.

Practical implications – The findings indicate that a regional approach, assuming that all Asian markets are the same, is inappropriate. Thus, US apparel firms need to pay careful attention to differences in each Asian market.

Originality/value – China and India have been compared frequently in various ways: growth potential, market size, and population. Surprisingly, however, no study has attempted to compare Chinese and Indian consumers' evaluative criteria for apparel products. This is the first empirical study to show the differences between Chinese and Indian consumers in evaluating apparel products.

Keywords China, India, Clothing, Emerging markets

Paper type Research paper



China and India are two of the world's most important emerging markets. China's economic growth rate is the world's fastest, and India's is the second fastest. The GNP of China ranks sixth in the world and India ranks seventh. Together, China and India account for 40 percent of the planet's population. Forecasts state that by the middle of the century, the two countries could account for half of the total global output (Engardio, 2005, August 22). Along with these impressive figures, the potential of the countries as apparel retail markets is also significant. China represents the world's second largest apparel retail sales market, after the US (Baker, 2007.). India shows a remarkable 20 percent growth per year in brand apparel market sales (Mozumder, 2006).

Despite these remarkable numbers, though, the market presence of US apparel brands in the countries is relatively small. In recent years, US apparel brands represented only 6 percent of total foreign-brand apparel sold in Beijing, China (Zhang, L. *et al.*, 2002), and the number of US apparel brands registered in China ranked fourth, behind Hong Kong, Italy, and France (DeLong *et al.*, 2004). This relatively small market share of U.S. apparel brands is also found in India, as European fashion brands such as Chanel, Louis Vuitton, and Hugo Boss are more visible (Castano, 2007, October). In order to help US apparel companies successfully expand to China and India, it is imperative to first understand the evaluative criteria used by Chinese and Indian consumers to assess apparel goods.

Many multinational companies assume that all Asian consumers have similar tastes and preferences; however, a growing number of studies support the notion that Asian consumers are heterogeneous (Kim *et al.*, 2007; Kotabe and Jiang, 2006). China and India are collectively viewed as "Asian countries," however; the two are dissimilar in terms of cultural dimensions and in the degree of retail market development. Evidence supports the assertion that the importance of product attributes varies by culture (Forsythe *et al.*, 1999). "The products and brands people buy, product attributes they value, and the benefits they desire are all culturally-based" (Forsythe *et al.*, 1999, p. 279). In addition, organized retailing in China comprises approximately 15 percent of the economy, whereas the figure in India is only 2 percent (Sinha and Banerjee, 2004), denoting that more international apparel brands are available in China than in India. Therefore, these dissimilarities in culture and the retail market impact upon consumers' use of evaluative criteria when purchasing apparel goods. Based on this rationale, this study posits that Chinese and Indian consumers use different evaluative criteria when purchasing apparel goods.

Despite a plethora of literature on consumers' evaluative criteria, the findings of previous studies are inconsistent. This study views that the reasons for the mixed findings lie in the methods that previous studies utilized. Previous studies only asked respondents the importance of each attribute and did not consider correlation among the attributes, even though consumers make an overall judgment by incorporating the relative importance of each attribute, which requires complex trade-offs (Green and Wind, 1975). To measure consumers' evaluative criteria in more realistic settings, this study employs a conjoint analysis method. The purpose of this study is to compare apparel evaluative criteria between Chinese and Indian consumers when they purchase apparel employing conjoint analysis.

Literature review

China and India: two emerging apparel retail markets

China and India have emerged as two of the fastest growing developing countries in the global marketplace. Since China first opened its market to foreign entrepreneurs, its

GDP growth has averaged around 9.7 percent. India, following in China's footsteps a decade later, has shown a steady GDP growth of 5.8 percent (Hubacek *et al.*, 2007). Taking the purchasing power of these two nations into account, China is placed as the second largest economy, right behind the US, and India ranks fourth (Hubacek *et al.*, 2007; Korukonda, 2007). Furthermore, China and India are currently responsible for 11.5 percent and 7.7 percent of the world GDP, respectively (Hubacek *et al.*, 2007), and will jointly represent approximately 40 percent of the world trade by 2016 (Khanna, 2007).

