

# Will Middle-Aged Korean Women Buy Jeans Again?

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**Abstract** *The purpose of the study was to investigate jean consumption among middle-aged Korean women and the characteristics of consumers as potential jean consumers. The data were collected from the survey of 238 Korean women aged 45 to 64 years old. The respondents prefer outlet store to other retail outlets and wear jeans mainly for travel, grocery shopping, and outing. The main reason for not wearing jeans is body change, which leads to poor fit in abdomen and waist area. The sample was clustered into two groups based on interest in jeans: high-interest and low-interest group. From the examination of group differences, the high-interest group rated conformity/brand reputation, scarcity, and attractiveness of appearance significantly higher compared to the low-interest group among the five clothing benefits pursued. No difference was found in obesity and body satisfaction. Group differences were found in recent purchase, price, number of jeans owned, and frequency of wearing jeans. The results suggest the characteristics of the potential jean market among middle-aged women in Korea. Implications are discussed.*

**Key words** *Jeans, Denim, Middle-Aged Women*

## Introduction

Along with the increasing trend of casual dressing, jeans are worn by consumers from all classes and of all ages. Jeans, which originated as miners' working attire, are now worn in pursuit of flattering appearance, self-expression, and symbolic meaning in addition to physical protection. Compared to practical jeans produced in the mass market, so-called premium jeans in up-to-date style form an important part of young consumers' fashion wardrobe.

In Korea, jeans were introduced during the Korean War by American military soldiers in the 1950s. In the 1960s, young adults began wearing jeans regularly (Jun, 2007). In the 1970s, jeans were adopted widely as a symbol of youth culture along with draught beer and acoustic guitar in Korea. These three consumption objects represented the popular music trend influenced by American folk musicians, such as Bob Dylan. Since that time, jeans became everyday attire among college students and young adults. However, this cohort started to wear jeans significantly less frequently later on as adults, perceiving them

as more appropriate for teenagers and young adults.

Studies on jean consumption in Korea have thus focused on consumers in their twenties and few studies examine middle-aged consumers who used to be the major jean consumers. This study investigated the middle-aged women's evaluation of jeans, clothing benefits pursued, preferred styles, and other variables to understand this target market and to provide implications for product development and marketing.

### *Literature Review*

#### **Evaluation Criteria of Jeans**

Consumers evaluate alternatives and make a final choice based on their memories and external information. Evaluation criteria are applied when consumers compare and assess alternatives. Evaluation criteria and relative importance of each item vary by product type, occasions, and place (Lee, Ahn, & Ha, 2010). Consumer evaluation influences the perception of product value and the purchase intention (Jeon, 2007).

Previous studies on jeans focused on identifying evaluation criteria and determining factors that have significant effect on their purchase. Koh (1994) identified intrinsic and extrinsic criteria of jean evaluation. Park and Park (2009) classified three types of criteria, including aesthetic, quality, and extrinsic criteria. Intrinsic criteria, which are related to product's fundamental attributes, consist of aesthetic and practical factors. Aesthetic factors include color, style, fit, flattering, size, and construction/stitch line. Practical factors include quality of textiles, sewing, subsidiary materials, durability, comfort, easy washing/care, shrinkage, color fastness, and stretchiness. Extrinsic criteria include price, brand reputation, brand image, trendiness, uniqueness, status symbol, country of origin, and reviews by others (Ban, 2006; Kim, Kim, & Jeon, 2008; Koh, 1994; Kwak & Lee, 2002; W. Park, 1998; Yoon, 2000; Zhang, 2011).

Evaluation criteria that have significant effect on purchase vary by group. In Koh's (1994) study, durability, subsidiary materials, and sewing were significant. More interestingly, comfort was significant only for domestic brands, whereas looking slim was significant only for imported brands. In another study, appropriateness for body type was the most significant, followed by design elements, color, and price (W. Park, 1998). With regard to group difference by clothing benefits pursued, brand/individuality-pursuing group considered symbolism and aesthetics as important benefits while no interest group considered practicality, aesthetics, and symbolism as important (Koo, 2000). In a similar study, name brand-pursuing group evaluated brand, design, and wearing sensation higher compared to individuality-pursuing group and no-interest group (Ban, 2006).

