This summer I worked for Shinsegae International as an associate buyer. Although I knew that Shinsegae International was a fashion company, I did not know the specifics regarding what Shinsegae International does. Moreover, I was not familiar with the role of a fashion merchandise buyer. Without knowing much about either the company or my position, I was fairly nervous in the days leading up to the first day of my internship. On top of everything, the aspect that made me most nervous was the rumors I heard about South Korean work culture. My friends who have lived and worked in South Korea told me that Korea is all about the “work hard, play hard” culture. People work over-hours regularly and bond with their teammates over alcohol. Also, I heard that the South Korean work culture is extremely stiff in which there are certain rules that may seem impractical from a foreigner’s perspective that one has to follow. Having heard these rumors and not knowing much about the company or my position, I was scared.

On the first day of my internship, I met with several people from the Human Resources Department. They went over employee conduct, my salary and all the administrative stuff. Next, I had a meeting with the head of the HR department. The meeting was extremely professional and so I got even more nervous about starting my internship. However, after a person from HR took me to the floor I would be working on and eventually to my teammates, everything changed. They warmly greeted me and
started talking to me about the company and their roles as buyers and my role as an associate buyer.

Specifically, I was assigned to the Armani Collezioni team. Shinsegae International is in charge of the operation of many different luxury brands ranging from Marni, Alexander McQueen, Acne Studio, and Celine in Korea. Therefore, people who work there are not only buyers, in a sense that they choose which pieces and the amounts of them that would be sold in Korea, but also operation managers. They were in charge of the operation of stores from visual merchandising to store manager conduct. After hearing that from my teammates at Shinsegae International, I was both relieved and happy. It was something that I always wanted to do.

The first couple of days were all about learning. I had to learn a lot of professional fashion terminology and Shinsegae International specific fashion jargon. Also, I had to memorize the European size system and how the Italian size system translates into for instance the French size system and so on. Memorizing fashion jargon was not that big of a deal but what was really hard was learning about the operation. Specifically, I had to learn a lot of business and finance related terms. I learned how to analyze profit data and sales data. Although the learning process was a bit hard, I am happy that I now know a little bit about both the business and the creative side of fashion.

Even though I learned a lot throughout the entirety of my internship duration, after the first couple of days passed, I started doing tasks. My tasks were divided mainly into three different categories. I would say the first set of tasks was fashion related, the second business related and the third just plain administrative stuff. For fashion related tasks, I had to make Powerpoint presentations about current fashion trends, information about fabric and how they are used, information about Armani Collezioni’s
current seasonal styles. For business related tasks, I had to make Excel files that reported daily Armani Collezioni sales data and compare it to last season’s and other brands’ owned by Shinsegae International. In addition to that, I attended weekly price deciding meetings. Price deciding meetings were basically meetings in which we decided the price of certain pieces. It was interesting to see how the clothes we usually buy are priced.

Interestingly, every Friday afternoons were reserved for “field days.” That meant that I would go to Armani Collezioni stores in certain department stores in Seoul and assess how they were operated. Sometimes, I even pretended to be a secret shopper to assess the service quality. Other times, I went with my teammates and chatted with the store manager and just looked around. Fridays were my absolute favorite.

Looking back at the experience, I am so glad that I had this opportunity. Not only did I learn a lot about fashion and business, I learned a lot about interacting with teammates, and my boss. On top of that, I learned so much about the Korean work culture. But most importantly, it was an opportunity for me to know what my strengths, weaknesses, and interests are. I realized that I love fashion much more than I thought so I am now actually thinking about applying to grad school in fashion. Also, on a more personal level, I now know what my strengths and weaknesses are when interacting with people. Overall, working at Shinsegae International has been an extremely valuable experience that helped me grow in many different ways.