

Consumer Culture in North Korea: The Cosmetic Usage Patterns and the Meaning of Make-Up in North Korea¹

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Abstract

This is an investigative study about consumer culture in North Korea, conducted by South Korean researchers in an attempt to better understand the quality of life in North Korea, in preparation for a possible unification of two nations in the future.

It has been more than 50 years since the separation of South and North Korea after the Korean War. With the recent development in the relationship between the South and the North, research intended to understand North Korea are now being conducted in various disciplines, Consumer Studies being no exception. South and North Korea have developed very different consumption cultures based on different economic and political systems that each nation has adopted, and from a viewpoint of South Korean researcher, the needs to analyze the difference in the meaning of consumption between South and North Korea is critical in order to understand the everyday life of North Korean consumers and households. North Korea has maintained its exclusivity from the world, and thus consumer culture in North Korea is virtually unknown. This study provides a rare opportunity to look into the lives of North Korean consumers.

This study explores a part of consumer culture in North Korea by investigating 1) the consumption environment in North Korea, 2) the cosmetic usage patterns of North Korean women, and the value of North Korean women regarding the consuming of cosmetics.

Data for this study was collected from April to September, 2001 using various methods. First, literature review of various publications, newspapers, magazines, reports of government organizations were performed and North Korean newspapers and novels were analyzed. Second, in-depth interviews of 10 North Korean defectors residing in South Korea were performed, either individually or in small groups. Third, in-depth interviews of 5 North Koreans were performed when researchers visited North Korea. Fourth, 10 North Koreans were observed in natural settings and 6 were further interviews afterward. Finally, a structured questionnaire was used to gather additional information from 20 other North Korean defectors residing in South Korea.

Some of findings of the study are:

1. Due to outburst of economic crisis in 1980's consumption environment in North Korea is rapidly changing and means other than rationing in order to obtain necessities are sought out by North Korean consumers.

2. Supply of cosmetics in North Korea is provided only by nationalized companies, and is limited in quantity, thus not for ordinary use. The distribution of cosmetic products is done by rationing and priorities are given to cities most visited by foreigners, or for women with occupations of facing foreigners. The usage of cosmetic products are largely effected by demographic factors.

3. An investigation of usage patterns of cosmetics in North Korea show that there is no open channel for information, and thus most of information search is done by WoM. Important decision factors include brand and country of origin, and Japanese, South Korean, and French products are preferred. Methods of purchase include rationing, active exchange for other commodities, private purchase at black markets, or Jangmadang. The price for cosmetic products in case of private purchase is extremely high, and almost equals average monthly wage of North Korean worker, and yet still demand for cosmetics were found to be very high. Since cosmetics are so expensive, North Korean women consumers are very frugal in their use of cosmetics.

4. Traditional value of beauty demanded of women (must look modest and docile) is still embedded in North Korean women, and make-up is viewed as a mean to make oneself more presentable to others, rather than to express oneself. The desire to seek external beauty and thus was found to be very strong, and so was their willingness to pay high price for quality products, as shown in the expression "Sell rice to buy cosmetics".

Although not conclusive, this study provides an initial look into the consumer culture in North Korea. It is hoped to generate interests among researchers about cultures less studies for various reasons. It

Endnotes

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