As high-priced premium jean brands become important in jeans market, research interests shift to in price. Korean consumers with high spending are willing to pay more and those with higher allowance consider brand reputation as more important (Yoon, 2000). In Kwak and Lee's (2002) study, those who use price as reference for quality were more sensitive to usefulness of brand and less sensitive to price.

In terms of demographics, women and those with higher income and higher spending on clothing consider both extrinsic criteria as well as intrinsic criteria (Park & Park, 2009; Yoon, 2000). Comparing

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Korean and Chinese consumers, Zhang (2011) found that washing/care, sewing, subsidiary materials, durability, comfort for action, and trendiness are more important for Chinese while self-expression is more important for Koreans. Within domestic market in Korea, consumers in Seoul, the capital of Korea, rated materials and durability higher and brand, silhouette, and advice from others lower compared to those in other areas (Kim, Kim, & Jeon, 2008).

### **Clothing Benefits Pursued**

Benefits pursued are rewards expected from consuming products, and they are often used in market segmentation. Consumers pursue clothing certain benefits from wearing clothes. Because benefits that products provide or desirable consequences of consuming products are understood as important behavioral variables, clothing benefits pursued rather than specific features of a product receive much attention.

Clothing benefits pursued vary by consumer characteristics, clothing items, and occasions (E. Park, 2012). Literature presents four or five main clothing benefits that consumers pursue. Trendiness and brand reputation are commonly found in previous studies. In addition, other benefits include practical and social psychological benefits. Practical benefits include practicality, easy care, wearing sensation, and economical efficiency. Social psychological benefits include conformity, status symbol, sex appeal, and individuality (Ban, 2006; Koh, 1994; Koo, 2000; W. Park, 1998). Consumption values of clothing have also been investigated to understand the motivation of consumption. The values identified included attractiveness of appearance, psychological value, social value, individuality, trendiness, contextual value, and functional value (Kang, 2010).

Previous studies have shown that clothing benefits pursued vary by consumption pattern or demographic variables. Those who score higher intention to purchase domestic brands do not pursue status symbol or brand reputation while consumers of imported brands score higher on brand reputation (Koh, 1994). For women, those with high spending on clothing pursue trendiness (Ban, 2006). Younger consumers tend to pursue trendiness, brand name, and sex appeal (W. Park, 1998).

Consumers are segmented by clothing benefits they pursue. Koo (2000) classified consumers into three groups: brand/individuality-pursuing group, economical group, and no-interest group (Koo, 2000) while Ban (2006) identified brand-pursuing group, individuality-pursuing group, and no-interest group. In Koo's (2000) study, brand/individuality-pursuing group scored higher on every benefit except for economical factor, and economical factor was higher only in economical group. No-interest group scored lower on every benefit. In Ban's (2006) study, brand-pursuing group comprised predominantly consumers aged from 25 to 30 and married. Individuality-pursuing group included consumers with more education. Both groups spend more on clothing compared to no-interest group. A recent study has shown that spending on jeans vary by group. Premium denim consumers are more likely to pursue attractiveness of appearance, psychological and social value, individuality, and trendiness (Kang, 2010).

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**Middle-Aged Women, Body, and Clothing**

Although scholars define middle age differently, middle age is generally perceived from 40 to 65 years old, indicating the period between early adulthood and old stage. According to the Welfare of the Aged Act in Korea, middle age ranges from 40 to 64 years old (Lee, 2012). Buhler defined middle age as 45~65 years old, as at this age, aging begins along with significant decrease in reproductive ability (as cited in Byun, 2011). Kang and Kye (1996) also defined middle age as 45~64 years old.

In a study related to apparel industry, Y. Park (2002) maintained that middle age begins at 40 and ends at 55 years old based on the awareness of physical aging. Based on purchase pattern/lifestyle, physical age, aging, body change, and increase in weight, some view 35 years as a beginning of middle age (J. Kim, 2003; Park & Koo, 2009).

