

Qualitative Study on Body Image and Appearance Behaviors in the Diet Center

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand body image, appearance behaviors, and eating disturbances among females in the Diet Center. Subjects for this research were 40 females enrolled at the Diet Center in Seoul. They were interviewed for this study using an interview schedule at September in 2004. As a result, most of the subjects (87%) were dissatisfied with their bodies, especially their lower body such as hip, thighs, legs, stomach. Subjects tended to use dieting and fasting (46.3%) as the most common appearance management behaviors in relation to the body parts. Make-up (32.9%) was also used as routine appearance behaviors, while 37.5% of subjects have had cosmetic surgery on eyes, nose and liposuction. Sixty percent of subjects had participated in Diet center programs more than twice. This may mean that society pressures women to have a slim body, which then will result in more self-confidence. Subjects tend to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors, such as 'fasting', 'inducing vomit', 'using diet pills or laxatives', and 'after chewing, spit out'. Based on these results, socio-cultural body image regarding ideal beauty would be discussed.

Key words: Body image, Appearance Behavior, Eating Disturbances, Diet Center

I. Introduction

Beauty ideals are culture bound and have undergone many changes over the centuries. It is well known that physical appearance influences one's image is defined as one's perception and attitudes about one's own body (Sullivan & Harnish, 1990). Body image plays an important role in individuals evaluate their bodies differently in their environment through comparisons with others. Those individuals who put importance on their bodies often perceive a discrepancy between their actual image and their ideal image (Sullivan & Harnish, 1990). Females tend to

evaluate their bodies more negatively than males and engage in a variety of behaviors related to their appearance, including those that are healthy as well as those that are hazardous. For example, females are more likely than male to enroll in formal weight-loss programs.

Sociocultural values are thought to represent important influences on the development of body image. Each culture defines its own particular ideals of beauty, and these ideals change constantly, especially for women (Fallon, 1990). Traditionally, Asian cultures including Korea through the centuries have developed their own unique concepts of beauty. However, due to

influences of Western culture, Asian criteria for beauty have shifted to Western standards. It is possible that the traditional stereotypes about Asian attitudes to plumpness are not held by young Asian woman today. Empirical evidence (e.g., Chen, 1993) is increasing that plumpness is no longer valued by young Asian woman. Asians differ physically from Caucasian-Americans in skin color, facial structure, and body size. These comparisons to standards of Western beauty may affect Asian women's perceptions regarding their body image and problematic eating behaviors.

Recently, incidence of Korean females with anorexia and bulimia nervosa is increasing (Yeon, 1995) in Korea. In addition, according to Lim's (1997) study, it is increasingly recognized that Korean women expend more time and enroll in formal weight - loss programs such as diet center to lose weight, pursuing thinness. This may mean that Korean women who don't attain the Western beauty standard may suffer from low self-esteem, poor body image and eating disturbances such as fasting, restrictive dieting, self-induced vomiting and using diet pills or laxatives for weight control. However, there is no research about their body image, appearance behaviors including eating disturbances behaviors among Korean females in the Diet Center Program. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine and understand body image, appearance behaviors, and eating disturbances among females in the Diet Center.

II. THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Body Image

Physical attractiveness and beauty standards

have been the most important factors in relationships and interactions, leading to social judgments. According to Mathes and Kahn(1975), physical attractiveness is more important for women than for men. The attractive women are more happy, psychologically healthy, and proud of themselves. Through mass media such as television, magazines, society for women. Some research (e.g., Morris, Cooper & Cooper, 1989) found that the ideal body shape for women has become thinner.

One consequence of the emphasis on thinness is distortions in body image. Body image, the mental concept we hold of our bodies and our affective response to it, consists of two concepts: body-perception and body-attitude (Fawcett & Frye, 1980). Body-perception refers to one's direct mental experience of the physical body, while body-attitudes refers to one's feeling, attitudes and emotional reactions toward the body(e.g., satisfaction/dissatisfaction). Body image has received much attention in the research literature because body dissatisfaction among women is so prevalent and recognized as playing a central role in eating disorders. Many women experience their own body size and weight as excessive and unacceptable, having negative feelings about their own failure to meet the standard. They see themselves as heavier than their actual weight. For example, 75% of American females are dissatisfied with their bodies (Cash & Green, 1986).

