

Why Do Women Seek Physical Beauty?

: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Understand the Physical Beauty of East Asian Women¹

Sun-Woo Kim, Yuri Lee,

Seoul National University/ Research Institute of Human Ecology at SNU, South Korea

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INTRODUCTION:

Physical beauty has been a main research agenda of the social psychology of clothing. However, the body of research that has illustrated the main reasons that women seek physical beauty has been limited. This study examined what values are sought by women through their physical beauty. The physical beauty value, a new paradigm suggested by this research, is the value acquired through the improvement of physical beauty. As the cognition of beauty is affected by sociocultural contexts (Dion et al., 1990), the physical beauty value is also formulated based on cultural characteristics. This study selected Korean, Chinese and Japanese women in their 20s and 30s, and explored their physical beauty values with a cross-cultural approach. Through this perspective, this study discovered a common physical beauty value in East Asia and specific physical beauty values salient in each culture.

METHODOLOGY:

This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative research methods. First, a total of 10 focus group interviews were executed: three with 18 Korean females, four with 25 Chinese females, and three with 17 Japanese females. We facilitated the group dynamics using stimuli which were developed with images of beauties brought by FGI participants. We analyzed the qualitative data according to the 3 steps of the grounded theory as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). As a result of the primary analysis of the qualitative data, we could identify four value dimensions of Asian women's ultimate goal for managing their physical beauty. Specifically, we generated 12 items to measure the four values. Accordingly, to verify dimensionality and develop scales to measure the physical beauty value, a quantitative online survey was conducted with 600 respondents comprised of 200 females from each country. The quantitative data was analyzed through exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and reliability analysis with SPSS 19.0 and AMOS 18.0.

RESULTS:

As for the four values, the qualitative research revealed the similarity and dissimilarity of the dimensionality of the physical beauty value among the three countries. The three countries' females commonly mentioned 'Authenticity,' which means not to be made spuriously, not to be imitated easily, and not to be generated artificially. In contrast, specific values were emphasized by a certain country, distinguishing cultural differences. Korean women more frequently mentioned 'Superiority,' which means to have an intrinsic aura not to be found easily in women in general, to make other people exclaim with admiration, and to surpass others' beauty. Meanwhile, Chinese women more frequently mentioned 'Self-Improvement,' which means to improve themselves with advancing years, to transcend time and space despite aging, and to self-administer on a constant basis. Additionally, Japanese women mentioned a value that was the basis of another dimension, 'Individuality,' which means to distinguish themselves from others, to create diverse styles and images, and to have a uniqueness that is not prevalent.

A subsequent quantitative study verified the dimensionality of the three countries' physical beauty values (refer to Table 1 and Figure 1). According to the result of the exploratory factor

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analysis and the confirmatory factor analysis of the 12 physical beauty value items, four factors were confirmed. Relevant validity and reliability indexes were also acceptable. The mean scores of each value dimension showed the similar or dissimilar tendency of the respondents of the three countries toward the physical beauty value. Overall, ‘Authenticity’ showed the highest score across the countries, and ‘Self-Improvement’ was high for Korea and Japan, while ‘Individuality’ was high for China.

Table 1. The results of the qualitative data analysis and the exploratory factor analysis of the physical beauty values

Cultural attributes	Values	Items	Factor loading	Cronbach's α	
Universality	Authenticity	y1: have authentic beauty not to be made spuriously	.832	.684	
		y2: have authentic beauty not to be imitated easily by others	.796		
		y3: have natural beauty not to be generated artificially	.596		
Specialty	Superiority	y4: have superior beauty surpassing that of others	.823	.781	
		y5: have an intrinsic aura not to be found easily by women in general	.802		
		y6: have beauty that makes people exclaim with admiration	.661		
	Improvement	y7: have beauty transcending time and space despite aging	.810	.681	
		y8: have improved beauty with advancing years	.746		
		y9: self-administering constantly for beauty improvement	.588		
	Individuality	Individuality	y10: have individual beauty distinguished from that of others	.767	.783
			y11: have beauty creating diverse styles and images	.753	
			y12: have unique beauty that is not prevalent	.748	

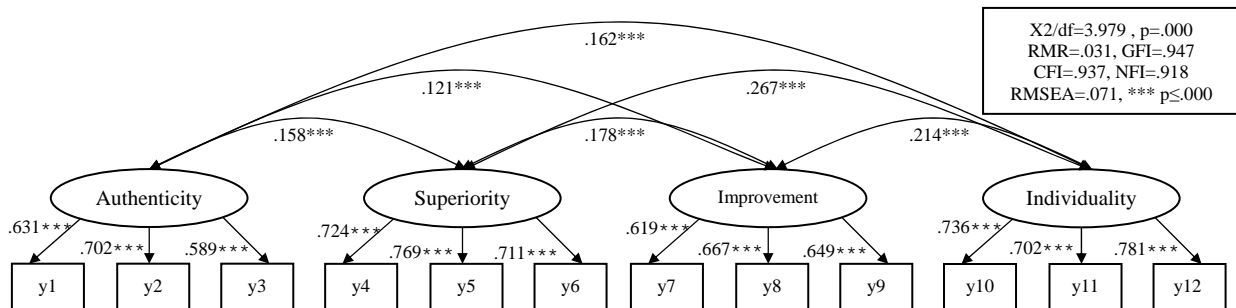


Figure 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Physical Beauty Values

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS :

This research is an exploratory approach to illustrate the physical beauty values sought by Korean, Chinese, and Japanese women. The physical beauty value could be a significant factor affecting women’s self-cognition, emotion, and physical appearance management in connection with sociocultural contexts. In future research, additional physical beauty values can be observed in another cultural context such as Western culture, as they are expected to be different from those of East Asian culture. Validity for the Physical Beauty Value scale will be strengthened by testing in diverse sociocultural situations in future research.

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