Somatotype or physical type refers to the contour of body, and it anatomically determines individual structure of body form (K. S. Kim, 2010). With aging, physical and mental ability decrease, and women go through external body change more radically compared to men. Although body development is complete approximately at 16 for women and 18 for men, changes in somatotype continue due to accumulation of subcutaneous fat, pregnancy, delivery, and more (K. H. Kim, 2001). According to the report of national anthropometric survey of Korea, height decreases and waist significantly increases with aging (Kim, Korea Research Institute of Standards and Science, & Korean Agency for Technology and Standards, 1997). For middle-aged women, height decreases while width and thickness toward H-type body increase (Y. Park, 2002). Therefore, ready-to-wear designs based on standard body type are not appropriate for these consumers.

Obesity is also noteworthy among middle-aged women. Obesity increases with aging. Particularly those between 50 and 55 years old become more obese while obesity decreases after 64. Overall body changes into thick and round type. Changes in waist are most severe and fat is accumulated in the back so that women in their sixties tend to stoop with neck and back bent forwards, shoulder swayed, and legs bowed (M. Kim, 2010).

With regard to images pursued, middle-aged female Korean consumers commonly pursue conformity and prefer classic style. In addition, trendiness, elegance, maturity, modesty, innocence, and opulence are pursued (Chung & Kim, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2004; Shim, 2006). Considering that consumers in their sixties additionally pursue cuteness and liveliness and the middle-aged perceive their age younger (Kim & Kim, 2004), consumers pursue images that are more youthful as well as elegance or class as they become middle-aged. Calling the youthful middle-age as "new middle age", Choi (2010) listed purchase motivations of these consumers, including pleasure, impulse, rationality, economy, dignity, and attractiveness, in order of importance. With regard to criteria of clothes selection, quality was the most important, in contrast to youth and young adult market who see clothing as means of refreshment. Middle-aged consumers use mostly personal information source, followed by observation and the media. They see product/salesperson more important compared to transportation and store atmosphere as criteria for store selection (Choi, 2010).

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Based on the findings of previous studies, the current study raises questions. Will the middle-aged women ever wear jeans again? Why do they stop wearing them when they enjoyed jeans so much in 1970s and 1980s? The purpose of the study is to investigate the current state of jean consumption among middle-aged women and to examine the characteristics of consumers who are potentially important for the jean market. Survey was used to investigate the current state of purchasing and wearing jeans. In addition, the study examined clothing benefits pursued and other characteristics of middle-aged consumers who have high interest in jeans in order to find implications for product development and marketing. First, researchers examined last purchase of jeans, frequency and purpose of wearing jeans, reasons for not wearing jeans, and any alterations to jeans. Second, segmentation by interest in jeans was conducted. Evaluation of jeans was used instead of interests in jeans. Because this group of consumers reports fairly low frequency of purchasing and wearing jean pants, we decided that evaluation of jean products in the market would be a better indicator of interests in or attitude towards jeans. As a result, we divided the sample into high- and low-interest group. Lastly, group differences are examined in terms of clothing benefits pursued, obesity (i.e., BMI), body satisfaction, jean purchase, and wearing jeans in order to identify the characteristics of high-interest group.

## ***Method***

### **Measurements**

Survey method was adopted. The measures adopted from previous studies included items assessing jean consumption (E. Kim, 2003; Seo, 2005), evaluation of jeans (Ban, 2006), clothing benefits pursued (Koh, 1994; Koo, 2000), and alteration (Lee & Sung, 2003). The items assessing evaluation of jeans and clothing benefits pursued were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Respondents also completed a demographic questionnaire.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data were collected from a convenient sample comprising 238 women aged 45 to 64 years. The data were analyzed using SPSS 12.0 for Windows. The average age was 52.8. High school graduates comprised 50.4% of participants, followed by college graduates (36.6%). For monthly household income, 40.3% earned over four million won (i.e., Korean currency), 23.5% earned between three and four million won, and 23.1% earned between two and three million won. For monthly spending on clothing, 28.6% spend between 50,000 and 100,000 won, 23.9% spend between 100,000 and 150,000 won, and 17.2% spend over 200,000 won. The average height and weight were 158.3cm and 56.1kg, respectively. Regarding occupation, 61.3% were homemaker.

Frequency analysis was conducted for purchasing and wearing jeans, reasons for not wearing jeans, and jean alterations after purchase. Factor analysis were conducted for evaluation of jeans and clothing benefits pursued. Cluster analysis was conducted for evaluation of jeans. Analysis of variance was con-

ducted to find group difference in clothing benefits pursued, obesity, body satisfaction, and frequency of purchasing and wearing jeans.