2. Body image disturbance

Cultural factors affect the norms against which women evaluate their appearance and influence how they subconsciously construct their body image based on their own and other's perceptions. American cultural norms prescribe

that women conform to a relative narrow range of body size and shape, pursuing thinness (Fallon, 1990). There has been increasing interest in the role of socio-cultural factors in the development of body image disturbance. A disturbance of body image may be related to depression, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, lowered self-esteem and cosmetic surgery, and to cultural standards for beauty.

Consistent with these cultural differences, research has indicated that eating disorders have increased in frequency more among young females in Western countries than in non-Western countries. For example, according to Fallon (1990), Caucasian females showed greater levels of disordered eating/dieting behaviors and attitudes and greater body dissatisfaction than African-Americans or Asian-Americans. However, the incidence of occurrences of these syndromes in Asian cultures has increased. Asian women who become exposed to the cultural pressure to be thin may be at risk regarding negative body image and eating disorders. For example, anorexia nervosa is recognized and increasing in Japan (Dolan, 1991). Also, Lee et al. (1996) found that anorexia nervosa among Chinese occurs in Hong Kong. This may result from adaptation to Western values, research has shown that body image disturbances emerge in other cultures upon identification with, or adoption of, Western cultural norms, as well as with individuals experiencing a cultural change into Western society.

In addition, some research supports (e.g., Patel, 1994) that both Asian women and American women perceived European Americans to be more physically attractive than Asians. A greater toleration and appreciation for a wider range in body weight and size is evident in many non-Western cultures. Plumpness in females is

considered attractive and in some cultures, obesity has been admired or even considered a secondary sexual characteristic. For example, the Chinese are known to associate fatness with prosperity and longevity, and plumpness as symbolic of fertility and womanhood. However, the standard of beauty has been changing toward being thin in many Asian countries, It might be the result of Western standards of beauty which is one of the foremost imports embraced in many Asian cultures. Evidence suggests that according to the American Society of Plastic Surgery and Reconstructive Surgeon, Asians were more likely than any other ethnic group to pursue cosmetic surgery based on Western ideals of beauty. Especially, double eyelid surgery is the most common cosmetic surgery on Asian faces worldwide(Eshima, 1994). This is congruent with Fallon's (1990) suggestion that increased pressure to conform to a shape that is different from one's own leads to taking increased measures to diminish that difference. Exposure to and identification with Western values has been positively associated with Asian women's body image.

It is apparent that exposure to Western values has been positively associated with Korean women's body image and eating disorders. While numerous quantitative studies have examined the implication between body image and variables such as gender role ideology, and disordered behaviors, very few qualitative studies have reported cases in which women discuss their own opinions and cultural perceptions regarding the ideal of beauty and body image and disordered eating behaviors. Therefore, this study attempts to understand Korean women's body image, appearance behaviors and disordered eating behaviors in the Diet center program based on cultural ideals of beauty.

III. METHOD

Subjects for this research consisted of 40 Korean females enrolled at Korea Diet Center in Seoul, Korea from September 11 to September 16, 2004. They were interviewed for this study using an interview schedule of 11 questions, developed by Rudd and Lennon(1994) and the investigator, regarding cultural perceptions and feelings about ideal beauty and appearance behaviors. The questions were written in English, then translated Korean. The Korean translated instrument was reviewed and discussed by two Koreans to ensure that the translation was clear and understandable. Tapes were recorded with Korean, then translated back into English to establish equivalence of the questionnaire by a Korean graduate student, For data analysis, thematic categories were used.

VI. RESULTS

1. Demographic characteristics of samples

The age range of subjects in the Diet Center was 14 to 42 years old with mean of 27 years old. The average of fasting days of subjects in the Diet center was about 8 days with the range of 5 days to 20 days. Regarding the subjects' occupation, business women were 30% of the subjects, followed by students (27.5%), designers(7.5%), secretaries(7.5%), housewives (7.5%), teachers(5%) and so on.

2. Actual height and weight vs Ideal height and weight

The height range of subjects was 153 to

<Table 1> Actual height and ideal height (N=40)

	actual height	ideal height
150-155cm(4' 11"-5' 1")	10%	.
156-160cm(5' 1"-5' 3")	22.5%	.
161-165cm(5' 3"-5' 5")	45%	12.5%
166-170cm(5' 5"-5' 7")	22.5%	75%
171-175cm(5' 7"-5' 9")		12.5%

170cm (5' 5" to 5' 7"). The average was 163.56cm (5' 5"). The actual height and ideal height for subjects in the Diet center were as followed by <Table 1>.