With its dramatic economic growth, China represents the world's most promising apparel retail market. This market, apparel retail, accounts for 10 percent of China's retail sales (Baker, 2007), and it increased by 34.8 percent from 2000 to 2001 (Lee, 2002). Forecasts indicate that China will surpass the USA and become the world's largest apparel retail market by 2012 (Baker, 2007). Furthermore, Chinese consumer preference for and high likelihood of purchase of foreign apparel brands (Dickson *et al.*, 2004; Kwan *et al.*, 2003; Zhang, 1996) present great opportunities for multinational apparel corporations. However, the presence of US apparel products in China has been weak (Frumkin *et al.*, 2006). A survey of foreign-brand apparel retailers in Beijing revealed that only 6 percent of brands sold in those stores were made in the USA, compared with 46 percent made in France and 38 percent made in Italy (Zhang, L. *et al.*, 2002).

India is the world's second most significant emerging market in apparel retailing. India's total apparel retail sales will be worth US\$115 billion by 2012, more than double the figure for the same period in 2006 (Baker, 2007). The market for foreign branded apparel is especially promising with a continuous growth rate of over 20 percent per year (Mozumder, 2006). Indian consumers also have a tendency to prefer Western-style clothes (Roy and Saha, 2007) and foreign apparel brands (Mozumder, 2006). For Indian consumers, a foreign brand is a sign of "foreign envy," so "if you own something that's from abroad, it sets you apart from your peers" (Kavilanz, 2007). While several US apparel companies, such as VF Corporation, have successfully launched their brands (e.g. Lee, Wrangler, and Nautica) in India (Mozumder, 2006), their presence is relatively smaller than that of European companies. European fashion brands such as Chanel, Louis Vuitton, and Hugo Boss have had stores in New Delhi and Mumbai for years, and other European brands such as Versace, Prada, Gucci, and Fendi have plans to enter the market or to expand their operations in India (Castano, 2007).

The organized retailing[1] sectors in China and India represent a small portion of each country's entire retailing industry, accounting for approximately 15 percent in China and 2 percent in India (Fernandes *et al.*, 2000). These figures are relatively low, even for other developing countries in Asia, such as Malaysia and Thailand, which both have over 40 percent organized retailing sectors (Fernandes *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, the organized retailing sectors in China and India present great opportunities for US apparel retailers. However, despite this potential for US apparel companies, the Chinese and Indian apparel retail markets have not been actively explored. Therefore, an understanding of consumers' critical evaluative criteria when purchasing apparel items will be one of the most important pieces of information US apparel companies need to fully comprehend Chinese and Indian markets. The following discussion summarizes prior studies on apparel product attributes.

Apparel product attributes

Consumers evaluate a product using various product attributes or cues, from which they then form their evaluative criteria. Table I summarizes apparel product attributes identified in earlier previous studies. As Table I shows, price, country/brand of origin,

quality, design/style and fitting, were used more than other attributes; thus, this study chose these five apparel attributes to be examined. Previous studies on apparel product attributes found price, country/brand of origin, quality, design/style, and fitting more important than other attributes. However, results regarding these attributes were rather inconsistent. Price was found to be the most important information for US female consumers (Davis, 1987; Martin, 1971). Country of origin was identified as the most important factor when US consumers evaluated garments (Dickerson, 1987). In another study, overall design of garment was the most important attribute when consumers selected garments, but fit and design of garment on the body were more critical when they decided whether to buy the garment (Eckman *et al.*, 1990). While quality has been one of the most frequently cited attributes in numerous studies, it has not been identified as the most important attribute. This suggests that quality was indirectly evaluated through other attributes, such as country/brand of origin and price. Consumers often perceive products as having a higher quality when the products are expensive (Lee, 2002) and are from a developed country (Kwan *et al.*, 2003; Zhang, 1996). In another study, fit was perceived to be the most important attribute for US college female students when purchasing clothing (Workman and Johnson, 1991).

Factors related to differing importance of apparel attributes

Previous research findings suggest that the importance of apparel evaluative attributes changes due to various factors, such as acculturation level, fashion leaders, age, gender, decision making style, culture and familiarity with a product category. That is, consumers' acculturation level influenced Chinese consumers' attitudes toward clothing and the importance they put on products' country of origin (Shen *et al.*, 2002). Fashion leaders consider aesthetic attributes of apparel products more important than fashion followers do (Beaudoin *et al.*, 2000). Younger consumers were more influenced by design and country/brand of origin (Dickson *et al.*, 2004). Gender also influences the importance of apparel attributes (Rocha *et al.*, 2005). Wang *et al.* (2004) suggested that Chinese consumers utilized different product attributes based on their decision-making styles, and fashion-conscious and hedonistic consumers were more likely to purchase imported brand, more expensive, and higher quality apparel products.