**Results**

**The Current State of Jean Consumption**

As seen in Table 1, respondents purchase jeans most frequently at a discount store and least frequently on an Internet shopping site. Over 40 % of respondents answered that they wore jeans for travel, grocery shopping, and outing. Respondents answered they wore jeans in the spring and fall when the weather is mild.

**Table 1.**  
Retail outlet of recent purchase and purpose of jeans

Retail outlet	Outlet store of brand	Department store	Discount store	Traditional market	Specialty store	Internet shopping site	Total
Proportion (%)	24.8	23.9	16.0	15.5	12.2	7.6	100
Purpose <sup>1</sup>	Travel	Grocery shopping	Outing	Walk	Manual labor	Work-out	Indoor
Proportion (%)	50.8	46.6	45.0	27.3	20.6	10.1	5.5
Wearing season <sup>2</sup>	Spring		Summer		Fall		Winter
Proportion (%)	81.5		71.0		34.5		25.2

<sup>1, 2</sup> Plural responses are permitted.

Regarding comfort, crotch (47.2%) and waist (24.3%) were answered as the least comfortable parts of jeans. The reasons for not wearing jeans were, first, body change and, second, being out of style. Respondents alter mostly the pants’ length, and they usually do not alter other parts of pants after purchase (refer to Table 2 for details). The results suggested that middle-aged women’s body changes lead to poor fit in abdomen and waist but alteration is not common for jean products, except for pants’ length.

**Segmentation by Interest in Jeans**

To identify a group who has high interest in jeans, respondents were asked to hypothesize that they went out to shop for a pair of jean pants and chose a pair they like the most after browsing jean pants in the market. They were then asked to evaluate the pair chosen. The scenario was presented, as they have limited experience with recent purchase; thus, the hypothetical evaluation of jean products in the current market served as a good proxy for genuine interest in jeans instead of asking interest directly. We believe that consumers who rate jeans highly represent the potential market that is likely to grow.

From the factor analysis of evaluation of jeans, four factors were extracted: social psychological

**Table 2.**  
Uncomfortable parts of jeans, reasons for not wearing jeans, and parts altered after purchase

Uncomfortable part <sup>1</sup>		Crotch	Waist	Abdomen	Hip	Thigh	None	
Proportion(%)		47.2	24.3	17.4	14.0	9.8	9.8	
Reason		Body change	Out of style	Worn out	New purchase	Deformed	Others	Total
Proportion(%)		40.3	31.5	10.9	6.7	3.8	2.5	100
Parts altered		Waist	Hip	Crotch	Pants width	Pants length		
Proportion(%)	Increase	2.9	3.8	3.4	0	2.5		
	No alteration	84.9	94.5	89.5	83.2	32.4		
	Decrease	13.0	1.7	7.1	16.8	65.1		
	Total	100	100	100	100	100		

<sup>1</sup> Plural responses are permitted.

satisfaction, design, mobility, and practicality (refer to Table 3). From k-means clustering based on hierarchical cluster analysis of evaluation of jeans, two groups were identified, high-interest and low-interest

**Table 3.**  
Factor analysis of evaluation of jeans

Factor	Items	Factor loadings	Eigen value	Variance cumulative (%)	Reliability (α)
Social psychological satisfaction	Jeans give me confidence.	.753	4.008	26.719	.892
	Jeans make me look slim.	.710			
	Jeans are good for my age.	.680			
	Jeans are comfortable.	.676			
	Jeans make me look young.	.663			
	Jeans match my image	.659			
Design	Jeans never go out of style	.615	2.427	42.899	.808
	Design is appropriate for my age.	.805			
	Crotch length is good.	.802			
Mobility	Jeans emphasizes strength of my body and hide weakness.	.631	2.205	57.597	.748
	I enjoy wearing jeans.	.753			
	Jeans are good for movements and actions.	.722			
Practicality	The position of the waist is good.	.645	1.994	70.894	.753
	Jeans are durable.	.877			
	I like the material.	.713			

group (refer to Table 4).

