



Cross-cultural study of obesity regarding socio-cultural attitudes on appearance involvement and appearance management behaviors through clothing: 20s-30s female plus-size consumers

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Socio-cultural attitudes on obesity differently influence on formation of individual person's body image, attitudes, and appearance management and involvement. Recently consumer market research on young female plus-size consumers clearly shows the increasing population of obesity and the changing social perception on the plus-size market from being negative to being somewhat positive. Thus, the consumption behavior of plus-size consumers also positively changed accordingly. Clothing is no more a means to cover up or hide their bodies only for a functional reason. They tend to purchase not only expensive but also attractive apparel products, which are aesthetically pleasing and fashionable.

In this study, the researchers intended to study cross-cultural differences and similarities of appearance management and involvement regarding social and cultural attitudes toward obesity. A survey was conducted through on-line survey companies in Korea and the United States respectively for the 6 weeks in the summer of 2013. The questionnaire was first developed in Korean and translated into English, and back translated to ensure the correctness of the translation. Data from 673 female respondents in their 20s-30s who had a previous experience of purchasing plus-size products were used for the statistical analysis in this study. Factor analysis, t-test, frequency analysis, multiple regression and path analysis were conducted with SPSS 18.0 in the study. Specific empirical results are as follows.

First, factor analysis for the socio-cultural attitudes toward obesity resulted in three main factors: 'Longing for the ideal body (also called internalization)', 'negative self-perception of obesity', and 'positive self-perception of obesity'. Results of t-test of the two cultures showed significant differences between them. Interestingly enough Korean consumers were more aware of obesity as being negative compared to their US counterparts. They showed more tendency of 'longing for the ideal body' than their US counterparts. Although BMI value (obesity index) of U.S. consumers (mean= 33.08) were significantly higher ($t = -16.29$, $p = .000$) than Korean consumers (mean=26.23), their stress being overweight was lower than Korean consumers. Korean consumers had more stress being overweight, which appeared significantly higher than American consumers ($t = 6.616$, $p = .000$). Regarding the body satisfaction, both the U.S. and

Korean consumers were low but the US consumers were significantly higher ($t = -11.247$, $p = .000$).

Second, Korean consumers tended to have more 'consciousness in obesity', and both Korean and US consumers showed more 'interests in clothes' than 'interests in appearance'. Especially, American consumers showed high 'interests in fashion orientation' than Korean counterparts although there was no significant difference in 'clothing dependency'.

Third, stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine how cross cultural differences of socio-cultural attitudes toward obesity affect appearance management behaviors through clothing with a mediator of appearance involvement. For Korean consumers two factors, 'longing for ideal body' and 'negative self-perception of obesity,' significantly affected 'consciousness in obesity' but 'interests in clothes' and 'interests in appearance' were influenced only by 'longing for ideal body' significantly. By the path analysis 'clothing dependency' was a significant path to both 'consciousness in obesity' and 'interests in clothes'. 'Fashion orientation' was a direct path to 'longing for ideal body' and two other factors, 'interests in appearance' and 'interests in clothes'.

For US consumers both 'longing for ideal body' and 'negative self-perception of obesity', significantly affected 'consciousness in obesity', and 'longing for ideal body' affected 'interests in appearance' while 'negative self-perception of obesity' negatively affected it. 'Longing for ideal body' and 'positive self-perception of obesity' also affected 'interests in clothes' and 'interests in appearance'. 'Negative self-perception of obesity' and 'longing for ideal body' directly affected 'clothing dependency' and 'fashion orientation' and there was a path between 'fashion orientation' and 'interests in appearance' and 'interests in clothes' but not with 'consciousness in obesity'.

In conclusion, this study confirmed that the socio-cultural attitudes of obesity clearly affect plus-size consumers' appearance involvement and appearance management behaviors through clothing cross-culturally. For example, Korean consumers perceived obesity as being negative due to its own social and cultural attitudes toward obesity. Therefore, it caused them to have more stress on being obese compared to their US counterparts. On the other hand, US consumers had more positive perception on obesity although they are more obese in reality than Korean consumers due to its social and cultural attitudes toward obesity. They have more positive and proactive appearance management and clothing behavior expressing who they are naturally. It is imperative for marketers clearly understand their consumers' unique social and cultural environment first to provide products meet the needs and wants of their target consumers.