

## Korean Women's Shopping Behavior and Body Image in U.S.

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand shopping behaviors and body image among Korean females in U.S. Subjects for this research were 20 Korean housewives. They were interviewed for this study using an interview schedule. As a result, most of the subjects have enjoyed shopping in U.S. stores. They showed that they go shopping more often in U.S. than in Korea due to more time to shop. They considered refund policy and kind salespersons as the positive characteristics in U.S. stores, while they complained about size, quality, and style in even their favorite stores. Also, subjects tend to be dissatisfied with their bodies. Compared to how they feel in Korea, they especially feel lower body image and lower self-esteem in the U.S. Ninety percent of subjects considered their body affected their shopping behaviors. To compensate how they felt about their bodies, they responded that they limit or change clothing styles or colors when they shopped. Based on these results, socio-cultural body image regarding ideal beauty and shopping behavior would be discussed.

**Key words** : Shopping Behavior, Body image, Appearance Behavior, Korean Women

### I. INTRODUCTION

Retailers today optimize their chances for success in heavily competitive markets, if they can attract consumers effectively, establish a trusting relationship and maintain that relationship through meeting the consumer's need. They have used market segmentation to identify target consumers as 'an important tool' (The Consumer Protection Board, 2000).<sup>1)</sup>

Every culture has its own particular ideals of beauty, which is changing constantly (Fallon, 1997).<sup>2)</sup> Cultural factors are important in setting the norms against which an individual judges her appearance and thus builds up an image of her body based on her own and others' reflections (Mathis & Connor, 1998).<sup>3)</sup> However, some research supports the notion that Asian

females tend to perceive Caucasian–American females as more physically attractive than Asians. It might be the result of Western standards of beauty which are adopted in many Asian culture (Rudd & Lennon, 1994).<sup>4)</sup> During Asian females' stay in U.S., Korean women may have lower self–esteem and body image due to their overexposure to Americans' ideals of beauty. This may lessen the satisfaction Korean housewives have when shopping in retail stores. Thus, understanding Korean consumers' apparel shopping behavior and their body image can aid retailers in targeting Korean consumers and in merchandising products and services more effectively. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the linkages among body image and shopping behavior or attitudes, to enhance the shopping experiences for Korean housewives.

## II. THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many researchers have studied body image, the physical self–concept (Sullivan & Harnish, 1998),<sup>5)</sup> using social comparison theory. According to Heinberg and Thompson(2001),<sup>6)</sup> body image contains our perceptions of the physical appearances of others. One's body image is determined by how one perceives the self in relation to others. Individuals evaluate their body image differently through comparisons with others. As a whole, as Morse and Gergen(1970)<sup>7)</sup> noted, individuals are often concerned with their personal attractiveness and general value. They may frequently compare themselves with others in their environment to

judge their own value. For instant, there are many sources which present images of women every day. For women, models for physical comparison are found in images of the mass media such as movies, TV, music videos, and magazines.

To illustrate the development of body image, Irving (1990)<sup>8)</sup> investigated the impact of exposure to attractive models on subjects' evaluation of themselves. Results suggested that subjects exposed to thinner models reported lower levels of self–esteem and weight satisfaction than did subjects exposed to larger models.

Researchers believe that the media is a strong influence on women with regard to the thin standard of beauty. For example, two studies found, through examinations of fashion models and Miss America contestants that the ideal of body shape for women has become thinner.

Moore(1993)<sup>9)</sup> found that 75% of overweight girls did not like the shapes of their bodies, nor did 44% of normal weight girls, most of them feeling that they were too fat. Thus Irving(1990)<sup>8)</sup> affirmed that a social environment which may provide some women pressures to diet has created desperate physical and emotion problems such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and chronic dieting. In another investigation, Richins(1995)<sup>10)</sup> studied college students to see if they compare themselves to pictures in magazines. A typical questionnaire item stated that when they see models in clothing ads, they think about how well or how badly they look compared to the models. Richins found that when subjects were exposed to idealized images of beautiful women, they rated an average woman as less attractive than she was rated by subjects who were not

exposed to idealized images. Thus, the subjects looked at the ideal images and based their judgment of the average woman on how she compared to the ideal. These comparisons with idealized media images of beauty tend to have a negative effect on ones' body image, self-esteem and satisfaction with one's attractiveness.

