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# A cross-national study of apparel consumers' preferences and the role of product evaluative cues

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## Introduction

Due to company growth strategies, economies of scale, and/or the saturation of domestic markets, many fashion companies seek opportunities abroad to drive their businesses. For example, H&M has grown from fewer than 500 stores worldwide in 1993 to 3,132 stores in 2013 (Peterson, 2014). A report published by IDC (2014) found that “82% of US businesses are now looking overseas in a bid to grow sales.” The independent market research company eMarketer (2015) anticipates that total global retail sales will increase from US\$21.3 trillion in 2014 to US\$27.9 trillion in 2019, with a 5.5% year-over-year growth rate.

Although internationalization has been embraced or at least considered by many companies, it is not easy to fully understand consumer needs in different socio-cultural contexts. Consumers are not one homogenous group around the globe – people in different nations have diverse cultural backgrounds and societal values. Previous studies (e.g., Rahman *et al.*, 2010; Tse and Wong, 1993) indicate that any specific product attribute may have different effects on consumer perception, preferences and buying decisions depending upon the nation in which that product is sold. In other words, universal or standardized products may not appeal to everyone, due to divergences in cultural and societal norms.

According to many cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 2001; Kim *et al.*, 1998; Park and Jun, 2003), Asian consumers are relatively collectivistic in their social values, whereas consumers from the West are more individualistic. Collectivists are more concerned with social conformity, group affiliation, and interpersonal harmony (Kim *et al.*, 1999; Park and Jun, 2003), while, on the other hand, individualists' main concerns include self-expression, autonomy, and personal and experiential needs (Gong *et al.*, 2004; Lam, 1997). However, the value systems in many collectivistic countries such as China, Korea and India have undergone tremendous changes over the last few decades. Through various forms of digital media platforms available on the Internet (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat), individuals living in the East have been highly influenced by Western culture and ideologies, and their traditional social values have been challenged. It is not uncommon to see both traditional/Eastern values and individualistic/Western values coexisting within one society, particularly among youth (Kouyama, 1990; Lu, 2004).

In order to be successful in this fast-changing cultural milieu, it is imperative for multi-national companies to understand their consumers' needs and aspirations in different markets. However, there are relatively few research studies (e.g., Goldsmith *et al.*, 1993; Kim *et al.*, 2002; Rahman *et al.*, 2010) have focused on apparel consumer behaviour, and the salient impact of various product cues – particularly from a cross-national perspective. Our research seeks to enrich our understanding of consumer preferences and behaviour in two different countries in particular – Canada (located in the “West”) and China (located in the “East”). These two countries were selected because there are significant differences in their social, cultural and economic conditions (Rahman *et al.*, 2010; Hofstede, 1984). Studying Canadian and Chinese consumer behaviour will provide international retailers more specific information on product

development and marketing strategies for each individual country – and by extrapolation, other countries in the West and East.

The next section of this paper reviews previous literature related to consumer behaviour when purchasing apparel, the role of product-evaluative cues, consumer preferences across nations, and the development of hypotheses. The following two sections explain our research methodology and discuss the results, respectively. The conclusion and implications follow, and in the last section, limitations and potential further research is discussed.

### **Apparel-product cues**

Consumers often base their evaluations of a product on a number of descriptive, inferential, informational and/or visual cues. These attributes may be classified as extrinsic or intrinsic cues. “Extrinsic cues” refer to those attributes that can be changed without changing the product’s physical structure or appearance, such as price, brand name, and country of origin (Hines and Swinker, 2001). “Intrinsic cues” refer to the concrete characteristics that are inherent to the physical composition of a product such as fabric, fit, colour and style. Any manipulations or modifications of these intrinsic cues will alter the physical appearance of a product (Hines and Swinker, 2001; Olson and Jacoby, 1972). Intrinsic cues can also be categorized into two types of utility: psychic and physical (Swan and Combs, 1976). Psychic utility is related to the aesthetic aspects of a product such as colour and style, whereas physical utility is related to performance aspects such as durability and comfort.

Extrinsic cues are more easily recognized, understood, processed and interpreted than are intrinsic cues (Purwar, 1982). Both extrinsic and intrinsic cues can play an influential role in consumers’ purchasing decisions. According to cue-utilization studies (Rahman *et al.*, 2008; 2010), consumers tend to use both types of cues concurrently when evaluating and selecting apparel products.

To understand the relative importance of various clothing cues during the selection and evaluation process, twelve cues were selected for the present study. In total, we selected three extrinsic cues (price, brand name and country of origin), and nine intrinsic cues (style, fit, comfort, fabric, colour, durability, wardrobe coordination, ease of care and quality/workmanship). The selection criteria for these product cues were based on the guidelines of several prior apparel studies (Eckman *et al.*, 1990; Rahman, 2011; Rahman *et al.*, 2009), such as the relevance, importance and frequency of adaptation for clothing studies.