As seen in Table 2, the actual weight (before fasting) range of subjects was 49kg-90kg (108-198.4 lbs), and average was 63.12kg (139.2 lbs). Their ideal weight range was 42kg-60kg (93.6-132.3 lbs), and average was 50.45kg (111.2 lbs). Desire amount of weight loss, calculated by subtracting actual weight from personally desired weight, was 5 to 40kg (11-88 lbs), and average was 12.65kg (27.8 lbs).

3. Findings

1) On the whole, how satisfied are you with yourself?

As see in <Table 3>, generally, the subjects (67.5%) tend to be dissatisfied with themselves.

2) Is it important to have private self-consciousness or public self-consciousness?

Public self-consciousness (87.5%) was more important than private self-consciousness (12.5%) among subjects(Table 4). They responded that they are paying attention to their appearance or body, clothing style or brand names, capability, speaking, for example.

<Table 2> Actual weight and ideal weight (N=40)

	actual height	ideal height
40-45kg (88-99 lbs)	.	10%
46-50kg(99-110 lbs)	10%	57.5%
51-55kg(110-121 lbs)	12.5%	25%
56-60kg(121-132 lbs)	20%	7.5%
61-65kg(132-143 lbs)	30%	.
66-70kg(143-154 lbs)	12.5%	.
71-75kg(154-165 lbs)	7.5%	.
76-80kg(165-176 lbs)	.	.
81-85kg(176-187 lbs)	2.5%	.
86-90kg(187-198 lbs)	5%	.

<Table 3> Satisfied with oneself (N=40)

very satisfied	satisfied	dissatisfied	very dissatisfied
5%	27.5%	32.5%	35%

<Table 4> Self-consciousness (N=40)

private self-consciousness	public self-consciousness
12.5%	87.5%

3) How important is appearance to you?

Most subjects(95%) placed importance on appearance as followed in <Table 5>.

4) How satisfied are you with your body?

Most subjects(87%)were dissatisfied with their bodies (Table 6). They were mostly dissatisfied with their lower bodies. Specifically, thighs, legs, abdomen, and face were the most dissatisfying parts of their bodies.

5) What is you cultural standard of ideal beauty?

When asked, "What is your cultural standard of ideal beauty?", the subjects responded in the following manner (Table 7): Western features (22.8%) such as height and thinness and Physical attractiveness (22.8%) were equally the

<Table 5> Importance of appearance (N=40)

very important	important	little important	not important
77.5%	17.5%	5%	0%

<Table 6> Satisfied with one's body (N=40)

very important	important	little important	not important
0%	12.5%	19.5%	67.5%

<Table 7> Cultural standard of beauty (N=40)

Western features (tallness & thinness)	22.8%	Physical attractiveness	22.8%
Inner beauty	21.1%	Harmony between internal an external beauty	12.3%
Self-satisfaction	8.8%	Pretty face	7.0%
Individuality	4.2%	Others	1.0%

most reported. Inner beauty was reported by 21.1%, while harmony between internal and external beauty by 12.3%. In sum, Western beauty such as height and thinness, physical attractiveness, and inner beauty were the most popular standard of beauty reported by groups.

6) What efforts do you practice to enhance your appearance?

As shown in <Table 8>, results showed that diet and fasting (46.5%) were the most routine appearance behaviors in relation to their appearance. Make-up and /or skin care(32.9%), and exercise (9.8%)are commonly used by subjects.

7) Have you had any kind of cosmetic surgery before? *If so, what areas?

While 62.5% of subjects responded that they have not had cosmetic surgery, 37.5% of subjects reported that they have had cosmetic

<Table 8> Practice on appearance (N=40)

diet and fasting	46.3%	make-up/skin care	32.9%
exercise	9.8%	cosmetic surgery	6.1%
clothing	3.5%	mental efforts	1.4%

<Table 9> Cosmetic surgery (N=40)

Yes	No
37.5%	62.5%

<Table 10> Body part of cosmetic surgery (N=40)

eyes	nose	liposuction
55.5%	22.25%	22.25%

surgery(Table 9).

Regarding the areas (Table 10), eyes (55.5%) were the mos popular type of cosmetic surgery(creating a “double eyelid”). Nose (reshaping) and liposuction (legs, thighs) were equally followed by 22.25% of subjects.

8) Do you have the desire to have cosmetic surgery? *If so, what surgery?

Results (Table 11) showed that 62.5% of subjects reported “yes”, they have the intent to have cosmetic surgery.

