

An Examination of Elderly Female Consumers' Body Shapes, Activewear Preferences and Exercise Behavior

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Introduction. Elderly people, also known as “silver seniors,” have become a main force in the US market place (Thomas & Peters, 2009). There is increased attention to the elderly population as this market is growing rapidly (Hoffmann et al., 2012). One segment of the US apparel industry that has not benefited from growth in this population is the activewear industry. While overall sales of activewear apparel increased from 2016 to 2017, sales of activewear apparel specifically among older consumers decreased during the same timeframe (The NPD Group, 2018). These sales figures suggest that elderly consumers are perhaps dissatisfied with the activewear styles that are currently available in the marketplace. It is important for elderly consumers to remain active as regular exercise has been shown to improve quality of and extend life (Oaklander, 2018; Pressman & Cohen, 2005).

Individuals’ body shapes often change as they age due to certain factors, such as overeating, hormones, lack of exercise, or loss of height (Breslau, 2015). Thus, these changes influence their body satisfaction and dress behaviors (Schuler et al., 2014). Activewear that is currently available on the market may not be appealing to elderly consumers, particularly female consumers, and may discourage them from exercising. Understanding that clothing is directly related to one’s daily lifestyle, it is important to reveal how certain factors affect their behavior. However, there is little information about the elderly’s dress behaviors relating to activewear preferences and body shapes. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate body shapes, activewear preferences, and exercise behavior for elderly female consumers.

Literature Review. The clothing selection of elderly consumers is closely related to social status and the daily activities of these individuals (Chang & Rahman, 2015). Importantly, certain body shapes have an impact on personal clothing choices and body satisfaction (Schuler et al., 2014). Body shapes are defined by the dimensions of bust, waist, and hip and these shapes change (Kirkova, 2013). These shapes affect the elderly’s clothing choice and their clothing perception. Accordingly, it is necessary to understand body shapes as these are related to clothing choices and body satisfaction for the aging society.

As people get older, their body sizes and shapes change because the skeleton system deforms and metabolism changes (Janelle, 2018). Even though body shape change is natural as people age, exercising can delay the process. Clothing has significant functions, such as building self-confidence (Johnson & Lennon, 2014). Activewear choices can be related to healthy lifestyle, body image, and exercise facilitation (Zhou et al., 2018). Positive perceptions of

activewear may explain participation in healthy lifestyles and exercise behaviors. Thus, it is important to understand body shapes of older female consumers in relation to activewear preferences and exercise behavior. Furthermore, we are applying Sheldon's body type theory (i.e., each body type has distinct physical and metabolic characteristics) (Yates & Taylor, 1978).

Methodology. This study employed a quantitative survey method. A questionnaire and images of activewear choices were developed. For the activewear choices, 4 (length) x 2 (fit) choices for both tops and pants were given to participants. The colors of tops and pants were controlled. For sleeve length, options included 1) long sleeves; 2) three-quarter length sleeves; 3) short sleeves; and 4) sleeveless. For pant length, the options included 1) ankle length; 2) calf length; 3) knee length; and 4) shorts. For the fit of tops and the pants, options were 1) loose and 2) tight. The activewear style options were shown to participants. Then, they were asked to select their preferred sleeve length, pant length, and fit of tops and pants. The questionnaires also included items about their body shapes. Participants were asked to respond to the seven body type pictures (i.e., inverted triangle, lean column, rectangle, apple, trainable, neat hourglass, full hourglass) and select the one that resembled their body shape. The questionnaire also contained items to assess participants' exercise behavior, perceived age, chronological age, and other demographic information. A total of 279 individuals from a Qualtrics panel completed the questionnaire, which yielded 242 usable questionnaires that were used for further descriptive data analyses.

Findings. The participants' ages ranged from 66 to 99 and the average age was 70. We found that 36% of participants marked apple shape as their body shape. The next biggest proportions of body shape of participants were rectangle (16%) and full hourglass (16%). Elderly female consumers preferred the loose/short sleeve tops (55%), followed by loose/three-quarter sleeve (14.3%), and loose/long sleeve (9.7%) (Figure 1).

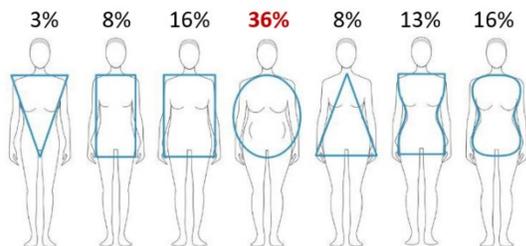


Figure 1. Body Shapes of Participants

Regarding the pants, they preferred loose/ankle length pants (37.5%), followed by loose/knee length pants (15%), loose/calf (14.6%), and tight/ankle (14.6%). Overall, elderly consumers preferred loose fits for both tops and the bottoms. Regarding the length, they preferred the short sleeves for the tops and selected long pants for activewear. Interestingly, most of the participants said they would wear what they wear for activewear for their daily life activities as well. Regarding the exercise behavior, 67% of participants said they exercise about three times a week. Only 6 participants (2.5%) answered that they don't exercise at all. This finding shows the active involvement in exercise of elderly consumers.

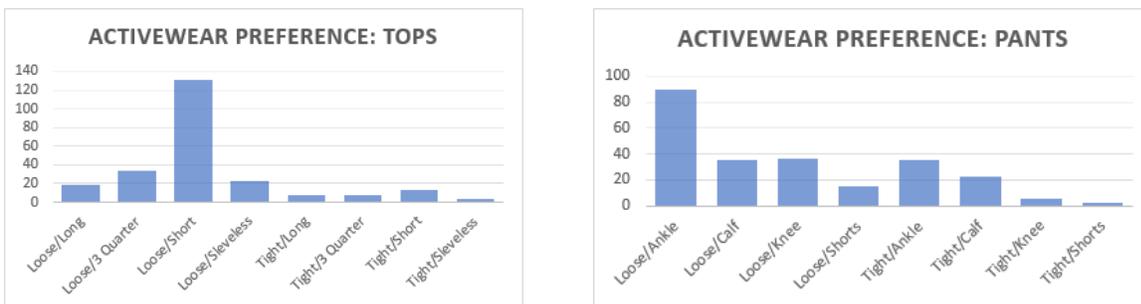


Figure 2. Activewear Preferences of Participants

Discussion and Implications. We found that most of the elderly female consumers perceived their body shape as apple shape. They predominantly preferred loose fitting short sleeved tops and long pants for activewear. This may be related to body shape changes or comfortability. It could also be related to modesty as the participants indicated that they wore their activewear for other daily activities as well. Regarding exercise behavior, they are actively involved in exercise and this show the importance of activewear design suitable for the elderly population. For further research, it would be necessary to investigate the relationships among body shapes, activewear preferences, and exercise behavior.

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