On the other hand, Patel(1994)<sup>11)</sup> examined the relationship between attitudes of racial identity and body image satisfaction among Asian Americans. Her results indicated that Asian American women reported a significantly greater discrepancy between ideal body weight and their actual body weight than did Asian American men. In fact, a majority of normal weight women(50%) reported perceiving themselves as 'overweight' or 'slightly overweight'. Moreover, it is reported that Asian Americans are more likely than any other ethnic group to pursue cosmetic surgery. This means that increased pressure to conform to a shape that is different from one's own leads to taking increased measures to diminish that difference.

Foreign students are exposed to socio-cultural pressures for thinness and gain weight under the general stress of acculturation. Because foreign students are exposed to dissimilar attractiveness comparison standards daily, the effects on self-esteem and body image may be more serious for foreigners in U.S. than others in their native country.

Several studies have investigated Korean housewives' shopping behaviors. Song(1988)<sup>12)</sup> indicated that 57% of consumers planned their clothing purchases in advance, their friends(44.9%) affected clothing buying behavior most as fashion information sources. Other

studies how display and TV as a sources of fashion information. Ki(1992)<sup>13)</sup> and Hong(1993)<sup>14)</sup> revealed that cash was used the most for Korean housewives. However, this is in contrast to American consumers, who spend more with credits cards, affecting 'American way of life'. Hong(1993)<sup>14)</sup> pointed out that when purchasing clothing, the most important factors were style and design(44.2%) and color (23.2%). But, Lee(1989)<sup>15)</sup> showed that quality (24.1%), price(8.7%), service(5.5%) are important factors for Korean housewives.

On the other hand, to study abroad in U.S. colleges, most foreign students including Korean students need considerable financial support because they must pay expensive living costs and tuition. This means students with this much money are likely to be able to shop and purchase in U.S. apparel. Therefore, Korean housewives who live in the U.S. now represent a small but potentially important segment of the U.S. apparel market. this, along with the increased number of Korean students staying in U.S. universities through a temporary stay, is contributing to the overall increase in clothing consumerism.

### III. METHOD

#### 1. Sample

Ten Korean housewives participated in this study. Their age ranged between 28 and 39, with average of 34. They were recruited through personal contacts. Their husbands were enrolled at a midwestern university, in various majors.

The range of their stay in U.S. is between 2–4 years. These subjects showed higher education levels—master degrees(5) and bachelor degrees(5).

## 2. Procedure

The research procedure used in this study consisted of personal interviews. The subjects were between the ages of personal interviews. The subjects were between the ages of 26–35 and were involved in one-on-one tape recorded interviews.

## 3. Instrument

The subjects were asked a number of questions about general shopping attitudes or behaviors; body image; shopping behavior or experiences related to self-esteem. This questions were modified by the researcher, based on Fallon's (1997)<sup>2)</sup> research. The interview was conducted in Korean between the researcher and subjects, then translated by the researcher into English. The Korean–translated interview was reviewed and discussed with by a graduate student enrolled at the midwestern university to ensure that the translation was clear and understandable. An then, another Korean graduate student was back translated it into English to establish equivalence of the questionnaire.

## 4. Data Collection

Subjects met the researcher at a convenient location such as at the subject's house or at a quiet campus area. Each subject was given a short explanation of the research study, and

asked questions by the researcher. The interviews lasted approximately 30–40 minutes.

## 5. Data Analysis

The responses of the subjects were analyzed through thematic categories. Since the questions were open-ended, the subjects were free to speak as little or as much as they wanted on each question.

# IV. RESULTS

## 1. Do you enjoy shopping? How often do you go to stores? How do you compare that to how you shop in Korea?

All subjects answered "yes" to this question. Fifty-five percent of the subjects go to shop once a week; twice a week and twice a month, each 18%; twice a ten days, 9%. Seven of subjects answered "here" they go to shop more often than in Korea. The reasons were time(50%), frequent sale items(37.5%) and convenient parking. Subjects who went to shop more often in Korea responded that the reasons were fashionability, various items, and short distance.