For the surgery area (Table 12), liposuction (e.g., thighs, legs, and abdomen) was the most commonly considered cometic surgery by 37.5% of subjects. Eyes(25.1%), nose(21.9%) and breast augmentation(15.5%) were also considered.

9) How often do you diet? How many times have you come to Diet Center so far?

As indicated in <Table 13>, surprisingly, half of the subjects reported that they have “always” dieted. Specific responses included “My life equals diet”(sub #23, sub #29, sub #33), “Diet

<Table 11> Desire on cosmetic surgery (N=40)

Yes	No
62%	37%

<Table 12> Body part of desire on cosmetic surgery (N=40)

liposuction	eyes	nose	breast augmentation
37.5%	25.1%	21.9%	15.5%

<Table 13> Diet (N=40)

Always	50%
Often	25%
Once a month	15%
Once a year	10%

<Table 14> Diet center (N=40)

Once	40%
Twice	40%
More than three times	20%

will be continuously”(sub #7), “I will diet forever”(sub #3). Also 25% of subjects responded “often”, while 15% of subjects answered “once a month”.

Also, when asked, “How many times have you come to Diet Center so far?”, the subjects responded (Table 14). “This time is the first” and “twice” were equally the most. “More than three times” showed 20% of responses. Among them, one subject answered “I come here once a year regularly”(sub #21).

10) Why do you diet?

Results(Table 15) revealed that 29% of subjects reported that they diet for “self-confidence”. “To be beautiful”(14.5%), “due to clothing size”(14.5%), and “to feel comfortable” (10.1%) were the priority reasons why they do diet.

<Table 15> The reason of diet (N=40)

for self-confidence	29%	to be beautiful	14.5%
due to clothing size	14.5%	to feel comfortable	10.1%
to be slim	8.7%	to look attractive to men	7.2%
due to pressure from others	7.2%	to lose a weight	5.9%
others	2.9%	Total	100%

<Table 16> The way of diet (N=40)

fasting	56.3%	vomit	16.9%
using diet pill or laxatives	14.1%	after chewing spit out	8.5%
try to eat fat-free foods	2.8%	try to eat a little amount	1.4%

11) How do you diet?

The half of subjects (56.3%) reported that they engage in fasting as diet (Table 16). Also, subjects responded that “vomit”(16.9%), “using diet pill or laxatives”(14.1%), and “after chewing foods, I spit out”(8.5%). Specific responses included “If I feel heavy, generally I engage in fasting for 2-3days”(sub #14, sub #25, sub #33), “When I usually engage in fasting by myself, it was very hard for me to endure. But here(Diet Center) because I do fasting with other people now, it is much easier for me to overcome the hardship”(sub #37), “When I need to do diet, I spit out the food after only chewing. I think it is a very good idea because I can taste some food although I did not swallow it(sub #5). “When I think I had too much eat, I feel guilty a lot. I try to induce vomit. Then I feel letter.

V. DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

This research goal is to extend to our knowledge regarding the association between sociocultural factors and body image by examining the ideal of beauty, body image, appearance behaviors, and disordered eating behaviors among Korean females in the Diet Center in Seoul, Korea. The results are as follows:

First, demographically, young females,

especially in the 20-29 year old age groups, comprised the majority of subjects. The average of their desired weight loss was 12.65kg (27.8 lbs). This means that subjects had a discrepancy between actual weight and ideal weight. Also, they had a discrepancy between actual height and ideal height. These results may reveal that Korean women pursue Western beauty such as thinness and tallness. Generally subjects are not satisfied with themselves (67.5%). This shows that they are much more dissatisfied with themselves than Korean students (40%) and Korean housewives (60%) in U.S. revealed by Lee, Lee, and Rudd (1996).

Second, Korean females rated Western beauty and physical attractiveness equally at 22.8% each. However, the two contrasting cultural ideals (inner beauty at 21.1% and Western beauty at 22.8%) were rated nearly equally as the cultural standard of ideal beauty. First of all, as mentioned earlier, Korea has been viewed as representative of a collectivist culture (Choi & Choi, 1994). Because the group is more important than individuals in the collectivistic cultures, forming harmonious relationship within the group is emphasized as goal for the Koreans. Based on Confucian concepts, which have been the essential thought of collectivistic cultures, Koreans have considered acknowledging the authority of the nation and family, and obedience of the children to parents, wives to husbands, and young to elderly as the central rules in

maintaining social order. Especially, Korean women have been encouraged to learn the inner virtues such as submission and endurance (Yoon,1994). Thus, it may be more important for Korean females to have public self-consciousness than private self-consciousness in appearance management or behaviors daily. It can explain why Korean women have considered inner beauty as the ideal of standard. Second, as Chen (1993) indicated that Western features such as height and thinness was one of the foremost imports in Japan, Korean women also have embraced Western beauty as the ideal beauty due to the influence of Western values.