### **Extrinsic cues**

#### *Economic differences and price*

According to Chan *et al.* (2007), Chinese consumers relied more heavily on price to form their perceptions of product quality than did Brazilian, Indian and Russian consumers. Another cross-national study (Suessmuth-Dyckerhoff, 2008) found that approximately 80% of Chinese respondents cited price as the most important factor in their purchasing decisions, compared to only 46% of American buyers and 39% of Japanese buyers. In addition, a study conducted in China by Ahmed and d’Astous (2004) found that the perceived quality of a T-shirt was strongly linked to price. Thus it is reasonable to suggest that Chinese consumers are particularly cost-conscious.

In terms of Canadian consumers, a study by Rahman (2011) reported that female consumers ranked price as the fifth most important evaluative cue for denim jeans among nine product attributes. Apart from the impact of price cue, and to put things in perspective, the average

disposable income of Chinese consumers is relatively low as compared to that of their Canadian counterparts. In 2012, the monthly average salary of a Chinese person was US \$656, while the Canadians, at US \$2,724, earned more than four times that amount (Statista, 2013). In consideration of the above discussion, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*H1.* Price plays a more significant clothing-evaluative role for Chinese consumers than for Canadian consumers.

#### *The importance of brand name*

Consumers use brand name to help them to process and retrieve product information from their memories. Many consumers also use brand name to project or portray their desired self-image. A brand name can provide a range of information to consumers, such as that the product is “durable,” “comfortable,” “reliable” and “fashionable” (Rowley, 2004). However, recent studies (Rahman, 2011; Rahman *et al.*, 2010) show that brand name becomes less significant or even unimportant as a surrogate indicator for clothing evaluation when multiple cues are used in the same study. For example, Rahman *et al.* (2010) found that both Chinese and Canadian consumers ranked brand name as the second-least important evaluative cue among other nine product cues. In a similar vein, a study by Forsythe *et al.* (1999) found that consumers in China and South Korea did not rely on brand name to evaluate the overall quality of a jacket, but rather on physical characteristics and quality. Thus, the following hypothesis was developed:

*H2.* Brand name plays a relatively insignificant clothing-evaluative role for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.

#### *The effect of country of origin*

The first study on the effect of country of origin (Schooler, 1965) was published in the mid-1960s. Country of origin is deemed to be an important or frequently chosen cue for evaluating durable goods, and high-end or luxury products (Cordell, 1991; Cui *et al.*, 2004). However, many studies (Heisey, 1990; Kawabata and Rabolt, 1999; Rahman *et al.*, 2010) found that country of origin did not significantly influence consumers’ perceptions toward apparel products. If consumers are familiar with the products, they are less likely to rely on country of origin to judge the product quality (Hock and Deighton, 1990). Kawabata and Rabolt (1999) also found that country of origin was the least important cue when evaluating apparel products. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis was developed:

*H3.* Country of origin plays a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.

### **Intrinsic cues**

#### *Cultural dimensions and style*

Consumers in an individualistic culture such as Canada may look at clothing style as a vehicle for self-expression and construction of identity, while consumers in a collectivistic culture, as in China, may use style to conform to certain acceptable norms or to affiliate themselves with certain societal groups (Hofstede, 2001). In addition, individualistic societies are generally higher in “uncertainty avoidance” (Hofstede’s cultural dimension) than collectivistic societies. According to Quigley and Notarantonio (2009), individualistic consumers are more tolerant of new products/ideas and more capable of dealing with ambiguity than are collectivistic

consumers. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that individualistic consumers with higher levels of openness and uncertainty avoidance are more likely to use style as a primary cue to evaluate and select apparel products. Although both Canadian and Chinese consumers may use the style cue with different motivations (to express or to be accepted) to evaluate clothing, Canadian consumers may rely much more on this attribute than their Chinese counterparts. Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*H4.* Style plays a more significant clothing-evaluative role for Canadian consumers than for Chinese consumers.

