

An Exploratory Study of Immoral Consumer Behavior: Apparel Retail Salespeople's Perspectives⁺

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify apparel consumers' immoral shopping behaviors from apparel retail sales associates' perspectives. As a first step to understand immoral consumer behaviors in apparel retail setting, the study took an exploratory approach using five focus-group interviews with 35 apparel salespeople.

The immoral behavior of fashion (product) consumers was divided into two categories: one was the immoral behavior associated with the product, and the other was the immoral behavior relative to the consumer. The immoral behavior associated with the product was classified into three types: shoplifting, inappropriate returns, and damaging to merchandise. Immoral behavior relative to the consumer was classified into two types: abusive behavior by a consumer toward sales associates and excessive demand. Although, shoplifting was the primary immoral behavior mentioned by all interview participants, most sales associates failed to recognize shoplifting as a serious criminal behavior. Another commonly mentioned immoral consumer behaviors was retail borrowing, which may pose serious problems to the fashion industry.

The findings of this study will provide a basis for approaches that may help decrease immoral consumer behavior at fashion retail stores and provide a basis for developing materials for consumer education over the long term.

Key Words : immoral behavior, shoplifting, retail borrowing, returns

I . Introduction

Though immoral behavior of companies or consumers may bring benefits over the short term, it ultimately has a negative impact on the

mutual trust and trade. Therefore, it is necessary to have discussions on the immoral behavior of consumers and companies. As consumers are more empowered and companies have increasing social responsibility, there have been vigorous

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discussions regarding the immoral behaviors of sellers or companies, and various measures have been taken to protect the right of consumers who are relatively vulnerable or disadvantaged. Meanwhile, the immoral behaviors of consumers have yet to be actively discussed. However, there has been growing interest recently in the research on the moral consciousness and immoral behaviors of global consumers, as issues have been raised as to copyright and trademarks.

There are frequent news reports of consumer misconduct in the media. Especially in the case of fashion products, various immoral behaviors have been observed in many different phases, such as product planning, production, distribution, and consumption. For example, plagiarism in design that copies the design or the product of others, replication, sales, theft in shops, and others have taken place. Specifically, fashion products that are not very large and that stimulate the purchase desires of consumers are often objects of shoplifting. Though some shoplifting cases of fashion products are reported in the media, most incidents are not reported, and shoplifters who are caught are often released at the store level¹⁾, which suggests that shoplifting may be more serious than what is actually known.

Home-shopping companies have been confronted with high rates of returns from consumers. Specifically, fashion products are much more likely to be returned than any others. The high rate of returns of home-shopping products may be attributable to the fact that consumers can request the return of their purchase without any face-to-face dealings, and most of them can be returned within the period of the product return. Because such home-shopping fashion products can easily be

returned, products that have been tried on or damaged are often returned.

Although there are many research papers associated with immoral consumer behavior in other countries, few studies have been conducted on the immoral behavior of fashion product consumers in Korea²⁾³⁾⁴⁾. Specifically, most research in Korea has targeted general consumers by focusing on shoplifting or counterfeit purchasing, and as a consequence, the overall aspect of immoral consumer behavior at fashion retail stores has not been considered extensively. This study intends to examine the immoral behavior of fashion product consumers from the standpoint of salespeople at retail stores, where consumer consumption occurs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the immoral behavior of consumers at fashion retail stores from the viewpoint of people working in the fashion retail industry.

II. Related Research

1. Consumer immoral behavior

Much research has been conducted on the ethics of marketers/companies, while little has examined the ethics of consumers. Indeed, consumers are often portrayed as being taken advantage of by marketers rather than committing immoral behaviors themselves. To maintain a profitable marketer and consumer relationship, it is important for both marketers and consumers to behave ethically. However, consumers do not always behave so. Davis⁵⁾ found that 95% of consumers referred to their consumer rights, while only 74% accepted their responsibility as a consumer.

