

Korean Immigrants and their Aesthetic Perspectives on Appearance

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Background and Context

Beginning in the late 1960s, mass immigration has increased the diversity of ethnic groups in American society (Alba & Nee, 2003). As the geography of U.S. immigrant population has shifted from Europe to Asia, Africa, and Latin America, a more favorable environment has been provided for nonwhite immigrants than in the past (Alba & Nee, 2003). Current immigrants think that cultural differences in society are valuable and express interest in maintaining their own cultural origins and cultural objects. Different values and views co-exist in contemporary American society. In spite of that, the individual immigrants of minority ethnic groups are likely to experience an acculturation or assimilation process, that is, as they enter into a new cultural environment, they learn and adopt cultural traits, norms, and values of the new dominant culture that are different from the ones where they were originally reared (Berry, 1997). As a result, immigrants experience attitudinal and behavioral changes in their everyday lives. As a learned attitude and behavior within a culture, apparel preference affects how we think about and behave toward our appearance (DeLong, 1998). Apparel preference changes based on aesthetic perception that is defined as learning about what is valued as an ideal and how people desire to look according to the dominant images of the time or place (DeLong, 1998). As immigrants learn and adopt the attitudes, behaviors, and values of the host culture, their appearance to some extent may emulate that of dominant group members. But, their appearance may also mark their status as a cultural minority (Gans, 1962). It is because both their culture of origin and the present culture they live in simultaneously influence their aesthetic experience, even if the culture of origin is not currently part of their experience (DeLong, 1998).

Our study indicates that immigrants in the U.S. experience some form of cultural change as they enter the new environment and as a consequence, their aesthetic experience is influenced. Appearance especially can be a key indicator of their aesthetic experience. Therefore, we explored what could influence immigrants' aesthetic perspectives on appearance and their resulting attitudes and behaviors.

Theoretical Framework and Method

According to the optimal distinctiveness model, individuals have two fundamental and opposing needs that govern the relationship between the self-concept and membership in social groups: the need for assimilation and inclusion, a desire for belonging that motivates immersion in social groups and the need for differentiation from others that operates in opposition to the need for immersion (Brewer, 2003). This model proposes that social identities are selected and activated to the extent that they help to achieve a balance between

needs for inclusion and for differentiation in a given social context (Brewer, 2003). We adopt this framework to determine how the experiences of immigrants in different cultural contexts influence their aesthetic perspectives, attitudes, or behaviors concerning appearance and how they balance their identities and memberships in these multiple contexts by way of their appearance. Thirty Korean immigrant women ranging in age from 23 to 58 years from a major city in the Midwestern United States were recruited for in-depth interviews by purposive sampling methods. Interviews were audio-recorded and interviewees' preferred dress was photographed that would be worn in their everyday lives in the host culture and on occasions within their Korean community.

Findings and Conclusions

We find that there are differences in how interviewees deal with their cultural change by means of their appearances at the individual level. Factors such as age, status, migration motivation, cultural distance (e.g., language), length of time, and socioeconomic attainment contributed to these differences among the interviewees. As a group, interviewees share common characteristics that can be identified from other ethnic groups. Especially their distinctive characteristics related to dress such as preference for national brands or price priority influenced their behavioral and attitudinal aspects about appearance.

Interviewees reported that their opinions about the appropriateness of appearance are divergent according to different cultural contexts. Assigning value, interest, effort, and behaviors for interviewees to constitute proper dress varied, depending on the cultural circumstance in which the individuals were located. Therefore, there was a conflict in the way they dress in their Korean community and in other communities. A majority of interviewees responded that they try to blend into their host culture by dressing casual and the reason being, they do not want to be marked as aliens by standing out in those contexts. On the other hand, they tend to dress up for their Korean communities in order to meet standards or norms of appearance because in Korean culture, dress is typically considered as an identifier of self, and people consider it to be beneficial to display their social achievements through their attire. By adjusting their appearance for their multiple lives, immigrants balance their needs to belong to multiple cultures as well as their needs to be differentiated as an individual.

Key References

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