#### *The importance of colour and quality/workmanship*

According to a study conducted in Canada (Wall and Heslop, 1989), researchers found that aesthetics (style and colour) were considered more important than functional cues such as garment construction, ease of care, fit and durability in the selection of women's clothing. It is therefore reasonable to assume that individualistic consumers rely more on aesthetic attributes such as colour to evaluate clothing than functional cues such as workmanship. By contrast, several studies conducted in China (Crocker and Tay, 2004; Lane, 2006; Tse, 1996) found that consumers tended to focus more on the functional benefits and quality of a product than on aesthetic qualities. According to Kim *et al.* (2002), Chinese consumers rated functional needs as the most important factor for clothing purchases, followed by social needs. In addition, a cross-national study (Rahman *et al.*, 2010) found that Canadian participants were more concerned with the aesthetic values of a product than were Chinese consumers. Based on the findings of these prior research studies, the following hypotheses were developed:

*H5.* Colour plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role for Canadian consumers than for Chinese consumers.

*H6.* Quality/workmanship plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role for Chinese consumers than for Canadian consumers.

#### *Fit*

Fit can be defined as the way a garment conforms to the human body (Workman and Lentz, 2000). A well-fitted garment can provide comfort, and also conceal wearers' figure "faults" or camouflage what they consider to be less attractive appearance features (Tate, 2004). Proper fit is viewed as the most important product cue for many US apparel consumers (Kawabata and Rabolt, 1999).

Studies have found that fit is the most important evaluative cue for both Chinese (Zhang *et al.*, 2002) and Canadian consumers (Rahman, 2011). Based on such results, the following hypothesis was developed:

*H7.* Fit plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.

#### *Comfort and fabric*

According to many apparel studies, comfort plays a very important role in clothing evaluation, selection and consumption. For example, comfort was cited as the most important

product cue for evaluating denim jeans in China (Wu and Delong, 2006) and Canada (Rahman, 2011), tennis wear in the USA (Chae *et al.*, 2006), sleepwear in the USA (Labhard and Morris, 1994), and brassieres in Hong Kong (Chae *et al.*, 2001).

Although fabric is an important evaluative criterion for overall appeal, tactile qualities and aesthetic appearance (Kadolph *et al.*, 1993), fabric cues play a relatively less important role than comfort. To illustrate the different impact of these two product-evaluative cues, compare the ratings for fabric in the studies cited in the preceding paragraph: fabric was cited as the tenth most important product cue out of 19 for denim jeans (Wu and Delong, 2006), sixth out of 14 for tennis wear (Chae *et al.*, 2006), and sixth (fibre instead of fabric) out of ten for sleepwear (Labhard and Morris, 1994). The fabric cue was not used in the study of brassieres (Chae *et al.*, 2001).

Based on the results of these apparel studies, the following hypothesis was developed:

*H8.* Comfort plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role than fabric for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.

#### *Correlation of fit, comfort and fabric*

Previous studies (e.g., Metje *et al.*, 2008; Rahman, 2011) show that fit, comfort and fabric are closely related. Tselepis and de Klerk (2004) point out that if a garment is not durable (e.g., is flimsy, over-stretches, etc.), its fit and comfort will ultimately change. This could create undesirable physical effects (e.g., reduce ease of movement, offer less protection) and create psychological discomforts (e.g., aesthetic appearance, emotional response) on the part of wearers (Metje *et al.*, 2008; Yoo, 2003). In addition, several recent studies (e.g., Rahman, 2011; Rahman *et al.*, 2009) have indicated that these three product cues are positively correlated. Therefore, the following hypothesis was developed:

*H9.* Fabric, fit and comfort are strongly correlated in both China and Canada.

#### *Durability and “fast fashion”*

Due to the “fast fashion” phenomenon and the proliferation of styles, consumers tend to purchase more apparel than they actually need (Banim and Guy, 2001; Tokatli, 2008; Woodward 2007). McAfee *et al.* (2004) point out that it is expected that many clothing products offered by fast fashion retailers will be worn fewer than ten times. According to a study by Allwood *et al.* (2006), from 2002 to 2006 the number of garments purchased per person increased annually by more than one third, and the life cycle of clothing decreased by fifty per cent. It is therefore reasonable to assume that many consumers are more concerned about style than garment durability. Such findings suggest that durability may not be considered as an important evaluative criterion for clothing evaluation, leading to hypothesis 10:

*H10.* Durability plays a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than style for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.

#### *Ease of care*

Ease of care generally refers to retention of the original garment shape, appearance and cleanliness, which entails laundry methods/soil removal, drying time, wrinkle resistance, and need for ironing (Kadolph, 2007; Zhang *et al.*, 2002). Forsythe *et al.* (1996) found that the care

of garments was not a significant indicator of product quality. Two other studies (McCullough and Morris, 1980; Sproles and Geistfeld, 1978) also found that ease of care was the least important factor for the evaluation of clothing quality. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that ease of care does not play an important role in the process of apparel evaluation and selection.

*H11.* Ease of care plays a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.