Culture as well as familiarity with a product category also explains some variance in the importance of apparel evaluative criteria. Shoppers who are less experienced in selecting apparel or who are less familiar with a product category rely more on extrinsic attributes (e.g. brand, price, country of origin, etc.) while more experienced shoppers more often utilize intrinsic attributes (e.g. fabric, comfort, style, color, fit, durability, quality, etc.) when making a purchase decision (Rao and Monroe, 1988). As evidence, price was a more significant determinant to Chinese consumers whereas design was more significant to Korean consumers (Forsythe *et al.*, 1999). Chinese consumers were less experienced shoppers and less exposed to Western culture compared to Korean consumers, therefore it was interpreted that Chinese consumers evaluated apparel products with an extrinsic attribute such as price, while Korean consumers used an intrinsic attribute such as design for evaluation (Forsythe *et al.*, 1999).

Important attributes for Chinese and Indian consumers

As Table II shows, empirical research on Indian consumers' clothing evaluative criteria has not been conducted to date. However, Indian consumers were found to place importance on Western brands and perceive them as having superior quality and more stylish design (Batra *et al.*, 2000). Chinese consumers' apparel evaluative criteria have

Authors	Year	Sample	Product	Price	Country/ brand of origin	Attributes								
						Quality	Design/ style	Fit	Fiber/ fabric	Color	Care	Brand name	Comfort	Durability
Wang and Heitmeyer	2006	Taiwanese	US, Taiwan- made apparel	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Wu and Delong	2006	Chinese	Jeans	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Delong <i>et al.</i>	2004	Chinese	US, China- made apparel	×	×	×		×						
Dickson <i>et al.</i>	2004	Chinese	Shirts/ blouses and pants	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Zhang, L. <i>et al.</i>	2002	Chinese retailers	Foreign- brand apparel	×	×		×				×			
Zhang, Z. <i>et al.</i>	2002	Chinese	Casual wear	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Forsythe <i>et al.</i>	1999	Korean Chinese females'	Ladies' jacket	×		×	×	×			×			
Ku	1990	Korean	Women's clothes	×		×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×

Notes: ^a Attributes that are not much chosen in selected studies have not been included in this Table

Table II.
Selected apparel product
attributes from the
previous studies
examining international
consumers^a

received a great deal of attention in previous studies; the findings have provided mixed results. Some studies suggest that Chinese consumers are brand loyal (Lowe and Corkindale, 1998) and that symbolic attributes (i.e. brand) are more important determinants of purchase intention than are utilitarian attributes (Zhou and Hui, 2003). Other studies have found intrinsic aspects, such as quality, to be the most important (Zhang, Z. *et al.*, 2002). Zhang, Z. *et al.* (2002) found that appearance (i.e. fit, style, color, etc.) and function (i.e. fabric content, durability, etc.) were more important than the symbolism and price aspects of casual wear. More recently, Wu and Delong (2006) determined that Chinese consumers placed importance on comfort and fit when they made purchase decisions for denim jeans, while price and fit were recognized as dissatisfaction factors. The above studies did not take the relative importance of each attribute into account when studying important attribute. This approach limits in understanding consumers' purchase decision in a real setting because consumers make an overall judgment by considering the relative importance of various attributes. To overcome the limitation, this study employs conjoint analysis.

Conjoint analysis

The primary advantage of conjoint analysis is that it can predict consumer preference of attributes by examining their trade-offs in a multi-attribute situation (Arora, 2006; De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2005; Silayoi and Speece, 2007; Sorenson and Bogue, 2007). For example, when a consumer decides to purchase a business suit, she/he considers price, quality, design, brand, etc. These attributes collectively influence the decision. The consumer may sacrifice quality for price, but to what level? The conjoint analysis method allows researchers to assess not only the importance of each attribute, but also the level of each attribute. The previous studies have employed this method for new product development (Silayoi and Speece, 2007; Sorenson and Bogue, 2007), product positioning (Arora, 2006), market segmentation (Dickson *et al.*, 2004), purchasing decision behaviour (Keen *et al.*, 2004), and marketing strategies (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2005). While conjoint analysis has been adapted to various types of market and consumer research, its applications in cross-cultural consumer behavior studies for apparel products are rare. In this study, respondents were asked to evaluate a set of products (suggested in the form of a card) that combined selected levels of the five chosen apparel attributes (i.e. price, country/brand of origin, quality, design/style and fit).

