

# Gender and Class Differences in Clothes and Entertainment

By Sato Toshiki

THE gender difference is the most interesting point to observe in the relationship between consumer behavior and classes. While class differences in males rarely come to the surface, they are quite clear in females. Sociologist Kataoka Emi of Kanto Gakuin University was the first to point this out through the quantitative verification research, calling this the “cultural omnivore” phenomenon of men.

To put it simply, the wearing of suits in formal settings is the “de facto standard” for many Japanese adult males (though its frequency varies according to occupation and status). In informal settings and at home, men wear clothes bought at the mall or mass merchandising stores. For leisure, large numbers watch baseball, particularly professional baseball. If they are white collar workers aged over 40, they may also play golf, and watching soccer is very popular among the younger generation.

When it comes to reading, apart from breezing through the bestsellers, adult males read general newspapers such as the *Asahi*, *Yomiuri* and *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*. In Japan, there are no quality papers as in Europe and the United

States: all of the mass-circulation papers in Japan are a combination of high brow and mass appeal. For example, one of the general papers frequently read by corporate managers and those in top administrative positions (mostly males) sold itself with serialized novels that were not far removed from pornography. In magazines, though, there are few fixed trends.

There are, of course, class differences among males. A cheap suit can cost some tens of thousands of yen while an expensive one could cost more than half a million. Normally, men buy a suit at a price that reflects their own economic level, but they are equal in the sense that they all wear suits.

Let me describe an incident I experienced myself. About two years ago, I was looking for some clothes at the Donna Karan flagship store in Tokyo’s Omotesando district, where many luxury brand stores are located. A male aged over 50, wearing clothes that looked like they were purchased at a GAP store or the neighborhood mall, came in and bought a suit. To repeat, this was not a DKNY outlet but Donna Karan, and not a department store counter but a flag-

ship store.

While this was quite a rare thing to happen in Japan, the shop assistant served the customer without batting an eyelid. Looking at the situation, I too, did not show surprise. The reason this man showed up at a Donna Karan flagship store was a mystery. Perhaps he suddenly had to go somewhere where everyone was expected to wear a high-priced suit. He might have been looking for an appropriate suit in a panic and someone might have mentioned the name “Donna Karan.” Maybe this someone had confused “Donna Karan” with “DKNY.”

As a way of looking for a store, this is exceptional but not “wrong.” To put it another way, if the shop assistant or I had pointedly acted as, “Why has this person come here?,” we would have been criticized for being impolite.

A man’s social position and the price of his suit generally match, and if you look closely, you can generally tell the price of the suit. Even if a person wears a suit priced above or below his current status, though, that is no outright mistake. That is to say, it is not a violation of the social code.



Basic consumer behavior is the same (everyone wears a suit in formal situations) and within that, there are differences according to economic level (expensive and inexpensive suits). In that way, there is a link between consumer behavior and classes among males.

WITH women, the situation is different. There are no majority-shared patterns for spending leisure time among women, such as watching baseball. Such pursuits as visiting art galleries and traveling to historical places are mainly popular among women with a relatively high socio-economic position. (Regardless of socio-economic position, such activities are not very popular among males.)

In term of reading, general newspapers are not read as widely by women as by men. Female preferences in books are quite varied, though women who are not highly educated read few books, and prefer comics.

The key to female consumer behavior is magazines. Even those who do not read books regularly read women's magazines, which contain all kinds of lifestyle-related information, covering everything from clothes, accessories and food to human relationships at the office or in private (particularly how to spend time with boyfriends or family), as well as horoscopes.

The readership of women's magazines is finely segmented – not only the differences in socioeconomic status, such as working, lower-middle or upper-middle class, but also according to generation and types of living environment (large city, small city, farming village). Moreover, the magazines a woman reads indicate her position in society. Although there are substantial individual differences in the frequency of reading, magazines are often the frame of reference for women as which magazine to refer.

Magazines, for their part, also offer product and lifestyle information tailored to the level of their readership. Many women seem to want to appear “high class,” so even “lower-middle”



magazines sometimes carry articles on high-priced stores. The content, however, is seldom very accurate. The readers will not buy those items anyway so these articles may frequently be based on hearsay.

RECENTLY, these differences between the genders have been diminishing. While it is not clear how far they can be statistically verified, men's habits seem to be drawing closer to women's.

In Japan, summer temperatures exceed 30°C. Because men wear suits while working in the office, office air conditioning is usually set rather low. Some women, who dress lightly in the office, even use portable heating devices to keep themselves warm. In the summer of 2005, however, the Japanese government launched a campaign to set office temperatures to 28°C in an effort to conserve energy. As a result, many white collar workers were pushed into giving up their suits and selecting clothes that suited their individual status.

In the generation under 40, non-conformity is advancing further in other

areas as well. For example, while watching professional baseball is the most common leisure activity for men as mentioned earlier, more than half of those who watch baseball in Japan are actually fans of a certain team – the Yomiuri Giants. As is the case with suits, conformity has also been strong in leisure. Among the younger generation, however, soccer is more popular than baseball, and support is diversified among several powerful domestic and overseas clubs. The “cultural omnivore” stereotype is slowly waning.

In Japan today, the difference between the genders is narrowing far faster than ever. The relationship between consumer behavior and class differences is part of this. Nevertheless, for a long time into the future we will surely see middle-aged and older males absurdly concerned about their shopping and leisure activities. Like the man I saw at the Donna Karan store in Omotesando. **JS**

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