Although *H10* and *H11* proposed that durability and ease of care are relatively insignificant clothing-selection factors in both China and Canada, it is reasonable to suggest that collectivistic consumers are more concerned about the functional aspects or physical utilities of clothing than are individualistic consumers. Therefore, we developed the following hypotheses:

*H12.* Durability plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role for Chinese consumers than for Canadian consumers.

*H13.* Ease of care plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role for Chinese consumers than for Canadian consumers.

#### *Wardrobe coordination*

A recent study (Koo, 2014) revealed that many consumers use only 6 to 38 percent of their wardrobes on a regular basis. In the same vein, McGrath (2012) found that her participants used only approximately half of their wardrobes. There are several reasons why people may not use most of their existing wardrobes: what they own does not coordinate with their new purchases, or it no longer fits their body size/shape, or it is irrelevant to current trends and life stages. For example, Rahman (2015) found that female consumers did not want to wear their faded jeans due to discoloration – i.e. the appearance of the garment was no longer relevant or acceptable. Based on such perspectives, the following hypothesis was developed:

*H14.* Wardrobe coordination plays a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.

## **Research methodology**

### *Questionnaire survey*

A questionnaire survey consisting of three sections was developed for use in the present study. The first section of the questions covered two areas: (1) the importance of product-evaluative cues; and (2) the sources of fashion information. In total, twelve apparel product cues and eleven fashion information sources were selected to identify most-frequently used clothing-evaluative cues and information source(s). A five-point Likert-type response scale (5 = strongly agree or most important, to 1 = strongly disagree or unimportant) was used for this section.

The second section focused on consumers' shopping behaviours, such as apparel spending, shopping channels (online versus offline) and shopping frequencies. The third section of the study was designed to collect demographic data including age, gender, employment status, and income level.

It is worth to mention that this particular paper focuses primarily on the results of the study that related to relative importance of extrinsic and intrinsic product-evaluative cues in clothing

purchases. The importance of fashion information sources will be presented in a subsequent research paper.

#### *Data collection*

In order to maximize the response rate and amount of data collected from various age groups, both online and traditional paper surveys were employed for this study. The questionnaire was originally developed in English for Canadian participants, and the back-translation method (Brislin, 1986) was used to prepare the Chinese version for use in China.

Prior to the actual collection of data, the questionnaire was pre-tested on fifteen participants in each country to identify potential issues and ambiguities; and corresponding revisions and amendments were made as necessary to create the final questionnaire (Rahman *et al.*, 2010). The commercially available online software SurveyMonkey™ was used for actual data collection in both countries. Kang and Park-Poaps (2010) have suggested that there are several advantages of employing online surveys: (1) reduced coding time; (2) lower financial cost; (3) minimization of coding errors; (4) maximization of privacy; and (5) participant convenience.

For this survey, the data was primarily collected from convenience sampling through the assistance of research collaborators, friends and acquaintances in both Canada and China. Paper surveys were used in Canada only, due to an insufficient amount of online data. In total, we received 650 and 699 data through Canadian and Chinese survey respectively. However, many were rejected from the data set due to incomplete responses, or because the online data came from nations outside Canada and China. As a result, the usable data for final analysis are 440 from Canada and 484 from China.

#### **Findings**

The participants were predominately female, although there was a relatively higher proportion of males among the Chinese respondents than among the Canadians. Specifically, the Canadian sample was composed of 358 females (81.4%) and 75 males (17.0%), while the Chinese sample was composed of 282 females (58.3%) and 166 males (34.3%). The difference in gender distribution was significant in both samples. This may be attributed to the nature of the topic of study: a previous study conducted by Quigley and Notarantonio (2009) found that women are more engaged and interested in fashion than are their male counterparts. As shown in Table I, the subjects from these two countries were relatively young, with a large number of them being students. Most fell between 18 and 27 years of age, with the mean age being 24.9 years and 26.2 years for the Canadians and Chinese respectively. It is worth mentioning that 24% of the Chinese participants preferred not to disclose their age.

According to the *t*-test result, there was significant difference between the Canadian and Chinese consumers regarding the frequency of apparel shopping at physical/brick-and-mortar stores per year ( $t=9.144$ ,  $df=893.5$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Canadians tended to shop more often at the physical stores than did the Chinese. In terms of the number of incidences of online shopping for apparel per year, our *t*-test result shows a significant difference between Canadian and Chinese consumers ( $t=-5.377$ ,  $df=902.0$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), with Chinese consumers shopping more frequently online than did their Canadian counterparts.