Method

Respondents and data collection

Denim jeans were chosen for this study because it was assumed that these garments were evaluated similarly by consumers in both countries. College students were chosen as respondents as they are the primary purchasers of jeans in both markets. Data were collected in one city in each country, Shanghai, China and Bangalore, India. Shanghai and Bangalore were chosen as each is a cosmopolitan city; more foreign brands are available in these cities and consumers in these cities have greater exposure to foreign brands than do consumers in other cities in China and India. A collaborator in each country collected data in multiple classes at two universities with the permission of lecturers during fall 2006 (China) and fall 2007 (India).

The questionnaire used consisted of conjoint profiling cards and demographic variables. Two versions of the questionnaire (Chinese version for China and an English version for India) were developed. The questionnaire was initially developed in English. To obtain the Chinese version, the questionnaire was translated into Chinese

by an individual fluent in both English and Chinese. To ensure translation equivalence, the questionnaire was back-translated into English by another bilingual native Chinese unfamiliar with the survey instrument. Prior to the survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested with a sample of ten native Chinese speakers residing in the USA. This pre-test ensured readability and a logical arrangement of questions, and it confirmed translation accuracy.

Data were initially collected from over 250 respondents in each country. However, after incomplete or incorrectly filled in questionnaires had been omitted, only 302 valid data sets (152 for China and 150 for India) were utilized for conjoint analysis. In the Chinese data, females accounted for 54.6 percent of the respondents and males for 43.4 percent. The respondents' mean age was 20.8 years. In the India data, females accounted for 34.7 percent of the respondents and males for 65.3 percent. The respondents' mean age was 22.1 years.

Conjoint profiling

In a conjoint analysis, the respondents are asked their preference for specific combinations of levels of variables (attributes) in the alternatives. To compose alternatives, conjoint cards were profiled with the attributes and attribute levels. Reasonable attribute levels for five chosen attributes (brand country of origin, design, price, quality and fitting) were identified. Two levels were defined for brand country of origin: US-made brand and domestic brand. The design reflecting fashion trend and the traditional design were adopted for design levels. Price, quality, and fitting were also divided into two levels each: medium and high. The attributes and attribute levels involved in conjoint card profiles are shown in Table III. A total 32 ($= 2^5$) possible combinations of jeans were possible from five attributes and two levels; however, to simplify the evaluations tasks, 32 conjoint cards were reduced to eight cards (eight imaginary pairs of jeans) employing a typical orthogonal array method, which uses two criteria to reduce the number of cards: each attribute level was included in any conjoint card at least one time, and the attribute level composition among conjoint cards was not overlapped as possible. Hence, eight alternative cards reflecting the imaginary jeans were included in the questionnaires with three hold out cards. Three hold out cards were included to check validity.

Results

The conjoint program provided in SPSS 12.0 was used for analysis. Before running conjoint analysis, the respondents who mistakenly marked the preference other wrong, such as putting the same rank twice or incomplete ranking, were excluded through the examination of response in two ways. First, the Pearson correlation between preference orders marked by respondent and reproduced by conjoint program was checked. Second, the value of Kendall's tau for three holdout cards was examined. Through this

Apparel products attribute	Attribute level
Brand country of origin	US-made brand/domestic brand
Price	High price/medium price
Design	Fashion trend/traditional
Quality	High end quality/medium quality
Fitting	High level fitting/medium level fitting

Table III.
Apparel products attributes and attribute levels used in a conjoint analysis

validity check, 152 for China and 150 for India were found suitable for further analysis. Table IV summarizes the relative importance of each attribute and the part-worth of each attribute for both China and India.

The relative importance of the five apparel attributes can be judged by reviewing the averaged relative importance percentage. For Chinese consumers, price was the most important attribute (27.26 percent) followed by fitting (23.40 percent), brand country of origin (16.98 percent), quality (16.90 percent) and design (15.47 percent). For Indian consumers, fitting was the most important attribute (23.32 percent), followed by brand country of origin (20.50 percent), design (20.13 percent), price (19.62 percent) and quality (16.40 percent). The significance of attribute importance differences between the two countries was assessed by means of one-way ANOVA. The importance of quality and fitting was not significantly different between Chinese and Indian consumers. However, there were significant differences in the importance of brand country of origin, design, and price between the two countries. The importance of brand country of origin ($F = 3.54, p < 0.1$) and design ($F = 14.41, p < 0.01$) was significantly higher in India than in China. On the contrary, the importance of price was significantly higher in China than India ($F = 7.36, p < 0.01$).