**Table 4.**  
Cluster analysis

	Social psychological satisfaction	Design	Mobility	Practicality
Low-interest group	3.98	3.51	3.73	4.69
High-interest group	5.36	5.02	5.76	5.86

**Table 5.**  
Factor analysis of clothing benefits pursued

Factor	Items	Factor loadings	Eigen value	Variance cumulative(%)	Reliability (α)
Pursuing conformity/ brand	I select brands with caution because clothes represent my image.	.726	2.492	15.58	.711
	I rather buy one item of famous brand than several items with no brand.	.680			
	I like clothes showing that it is name brand.	.641			
	I dress in such a way of most people.	.585			
	Labels of clothes are important in representing my image.	.568			
Pursuing attractiveness of appearance	I like to wear clothes that reveal contour of my body.	.760	1.931	27.65	.683
	I make efforts to create an impression that I dress well.	.759			
	I care about how I dress in order to look attractive.	.727			
Pursuing economy	I consider price most in purchasing clothes.	.741	1.878	39.38	.540
	I rather buy several cheap pieces than one expensive piece.	.684			
	I do not purchase unless it is on sale.	.651			
Pursuing trendiness	I buy clothes that feel fit and comfortable.	.752	1.735	50.22	.606
	I make a purchase if it is in style despite that it is uncomfortable.	.749			
	I make a purchase if it looks good on me despite that it is uncomfortable.	.607			
Pursuing scarcity	I no longer wear clothes that are worn by everybody else.	.804	1.576	60.07	.564
	I like clothes that are high in scarcity.	.702			

From factor analysis of clothing benefits pursued, five factors were extracted: Pursuing conformity/brand, pursuing attractiveness of appearance, pursuing economy, pursuing trendiness, and pursuing scarcity (Refer to Table 5).

### Group difference by interest in jeans

In order to characterize consumers who have high interest in jeans, group differences are examined. As seen in Table 6, clothing benefits pursued, body satisfaction, obesity, and purchase behavior was compared. Among the five clothing benefits pursued, the high-interest group rated conformity/brand reputation, scarcity, and attractiveness of appearance significantly higher than the low-interest group.

**Table 6.**  
Group differences in clothing benefits pursued

Clothing benefits pursued	Group	n	M(SD)	F(P)
Conformity/brand reputation	Low-interest group	114	3.5667(1.05257)	4.563(.034*)
	High-interest group	124	3.8597(1.06136)	
Scarcity	Low-interest group	114	3.5614(1.39554)	4.035(.046*)
	High-interest group	124	3.9274(1.41233)	
Attractiveness of appearance	Low-interest group	114	3.5760(1.00665)	11.570(0.001**)
	High-interest group	124	4.0618(1.18052)	
Trendiness	Low-interest group	114	2.5585(1.09391)	1.234(.268)
	High-interest group	124	2.7151(1.07924)	
Economy	Low-interest group	114	3.7222(1.08618)	.212(.646)
	High-interest group	124	3.6586(.09400)	

\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$

Low and high interest groups did not differ in obesity and body satisfaction. Group differences were found in time of recent purchase, purchase price, number of jeans owned, and frequency of wearing jeans. The high-interest group purchased jeans more recently, spent more on buying jeans, and wore jeans more frequently. No difference emerged in the number of jeans purchased during the last year and the duration of wearing the current jeans. In other words, middle-aged women's interest in jeans was not related to obesity, body satisfaction, or the frequency of actual wearing. Instead, it correlated with social psychological benefits that clothing provides, such as conformity, brand reputation, scarcity, and attractiveness of appearance. The interest in jeans thus leads to continual purchase of jeans at a higher price. Although middle-aged women attributed the reason for not wearing jeans anymore to body change associated with aging, the results suggest that they no longer wear jeans because they do not fit comfortably not because they no longer have interest in jeans. Those who pursue conformity, name brands, exclusivity, and attractiveness through appearance continue to have interest in jeans. The results are sum-

marized in Table 7.