## 2. What are your favorite stores? Are you satisfied with the store?

Specialty stores and off-price stores were the favorite stores with each 31.6%. Department stores were 21%, discount stores 15.8%. Most subjects tended to be satisfied with their favorite stores but, they commented about size(31.3%),

quality(25%), style(18,8%), as the areas that they felt had problems.

**3. Compared to Korean apparel stores, what are the positive and negative characteristics of U.S. stores?**

As the positive aspects in U.S. stores, refund policy(29,6%), kind salespeople(25,9%), convenient shopping such as adequate parking and locations(18,5%), and relatively cheap price(14,8%) were considered. On the other hand, quality(20%) and display(20%), out of fashionability(13%) and style(13%) were negative aspects.

**4. Do you like the stores' salespeople or visual merchandising?**

As above question #3, overwhelmingly all subjects are satisfied with salespeople but, two subjects answered salespeople are nice but, sometimes they feel discrimination from them. For visual merchandising, most subjects did not like it except only one subjects. But one subjects also showed both responses—like(City Center), unlike(Kohls).

**5. In stores, what is the most important looking in clothing?**

The forty of those surveyed felt that design of clothing was most important, followed by color(30%), price(20%), and texture(10%). The total number mentioned color(34,6%) as an important aspect, with design(30,8%), price(30,8%), quality(11,5%) and texture(7,7%). Brand names, sewing, origin of country, and material were each mentioned 3,8% of the time.

**6. Have you ordered through T.V. shopping or catalog shopping?**

There was a 100% negative response. The reasons were as follow: 'can't touch and examine or cannot be sure' (44,5%), 'complex of delivery' (16,7%), 'complex of refund process' (11,1%), and 'not try on' (11,1%), price, size, communication problem were each 5,6%.

**7. Are you satisfied with your appearance when you look in the dressing room mirror? If not satisfied, which body parts?**

Seven of ten women said "No" to this question, while two subjects answered "Yes" and one "Neutral". Body parts with which they are not satisfied are lower body parts(64,3%) such as hip and lgs, upper body parts(21,4%) such as breast and shoulder, and total appearance (14,3%).

**8. How do you feel about advertisement models in magazines or T.V.? Do you compare yourself with them?**

"Pretty or wonderful"(58,3%), "thin"(16,7%), "tall", "sexy", and "just Barbie doll" showed each 8,3%. Sixty percent of subjects said they compare with the models. After seeing them, subjects responded that they need to lose weight. On the other hand, 40% said they do not compare themselves because the models are unrealistic. So they feel it is impossible for them to reach models' beauty.

**9. Are you satisfied with your body?**

Seven subjects said "yes", while three subjects

said "no". Generally, they tended to be dissatisfied with their body.

**10. After coming here, compared to in Korea, how to think your body or self-esteem?**

100% of those questioned experienced a lower self-esteem after coming to the U.S. than when they lived in Korea. The reasons were due to comfortable American lifestyle, their interest in enhancing their appearance(54.5%) is declining. So they sometimes gained weight. Another reason was comparison with Western beauty(45.5%).

**11. Do you think that your body affects your shopping behavior?**

Except for only one, nine of ten subjects thought their body affects clothing buying behaviors. Overwhelmingly, 75% of responses limit or change the kind of styles and colors "to cover their body weakness", while 25% of responses answered their size affects clothing buying.

**12. In stores, do you have any shopping experience related to self-esteem?**

Except only one, nine of ten subjects said yes. Generally, subjects agreed that they have ever felt low self-esteem when they shopped. Gain weight or fat(40%); difference perception between just seeing and actual wearing a clothing(40%); comparison with American(20%).