Examination of the utility of attribute level shows that both groups of consumers preferred a pair of jeans that features US brand, medium price, high-end quality, and high level of fitting. However, Chinese respondents prefer traditional style jeans, whereas Indian respondents prefer trendy style jeans. The value of best utility jeans for Chinese customers was 2.15 and for Indian customers was 1.53.

Conclusion and discussion

Summary and discussion of major findings

US apparel firms are relatively slow in exploring Chinese and Indian apparel retail markets despite the tremendous growth potential of these countries. To help US apparel firms successfully enter these promising markets, this study attempted to identify apparel product attributes that Chinese and Indian consumers utilize when purchasing a pair of jeans. Specifically, this study compared the relative importance of evaluative attributes that Chinese and Indian consumers utilize via conjoint analysis. This study

Attributes	Averaged importance (%)		One-way ANOVA <i>F</i> -value	Averaged utility (part-worth) Level	Averaged utility (part-worth)	
	China	India			China	India
Brand country of origin	16.98	20.50	3.54 *	US-made	0.37	0.28
				Domestic	-0.37	-0.28
Price	27.26	19.62	14.41 *	Medium	0.64	0.40
				High	-0.64	-0.40
				Fashion trend	-0.27	0.13
Design	15.47	20.13	7.36 *	Traditional	0.27	-0.13
				High end	0.43	0.39
Quality	16.90	16.40	0.12	Medium	-0.43	-0.39
				High	0.44	0.33
Fitting	23.40	23.35	0.00	Medium	-0.44	-0.33

Table IV.
Summary of averaged importance and averaged utility (part-worth)

Notes: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.10$ (difference of averaged importance between China and India)

posited that the importance of apparel attributes would be different between Chinese and Indian consumers as their cultural dimensions and retail development stage are different. Data were collected in Shanghai, China and Bangalore, India. College students in each country evaluated eight conjoint cards (i.e. eight imaginary pairs of denim jeans) consisted of combinations of five apparel product attributes (i.e. price, country of origin, design, quality and fitting) and two attribute levels per attribute.

The findings of this study confirmed that Chinese and Indian consumers ranked the importance of attributes differently when they purchased denim jeans. For Chinese consumers, price was the most important attribute, followed by fitting, brand country of origin, quality and design whereas Indian consumers placed importance on fitting, brand country of origin, design, price, and quality in a descending order. For three evaluative attributes (brand country of origin, price and design), Chinese and Indian consumers showed significant differences. Price was more important to Chinese consumers whereas brand country of origin and design were more important to Indian consumers.

A finding of particular interest was that price was the most important attribute for Chinese consumers, but it was only the fourth most important attribute for Indian consumers. Because China allowed foreign brands in its market a decade before India did, Chinese consumers are more accustomed to Western brands and consequently, are less influenced by the brand name itself. This may signify that Chinese consumers have become smarter shoppers. Research conducted in the early 1990s suggested that Chinese consumers preferred foreign brands from developed countries because foreign brands were believed to be of higher quality and to carry a symbolic representation of wealth and high status (LaTour and Dickey, 1990; Zhang, 1996). However, studies in the 2000s have shown that the symbolic value of Western brands has diminished, as Chinese consumers have become more knowledgeable about foreign brands and more confident in their purchase decisions (Zhou and Hui, 2003). More recent studies supported the assertion that Chinese consumers do not necessarily relate Western brands to premium quality or high fashion (Chan *et al.*, 2007; Wu and Delong, 2006), but use price as a determinant of product quality and purchase value (Chan *et al.*, 2007; Delong *et al.*, 2004; Kwan *et al.*, 2004). With the influence of Confucianism, Chinese consumers value thrift, which makes them price-sensitive. Therefore, this study's finding is consistent with many studies that have confirmed Chinese consumers' extreme price-consciousness (Chan *et al.*, 2007; Delong *et al.*, 2004; Kwan *et al.*, 2004; Wu and Delong, 2006). Chinese consumers are more price-sensitive than other Asian consumers such as Koreans and Japanese, who share the same Confucian influences (Kotabe and Jiang, 2006).