	Canada		China	
	Frequency (N=440)	Percent	Frequency (N=484)	Percent
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	75	17.0	166	34.3
Female	358	81.4	282	58.3
No response	7	1.6	36	7.4
<i>Age</i>				
18-27	315	71.6	278	57.4
28 or above	107	24.3	90	18.6
No response	18	4.1	116	24.0
Mean age	24.9 (n=422)		26.2 (n=368)	
<i>Employment Status</i>				
Full-time Employed	73	16.6	157	32.3
Part-time Employed	73	16.6	8	1.7
Student	256	58.2	221	45.7
Other	31	7.1	74	15.3
No Response	7	1.6	24	5.0
<i>How Often Do You Shop for Clothing at a Physical Store Each Year?</i>				
3 times or less	47	10.7	101	21.4
4-6 times	63	14.3	96	19.8
7-9 times	40	9.1	93	19.2
10-12 times	43	9.8	67	13.8
13-15 times	31	7.0	13	2.7
More than 15 times	209	47.5	100	20.7
No Response	7	1.6	14	2.9
<i>How Often Do You Shop for Clothing Online Each Year?</i>				
Never	78	17.7	27	5.6
3 times or less	164	37.2	145	30.0
4-6 times	62	14.1	81	16.7
7-9 times	32	7.3	58	12.0
10-12 times	25	5.7	50	10.3
13-15 times	15	3.4	11	2.3
More than 15 times	62	14.1	94	19.4
No response	2	0.5	16	3.7
<i>How Much Time Do You Usually Spend at the Shopping Mall Each Visit?</i>				
Less than 1 hour	40	9.1	46	9.5
1-2 hours	183	41.6	187	38.6
3-4 hours	164	37.7	173	35.7
5-6 hours	32	7.3	43	8.9
More than 6 hours	15	3.4	14	2.9
No response	6	1.4	21	4.3

**Table I.** Participants' demographic profile and shopping behaviours

### *Salient Effects of Extrinsic Cues*

In order to assess the quality of the measurement, this study examined the reliability. According to the results, the multiple item scale for product cues was considered satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha scores from 0.670 to 0.734, Orth et al., 2004; Malhotra et al., 2002).

As shown in Table II, Canadian respondents perceived price cue as one of the top three salient factors for apparel evaluation, while the Chinese participants rated price as the fifth most important evaluative cue. According to the result of *t*-test analysis ( $t=1.41$ ,  $df=922$ ,  $p=0.159$ ), no statistically significant price differences between Canadian and Chinese participants were found. Thus, *H1* was not supported.

In terms of brand name and country of origin, our results confirm many earlier studies (Heisey 1990; Kawabata and Rabolt, 1999; Rahman, 2011; Rahman *et al.*, 2010) that these two product cues did not play significant roles in apparel evaluation. As seen in Table II, both Canadian and Chinese participants rated the brand name and country of origin as the second-least-important and the least-important cues, respectively. These results provide support for hypotheses *H2* and *H3*. Although both groups of participants perceived brand name as the second-least-important cue, a *t*-test analysis ( $t=-8.36$ ,  $df=918$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) revealed that there was significant difference between the mean scores for these two samples. This result suggests that brand name plays a more influential role to Chinese consumers than to Canadian consumers.

	Country						95% CI for Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	df
	Canada			China					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n			
Fit	4.85	0.408	438	4.57	0.786	484	0.190, 0.355	6.51*	920
Style	4.49	0.699	437	4.27	0.891	484	0.119, 0.328	4.20*	919
Price	4.30	0.765	440	4.23	0.885	484	-0.030, 0.184	1.41	922
Quality/Workmanship	4.27	0.840	439	4.48	0.697	484	-0.306, -0.107	-4.07*	921
Comfort	4.21	0.875	440	4.51	0.735	484	-0.399, -0.191	-5.55*	922
Material/Fabric	4.17	0.796	437	4.20	0.875	484	-0.137, 0.080	-5.20	919
Colour	4.13	0.810	435	4.33	0.821	484	-0.312, -0.100	-3.82*	917
Durability	3.97	0.941	438	3.98	0.969	484	-0.128, 0.119	-0.71	920
Wardrobe Coordination	3.88	1.056	438	3.95	1.111	484	-0.203, 0.078	-8.76	920
Ease of Care	3.61	1.062	439	3.95	0.940	484	-0.463, -0.204	-5.06*	921
Brand Name	2.79	1.149	436	3.40	1.075	484	-0.758, -0.470	-8.36*	918
Country of Origin	2.75	1.202	436	2.59	1.223	484	0.000, 0.314	1.95	918