## V. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

This research has examined a general idea of what the shopping behaviors or experiences are like for Korean housewives in the U.S., and the linkages between their body-image, self-esteem and shopping behavior. The results are as follows:

First, Korean housewives have enjoyed shopping in U.S. stores. They showed that they go shopping more often in U.S. than in Korea because they have more time to shop here. This means that increase leisure time is enabling more Koreans to have more time for shopping. Korean housewives have enjoyed going to specialty stores and off-price stores. This is consistent with other research in that Korean housewives enjoy shopping in specialty stores, but they revealed that they like to shop in off-price stores in U.S. more than in Korea. Also they complained about size(31.3%), quality(25%), style(18.8%) in even their favorite stores. They considered refund policy and kind salespeople as the positive characteristics in U.S. stores. This is supported by some studies(Ji & Rhee, 1995)<sup>16)</sup> that service delivery such as refund policy or the human interaction component is essential in determining levels of (dis)satisfaction. Ji and Rhee (1995)<sup>16)</sup> indicated that in Korea, salespeople complaints (45%) were the most noted among Korean women. For example, if a consumer tried on many articles of clothing, s/he felt intimidated by the salesperson. In U.S., many Korean housewives tend not to have this kind of feeling toward salespeople. In other words, they are satisfied with American salespeople when shopping. However, Korean

housewives showed negative responses toward quality and display in U.S. stores. (Kwon et al, 1991)<sup>17)</sup> pointed out that quality was considered by Korean housewives as an important factor. Also, display is considered by Korean housewives as an important fashion information tool (Song, 1998).<sup>12)</sup> This may explain why subjects pointed out quality and visual merchandising as negative aspects. When looking for clothing in stores, they considered design first as the most important factor, followed by color and price. This is consistent with Hong (1993)<sup>14)</sup> study that when Korean consumers were shopping, the most important factors were style or design (44,2%) and color (23,2%). About T.V. shopping and catalog shopping, subjects have never done these kinds of shopping, because they feel that they need to touch and see they have low trust in them. This means that as Kwon et al. (1991)<sup>17)</sup> indicated, catalog or T.V. shopping for Korean housewives perceive higher risk than shopping in stores.

2. Korean housewives tend to be dissatisfied with their bodies. Compared to how they feel in Korea, they especially feel lower body image and lower self-esteem in the U.S. Comfortable American lifestyles (e.g., casual style of clothing) may have reduced their interest in enhancing their appearance. Also, all of the focus of mass media through magazines and T.V. advertisement may have led Korean women to have lower body image and lower self-esteem with comparison with Western standards of beauty. In addition, exposure to American beauty on a daily basis, which provides Western cultural ideal beauty—thinness, may make them experience a more lower body image and lower self-esteem

than Korean women in Korea.

3. Ninety percent of Korean housewives thought their body affected their shopping behaviors. To compensate how they felt about their bodies, they responded that they limit or change clothing styles or colors when they shopped. Particularly, when standing before dressing room mirror, seventy percent of Korean women were not satisfied with their body—lower body parts (64,3%). In addition, when shopping, they experienced low self-esteem, because they felt that they gained weight or become fat, or had perception difficulty between seeing and actually wearing a dress. This means that their body image and self-esteem is related to shopping behavior or shopping experience.

In conclusion, it has been revealed that Korean housewives, for the most part have trouble finding their favorite clothing styles, good quality, and size. This study has emphasized primarily the Korean housewives' shopping behaviors or attitudes. These results might suggest that retailers need to find a way to make the shopping experience more favorable for Korean women, even though their stay in the U.S. is often temporary.

Korean housewives, who have traditionally enjoyed 'fashionable dresses' in Korea, perceived that American clothing styles as 'out of fashion'. The retailers may offer more fashionable clothing to encourage Korean housewives to spend more on their clothing. Furthermore, retailers need to let Korean women know advantages of direct marketing (e.g., catalog shopping), reducing their perceived risk. These would seem to stimulate more interest toward their appearance among Korean women and help to improve their body image and to raise

self-esteem. For further research, it is hard to generalize from the results because of the small group used. Thus, further research is needed to replicate this study using a geographically and developmentally wider range so as to enhance the generalization of these findings. As another method, it also would better to use focus group interview because the focus group interview gives the opportunities for subjects to express their own vocabulary through interaction of member and a discussion atmosphere.

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