India's unique cultural dimensions and retailing structure may explain why brand of origin is the most important attribute to Indian consumers. The Indian apparel retail market opened later than China; thus, fewer foreign apparel brands are available to Indian consumers. Studies show that the scarcer the foreign brand is in a market, the more desirable it is (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). Foreign brand apparel is viewed as a scarce commodity in developing countries (Ger *et al.*, 1993), so Indian consumers see Western brands as a symbol of high status (Batra *et al.*, 2000; Maxwell, 2001). The fact that India is a hierarchical society in which social class is important is another reason why featuring high status through foreign apparel brand names is important to Indian consumers. Another reason for the greater relevance of brand names to Indian consumers is that they believe Western brands guarantee product value or quality (Chan *et al.*, 2007). The quality of local unbranded products in the Indian market varies because of the market's unorganised and uncontrolled retailers, which represent almost 98 percent of India's retailing industry (Maxwell, 2001; Sinha and Banerjee, 2004).

Therefore, Indian consumers buy well-known and reliable Western brands for assurance of quality (Batra *et al.*, 2000).

Fitting was ranked the most important attribute for Indian consumers and the second most important for Chinese consumers. This may imply that good fitting is the basic attribute for clothing selection among all consumers. It may also be an indication of Chinese and Indian consumers' concerns that foreign apparel design is not mindful of their body figures (Wu and Delong, 2006).

Another interesting finding from this study was that Chinese and Indian consumers differ in their preferences over the design of denim jeans. The study found that Chinese consumers preferred traditional style design, while Indian consumers were fond of trendy style design. This may explain why design was the third most important attribute to Indian consumers, whereas it was the least important attribute to Chinese consumers. Chinese scored the highest (118) in long-term orientation of Hofstede's cultural dimensions; therefore, they may want to buy traditional style jeans that can be worn for long time without being influenced by fashion trends. Indian consumers, on the other hand, are relatively low (61) in long-term orientation (Hofstede, 2001), and that might affect their inclination toward more trendy style jeans.

Academic implications

China and India have been compared frequently in various ways: growth potential, market size, and population. Surprisingly, however, no study has attempted to compare Chinese and Indian consumers' evaluative criteria for apparel products. The findings of this study clearly showed that these two groups of consumers put differing importance on apparel evaluative attributes, adding empirical evidence that Asian consumers are heterogeneous and thus need to be treated differently. We believe this study is the earliest empirical study that validates that a regional approach to apparel marketing is improper and that US apparel firms should establish specific strategies to enter each market. Another value of this research is the employment of a non-conventional method for studying product attributes. This application of conjoint analysis to study apparel attributes is also one of the earliest attempts to apply this methodology to this industry. Because this method mimics the real purchase setting, we believe the findings of this study accurately reflect reality.

Managerial implications

This study provides marketers with vital information about the importance Chinese and Indian consumers place on attributes when purchasing denim jeans. The findings showed that price is a major factor for the Chinese purchase decision. Therefore, US apparel companies need to convince Chinese consumers that the purchase of US brand denim jeans is a wise use of their money. US marketers should consider price competitiveness in their marketing strategies and deliver value to consumers.

For Indian consumers, brand name was found to be the most important criterion. Therefore, establishing brand name is a key element for successful marketing strategies. Since Indian consumers prefer Western brands for status, scarcity, and quality, marketers should convey these messages in their communication strategies. Another important implication for US apparel firms is that marketers should act quickly to establish brand name value and visibility before Indian consumers become more accustomed to various Western apparel brands. Once the market is saturated with foreign brands, the premium image that Western brands offer diminishes.

Fitting is found to be the first and second most important criterion for Indian and Chinese consumers, respectively. Foreign denim jeans in these countries are often perceived to be inaccurate for Asian body figures (Wu and Delong, 2006). Therefore, marketers should overcome this perception and give additional effort to providing correct fitting to both Chinese and Indian consumers. Most importantly, the findings of this study strongly indicate that the same strategies for all Asian markets (i.e. a regional approach) are inadequate. Therefore, US apparel firms should be acutely aware of market differences when entering Asian markets.

Limitations and future studies

The data for this study were collected from respondents residing in Shanghai, China, and Bangalore, India. This could be a limitation of the study because greater variance by region exists in both countries (Dickson *et al.*, 2004; Khanna, 2007; Sun and Wu, 2004). Larger samples from various cities might help generalize the findings of this study. Previous research identified that various factors may influence the importance of apparel evaluative attributes. Factors such as consumers' product knowledge, purchase experience, and income level may moderate consumers' use of evaluative criteria. Therefore, these factors should be explored further.

Note

1. Organised retailing refers to trading activities undertaken by licensed retailers, that is, those who are registered for sales tax, income tax, etc.

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