Third, most of the subjects(87%)are dissatisfied with their bodies, especially their lower body such as hip, thighs, legs, stomach. This is consistent with Lim's(1997)study in that Korean women are the most dissatisfied with legs, hip and stomach. Subjects tended to use dieting and fasting (46.3%) as the most common appearance management behaviors in relation to the body parts. This is supported by Jeffery et al. (1998) in that lower weight standards in women cause greater body dissatisfaction and more dieting. Make-up(32.9%) was also used as routine appearance behaviors. This result is supported by the fact that Korea women have used cosmetics for thousands of years (Chun,1987) and by the rate of total cosmetics production (\$173million) in Korea, which has increased 27.3% over the previous year (The Korean Pharmaceutist Year Book, 1995). On the other hand, 37.5% of subjects have had cosmetic surgery on eyes, nose and liposuction based on Western features. There is overwhelming evidence that women in general are dissatisfied with their bodies, and this is partly due to the influx of information and messages they receive

on a daily basis about dieting and losing weight, looking good and being fit, and being beautiful.

Forth, frequency and reasons for dieting included: "always"(50%), "often"(25%), "once a month"(15%). The reasons why they diet were "for self-confidence"(29%), "to b beautiful" (14.5%) and "due to clothing size"(14.5%). Sixty percent of subjects had participated in Diet Center Programs more than twice. This may mean that society pressures women to have a slim body, which then will result in more self-confidence. Subjects tend to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors, such as, "Fasting"(56.3%), "inducing vomit"(16.9%), "using diet pills pr laxatives"(14.1%), and "after chewing, spit out"(8.5%). This is supported by Lee et al.'s study (1996) in that these problematic eating behaviors were positively associated with body dissatisfaction. Subjects responded that they left uncomfortable or guilty to comfortable or better, after dieting or fasting. this is congruent with Jeffery et al.'s study (1998) that eating disordered behavior was correlated to negative feelings of overacting and positive feeling after dieting

Finally, as much research reports, mass media might lead Korean women to pursue "Western beauty". In this study, most subjects (95%) read fashion magazines. Magazines have strongly influenced all women to prefer Western beauty through the diversity of fashion magazines. This view is supported by many examples, such as the excessive use of Western models, the advertisements of imported Western fashion brands, and the preference of a Western-type face among Korean beauty celebrities.

In this study, Korean women in Diet Center programs placed importance on their appearance or body, and perceive a greater discrepancy between their actual weight and

their ideal weight. They may believe they are overweight regardless of actual weight and express greater concern about weight control. Thus, they may effort to expend more time and money to lose weight in strict diet program. Also, according to this study, Korean women tend to have low self-esteem and high public self-consciousness. Lee et al. (1995) pointed out that people with low self-esteem dislike themselves and are characterized by a lack of confidence in their own attitudes an behaviors. In other words, their attitudes and behaviors are more apt to be affected by social-cultural and psychological behavior but also engage in hazardous behaviors to reach socially constructed ideal esteem and high public self-consciousness tend to have higher levels of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbances such as restrictive dieting and self-induced vomiting for weight control. These results indicate that Korean women who don't attain these standards may be the result of influence from Western standards of beauty adopted in many other Asian cultures. That is a more unattainable norm might cause Korean women to have more body dissatisfaction and to engage in problematic eating behaviors as they try to reach a Western ideal of beauty.

It is very apparent that the perception of ideal beauty and body image appear to be highly influenced by social and cultural factors. These data may be useful in producing strategies to strengthen aspects of self-concept such as self-esteem, and enable young Korean women to better withstand the risks of developing body image disturbances and engaging in hazardous behaviors. Furthermore, this basic information about unhealthy eating behaviors would be suggested for the purpose of planning treatment and prevention programs in Korea. To thoroughly

investigate appearance and body image, based on social and cultural constructs, additional research on cross cultures and populations is needed. In this way, a more diverse body of research can allow researchers to further examine these areas and to understand cultural views and behaviors regarding appearance, and body image and the manner in which they contribute to one's self-worth.

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