\*  $p < 0.05$

**Table II.** Results of *t*-test and Descriptive Statistics for Product Cues by Country

### *Salient Effects of Intrinsic Cues*

Based on the *t*-test result, there were statistically significant mean differences in style as an evaluative cue between the Canadian and Chinese participants ( $t=4.20$ ,  $df=919$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Canadian consumers ( $M=4.49$ ,  $SD=0.699$ ) were relatively more concerned with clothing style than were the Chinese consumers ( $M=4.27$ ,  $SD=0.891$ ). This finding is consistent with Rahman *et al.* (2010), and supported *H4*. Regarding to the impact of colour, Chinese participants ( $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=0.821$ ) cited this cue as more significant than did the Canadian participants ( $M=4.13$ ,  $SD=0.810$ ), and the *t*-test result also showed a significant difference between these two consumer groups ( $t=-3.82$ ,  $df=917$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Therefore, *H5* was not supported. Table II also indicates that the Chinese participants rated quality/workmanship higher than did the Canadians,

and the *t*-test analysis ( $t=-4.07$ ,  $df=921$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) shows significant difference between groups. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Chinese consumers are generally more concerned with the workmanship of garments than are the Canadians, and *H6* was supported. In terms of the fit of clothing, both groups of participants rated this cue as the most important evaluative criterion. This is in line with many previous studies (e.g., Kawabata and Rabolt, 1999; Rahman, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2002), and *H7* was supported. Moreover, Canadian ( $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=0.875$ ) and Chinese participants ( $M=4.51$ ,  $SD=0.735$ ) rated comfort the fifth and the second most significant cue among 12 product cues, respectively. With this finding, it is reasonable to suggest that comfort was perceived as relatively more significant than many other evaluative cues, and *H8* was supported. Although comfort plays a relatively important role, Canadians were less concerned about the comfort of clothing than were their Chinese counterparts, and the *t*-test analysis ( $t=-5.55$ ,  $df=922$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) confirmed a significant difference in the importance of the comfort cue between these two countries.

Table III and Table IV show the results of correlation tests for fit, comfort and fabric between the Canadian and Chinese samples. For the Canadians (Table III), fabric was strongly related to fit ( $r=0.191$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and comfort ( $r=0.256$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). However, the correlation coefficient was not significant between fit and comfort ( $r=0.086$ ,  $p=0.073$ ). Regarding the Chinese sample, the correlation coefficients between these three variables were significant (Table IV). Therefore, *H9* was partially supported.

	Fit	Comfort	Fabric
Fit	1	$r=0.086$ , $p = 0.073$	$r=0.191^*$ , $p = 0.000$
Comfort	$r=0.086$ , $p = 0.073$	1	$r=0.256^*$ , $p = 0.000$
Fabric	$r=0.191^*$ , $p = 0.000$	$r=0.256^*$ , $p = 0.000$	1

**Table III.** Canada – Pearson correlation coefficients for fit, comfort and fabric cues based on 99% statistical significance,  $*p > 0.01$  = not significant

	Fit	Comfort	Fabric
Fit	1	$r=0.336^*$ , $p = 0.000$	$r=0.296^*$ , $p = 0.000$
Comfort	$r=0.336^*$ , $p = 0.000$	1	$r=0.479^*$ , $p = 0.000$
Fabric	$r=0.296^*$ , $p = 0.000$	$r=0.479^*$ , $p = 0.000$	1

**Table IV.** China – Pearson correlation coefficients for fit, comfort and fabric cues based on 99% statistical significance,  $*p > 0.01$  = not significant

The results presented in Table II suggest that durability played a relatively less significant role in clothing evaluation than did style in both countries, and *H10* was supported. This finding is consistent with several apparel studies conducted in different countries including China (Zhang *et al.*, 2002), Japan (Kawabata and Rabolt, 1999), and the United States (Swinker and Hines, 2006; Kawabata and Rabolt, 1999). In addition, a *t*-test analysis ( $t=-0.71$ ,  $df=920$ ,  $p=0.944$ ) did not show statistically significant differences in ratings of the durability factor between Canadian and Chinese participants; *H12* was not supported. Based on the mean scores, Canadian and Chinese participants rated ease of care as relatively less significant than many other product cues. Thus *H11* was supported. The *t*-test of ease of care ( $t=-5.06$ ,  $df=921$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) indicated significant differences between both countries, and *H13* was supported. As

shown in Table II, both Canadian ( $M=3.88$ ,  $SD=1.056$ ) and Chinese ( $M=3.98$ ,  $SD=0.969$ ) participants rated wardrobe coordination as the ninth most important cue out of twelve. Thus, wardrobe coordination played a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than many other cues for both countries, and *H14* was supported.

To summarize, nine hypotheses were supported, three were not supported, and one was partially supported (see Table V for details).