**Table 7.**  
Group differences in body satisfaction, obesity (BMI), purchasing, and wearing jeans

Item	Group	N	M(SD)	F(P)
Body satisfaction	Low-interest group	114	3.18(1.686)	.649(.421)
	High-interest group	124	3.01(1.684)	
Obesity (BMI)	Low-interest group	114	22.42(2.523)	.159(.691)
	High-interest group	124	22.29(2.564)	
Number of jeans purchase during last 1 year	Low-interest group	114	0.76(2.29)	3.460(0.064)
	High-interest group	124	1.31(2.10)	
Time of last purchase	Low-interest group	114	2.32(1.24)	9.290(.003**)
	High-interest group	124	1.84(1.17)	
Price paid	Low-interest group	114	1.61(0.80)	4.138(.0043*)
	High-interest group	124	1.85(1.00)	
Number of jeans owned	Low-interest group	114	2.82(1.38)	23.639(.000***)
	High-interest group	124	3.68(1.35)	
How often one wears jeans	Low-interest group	114	3.56(5.165)	21.105(.000***)
	High-interest group	124	7.07(6.474)	
How long one wears jeans	Low-interest group	113	3.83(1.164)	.285(.594)
	High-interest group	124	3.75(1.194)	

\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$

### Conclusions

Middle-aged women purchase jeans mostly at outlet stores, and they are least likely to buy jeans on Internet shopping sites because they were educated before personal computers and the Internet were available and adopted in everyday life. They were particularly concerned with fit of the crotch and waist area. Therefore, brick-and-mortar store in which they can try the jeans on with the help of salesperson is the best shopping channel for middle-aged women. The result that they prefer outlet store (i.e., the reluctance to paying full price for jeans) can be interpreted as a negative outlook on jeans market for this age group. However, it also can also indicate that consumers are not willing to pay full price because they are not satisfied with the current market offerings.

The four factors of evaluation of jeans (i.e., social psychological satisfaction, design, mobility, and practicality) are different from the factors identified in the study on teenage consumers and women in their twenties. In Koo's (2000) study, aesthetics, symbolism, and practicality were extracted. Practicality

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and design (i.e., aesthetics) were common in both studies. However, jeans as status symbol was not extracted as evaluation criterion for middle-aged women. Instead social psychological satisfaction was extracted. It suggests that social psychological satisfaction functions as an evaluation criterion, with little indication that jeans signal status among middle-aged women.

Although middle-aged women do not purchase or wear jeans frequently, the results illustrated that middle-aged female consumers can be segmented according to their interest in jeans. Considering that respondents answered that they stopped wearing jeans as their body changed, one might expect that middle-aged women who wear jeans are more satisfied with their current body or less concerned with obesity. However, this study showed that body change was not associated with wearing jeans. The characteristics of the high-interest group have positive implications on jean markets. Those who are fond of jeans actually pay more and wear jeans more frequently. More importantly, they care about their appearance. Namely, they tend to care about what others wear and they seek attractiveness and scarce products. Therefore, this group of middle-aged consumers has potential to grow as one of the major target markets for jeans.

Middle-aged women wear jeans for aesthetic reason as well as practical reason. They consider jeans for travel or public appearance, such as shopping, which is similar to young consumers. The results imply that jeans can also be a major tool for middle-aged consumers pursuing conformity to name brands, attractiveness, or uniqueness in appearance.

Along with an effort to develop jean pants pattern that is appropriate for changing body, brands need to make more efforts to obtain high brand equity rather than to pursue low price or trendiness. The study suggests that it is critical to develop marketing and promotion strategies that will satisfy the important clothing benefits that middle-aged women pursue: emphasizing uniqueness or scarcity of design or delivering a message that jeans are the means of obtaining attractive appearance for middle-aged women. The current market offerings of jeans for these consumers are limited in terms of brand and style selection. To address the appearance-related benefits and values pursued by consumers who have stable purchasing power, new brand positioning and strategies need to be developed.

As seen from the success of American denim brand “Not Your Daughter’s Jean” for middle-aged women, brands that have exclusive image and different products are needed for Korean consumers. The current study found that jean markets for middle-aged women would grow if jean product design and marketing strategies were aligned to address body changes, conformity, brand reputation, scarcity, and attractiveness through appearance and if such jean products were more accessible in brick-and-mortar environment in Korea.

The limitation of the study is that the sample was not representative of middle-aged women in Korea; specifically, region, age, and other demographic variables of the sample were skewed. Thus, the results should be interpreted with caution. Another limitation is that the scales measuring jeans and clothing benefits pursued were developed mostly for young consumers. Despite that, the study aimed to investigate the growth in non-traditional jeans market. Further research with better measurements targeting middle-aged women is necessary.

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