Hypothesis	Description	Result
<i>H1</i>	Price plays a more significant clothing-evaluative role for Chinese consumers than for Canadian consumers.	Not supported
<i>H2</i>	Brand name plays a relatively insignificant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.	Supported
<i>H3</i>	Country of origin plays a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.	Supported
<i>H4</i>	Style plays a more significant clothing-evaluative role for Canadian consumers than for Chinese consumers.	Supported
<i>H5</i>	Colour plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role for Canadian consumers than for Chinese consumers.	Not supported
<i>H6</i>	Quality/workmanship plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role for Chinese consumers than for Canadian consumers.	Supported
<i>H7</i>	Fit plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.	Supported
<i>H8</i>	Comfort plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role than fabric for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.	Supported
<i>H9</i>	Fabric, fit and comfort are strongly correlated in both countries – China and Canada.	Partially Supported
<i>H10</i>	Durability plays a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than style for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.	Supported
<i>H11</i>	Ease of care plays a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.	Supported
<i>H12</i>	Durability plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role for Chinese consumers than for Canadian consumers.	Not supported
<i>H13</i>	Ease of care plays a relatively more significant clothing-evaluative role for Chinese consumers than for Canadian consumers.	Supported
<i>H14</i>	Wardrobe coordination plays a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers.	Supported

**Table V.** Hypothesis testing summary

### Discussion and conclusion

According to our findings, there was no significant difference in how Canadians and Chinese evaluated the *price* cue in apparel shopping. Both groups of consumers were concerned about product price when they shopped for clothing regardless of economic inequality between nations. Although per capita income is higher in Canada, consumers in our study often used price to guide and justify their spending. This may be due to the fact that many participants were students (as shown in Table I), which made them more likely to have limited budgets to spend on consumer goods. The lower income of Chinese in general and the student status of our Canadian respondents mean that it is not difficult to understand why both Canadian and Chinese participants used price as an indicator of product quality and/or monetary sacrifice (Monroe, 2003), helping to compare alternatives and determine purchasing decisions. This finding may

also provide support for the notion that young consumers have a greater tendency to believe in a price-quality relationship than do their older counterparts (Johnson and Kellaris, 1988).

Our study showed that, unlike price, neither *brand name* nor *country of origin* played an important role in clothing evaluation. These findings echoed several prior studies (Forsythe *et al.*, 1999; Kawabata and Rabolt, 1999; Taylor and Cosenza, 2002); these two evaluative cues played the least significant role among other product cues adapted in this study. According to several studies (Hem *et al.*, 2003; Kind and Smith, 2001; Maheswaran, 1994), the salient impact of brand name and country of origin are linked to consumer knowledge and product type. For example, consumers are often less inclined to use these two product cues to evaluate familiar, less-expensive, low-status and/or ordinary products than with unfamiliar, more expensive, and more innovative items. In other words, consumers are more concerned with physical characteristics (e.g., style, colour and fit) than brand name and country of origin when they shop for low- to mid-end apparel products. In addition, previous research (Birtwistle and Moore, 2006; O’Cass and Choy, 2008) reported that young consumers were more sensitive to fashion trends and were more receptive to new clothing styles than were older demographic groups. Thus, it is imperative for fashion designers and manufacturers to prioritize their resources, and focus more on product research/design and prototype development (R&D) than on the symbolic meanings such as brand name and “made-in” label. Products focused on innovative design of high quality can form a positive brand image and be more influential towards consumer purchasing intentions. In other words, the effect of brand image is often built on or linked to its concrete attributes – e.g., a reputation for well-fitting, comfortable and stylish clothing. Today’s consumers are knowledgeable, savvy and discerning; they don’t purchase a product solely based on its brand name.

The current study found that *colour* played a relatively less significant role as compared to other product attributes such as fit, style and comfort. According to some studies (Chu and Rahman, 2012; Holmes and Buchanan 1984), colour preferences are closely linked to product type. Colour choice is not merely influenced by fashion trends, but also by socially accepted norms and cultural values, and people do not always choose a product based on their personal colour preferences. For example, consumers often perceive/prefer denim jeans in blue, wedding dresses in white, formal attire in black, and Christmas decorations in red, green and gold. Someone who likes the colour pink may not want to buy a pink suit, because this doesn’t fit with the social norm; the wearer may not want to be perceived as “unprofessional,” “weird” or “ridiculous.” For similar reasons, many fashion companies do not offer business attire in pink because it will be difficult to sell. While consumers do not need to invest a lot of energy in determining what colour is suitable for certain types of clothing – particularly the fashion staples –this does not mean that fashion designers cannot do something different or “think outside the box.” Socio-cultural values are not stagnant, and the meanings of colour have been changing over the years. In order to fulfill consumers’ changing needs and desires, fashion practitioners should pay attention to the relationship between “colour symbolism” and “socio-cultural values,” and also study the concepts of “incremental improvement” and “radical invention.” According to a study conducted by Trueman (1998), many successful new consumer products fall into the category of “incremental innovation” rather than “radical invention.” In other words, slight or moderate change from existing fashion could be more acceptable than a dramatic departure from the current styles.

Interestingly, our research showed that Canadian participants perceived *style* as a more significant cue for clothing evaluation than did their Chinese counterparts, while *comfort* played

a relatively more significant role for the Chinese consumers than the Canadians. A possible explanation for this finding is that Canadian consumers may have been concerned with a product's aesthetic appeal and its contribution to the presentation of their individual self while, by contrast, Chinese consumers may have been more concerned with the functional aspects of a product and the formation of a social self. In other words, it seems plausible that Canadian consumers would often like to use clothing to express themselves and build self-identity, while many Chinese consumers may use clothing to conform to the acceptable social norm when building their social identity. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that new clothing styles with incremental design change and functional features could be more attractive to consumers living in collectivistic societies, such as China, than more dramatic and less functional design changes. With these points in mind, fashion designers could pay closer attention to different aspects of design strategies (radical vs. incremental change), product features (aesthetic values and functional benefits), and the symbolic meanings of a product (presentation of self and social conformity), depending on where their designs will eventually be marketed.

According to the correlation test, *fit*, *comfort* and *fabric* were strongly correlated except in the “fit and comfort” of the Canadian sample. Nevertheless, both Canadian and Chinese participants rated fit more important than comfort, and comfort more important than fabric. With these findings, it is reasonable to assume that consumers will not purchase a garment if it doesn't fit them, even if the fabric is comfortable. A well-fitting garment can provide consumers with physiological comfort (e.g., ease of movement, softness, warmth) and psychological comfort (e.g., fashion satisfaction, age appropriateness). Apart from the fit attribute, our results showed that participants often used “fabric and fit” or “fabric and comfort” at the same time in their evaluations. The logical explanation for this finding is that the properties of fabric (e.g., weight and elasticity) could greatly affect garment fit and comfort level. Fabric selection is a critical aspect of the creation of a well-fitted and comfortable garment. These findings suggest that designers should pay close attention to both the physical and aesthetic aspects of fabrics they employ. In addition to fabric choice, a variety of clothing styles and fits/silhouettes should be offered to meet different consumers' needs and diverse body types.

The results of the priority placed by participants in both groups on *durability* and *ease of care* were consistent with our expectations – both product cues played a relatively less significant clothing-evaluative role than many other product cues for both Chinese and Canadian consumers (Table II: H10). These two product cues may have been perceived to be less significant due to effects of the “fast fashion” phenomenon as well as consumer knowledge and priorities. Our findings showed that participants from both countries were more concerned about style and price than they were with product durability and ease of care. It is likely that consumers do not seek more durable and easy-care garments because they don't want to wear the same clothes all the time, which means that they pay little attention to these two clothing properties. Many individuals prefer spending their money on new and inexpensive clothes in order to continually update their wardrobes, rather than keeping contents of their current wardrobes for longer periods of time. This could also explain why many Canadian and Chinese participants rated “wardrobe coordination” relatively less significant than many other product cues. If clothing prices are less expensive and/or more affordable, consumers can purchase multiple pieces to create a new and fresh look. Interestingly, the above explanation is conformed with the finding of Allwood *et al.* (2006) that between 2004 and 2006, the number of garment purchases per person increased by more than one third, and the life cycle of garments decreased by half.

If fashion designers focused on aesthetic longevity and versatility to increase garment usage and extend the product life cycle, they would be taking a more responsible and active role in reducing overconsumption and promoting sustainable practices within the industry, while also nurturing and encouraging consumer consciousness towards the products they purchase.

### **Limitations and future research**

The present study has several limitations as many studies have. First, the findings cannot be legitimately generalized to fit all countries. More similar research will be required in other parts of the world to increase the validity and reliability. Second, the effects of the extrinsic and intrinsic evaluative cues vary among different product categories/types. Therefore, it would be meaningful to conduct additional research using different consumer goods and/or specific apparel products. Third, the majority of the data was collected from a relatively young age demographic; therefore, the results of this study lacked generalizability to other segments of the population. Fourth, in-depth information can be gained from employing qualitative methods (one-on-one in-depth/focus group interviews) to generate insights of actual shopping experiences. Nevertheless, the results of this study provide meaningful insights and add beneficial information to the existing literature by presenting salient effects and correlations among various evaluative cues.

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