Researchers investigated immoral consumer behavior as unethical⁶⁾ consumer behavior,

non-normative consumer behavior⁷⁾, or consumer misbehavior⁸⁾. Vitell, Lumpkin, and Tawwas⁹⁾ presented four categories of unethical consumer behavior, based on two standards: the activeness of receiving benefits, and the illegality of the action. The four groups include: a) consumers actively receiving benefits from their illegal activities; b) consumers passively receiving benefits at the expense of others; c) consumers actively receiving benefits from questionable actions; and d) no harm/no foul. These four types were used as a theoretical framework in other research studies¹⁰⁾¹¹⁾. Fullerton and Punji¹²⁾ named consumer behavior that violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in the consumption process as consumer misbehavior, and theoretically categorized consumer misbehavior into five types: misbehavior directed against marketer employees (e.g., verbal or physical abuse of marketer employees) directed against marketer merchandise (e.g., shoplifting) directed against other consumers (e.g., illegitimate use of express checkout lines) directed against marketers' financial assets (e.g., failure to report billing errors favorable to consumers) and directed against marketers' physical premises (e.g., vandalism). They suggest that consumer misbehavior is not a single construct rather, they explain five types of consumer misbehavior with three conceptual dimensions: the nature of the act, the type and degree of disruption, and the reaction by marketers and other consumers.

Although some research indicates that consumers' immoral behaviors are affected by consumer individual characteristics, including age, sex, or religious beliefs, the outcomes are not consistent. Generally younger female consumers tend to have the tendency to behave morally¹³⁾¹⁴⁾¹⁵⁾. However, Kim and Lee¹⁶⁾ found

that consumers in their 30s-40s tend to behave morally compared to younger consumers, and found no gender differences. Previous studies have also found that most shoplifters have had the money to purchase the merchandise they stole, indicating that economic reasons are not the main reason for shoplifting. Psychological factors, such as a sensation-seeking tendency, a feeling of accomplishment, and compulsive shopping tendencies also affect shoplifting¹⁷⁾. Especially for teenagers, peer pressure or competitive psychology is the major reason for shoplifting¹⁸⁾¹⁹⁾.

2. Immoral behaviors of fashion consumers

Although there is not much research on general consumer immoral behavior in the fashion industry, areas including counterfeiting or shoplifting have been investigated by many researchers. Shoplifting is one of the most prevalent crimes in the apparel-retail industry. In Europe, 48% of retail shrinkage is attributed to shoplifting²⁰⁾. Shoplifting is categorized into two types by the committers: consumer or employee. Shoplifting is usually indicated as consumer shoplifting. However, there are no official statistics regarding shoplifting in Korea. Results provided from Noh²¹⁾'s survey shows that 30% of the teenagers participating in the study indicated that they had shoplifted indicating that shoplifting frequently occurs among teenagers. Although consumers indicated that they perceived shoplifting as negative behavior, they did not consider shoplifting as a "real" crime. Noh also found that shoplifters often go free after they return the product to the store. Lee and Lee²²⁾ found that 17% of high school students indicated that they have purchased fashion items, and those students who shoplifted had a tendency toward a hedonic or

compulsive shopping orientation they also tended to have shoplifting experience.

Counterfeits are defined as reproduced copies that are identical to the legitimate articles, including packaging, trademarks, and labeling²³⁾²⁴⁾. Despite the efforts of legislation and many organizations to reduce counterfeiting, counterfeits continue to persist in the marketplace. The World Customs Organization estimates that counterfeits account for 5 to 7 percent of global merchandise trade²⁵⁾. There appears to be a demand for counterfeit goods, as evidenced by their growth in the marketplace, and the fact that some consumers knowingly purchase counterfeit items²⁶⁾. A few researchers have investigated Korean consumers' counterfeit purchasing behavior. Researchers have found that the majority of participants in their studies had experience in purchasing counterfeits²⁷⁾²⁸⁾. Lee and Shin²⁹⁾ found that more than 50% of the participants had experience in purchasing counterfeits, and the main reasons for purchasing counterfeits were low price and product design. They also found that counterfeit purchasers had higher materialism and hedonic shopping values than those who had not purchased one. Yu and Lee³⁰⁾ also found that 84% of they surveyed had purchased fashion counterfeit merchandise and the main reason reported for Korean consumers to repeatedly purchase counterfeits was low prices, combined with the idea that counterfeits were almost the same quality as the genuine products. They also found that participants who had a high tendency to engage in conspicuous consumption and those who had a luxury-oriented self-concept tended to shop for counterfeits.

Piron and Young³¹⁾ explored the other type of immoral behavior: "retail borrowing" behavior. It occurs when consumer returned a non-defective

merchandise for a refund subsequent to its use for a specific purpose. They found that 18% of they investigated had experience of product borrowing and most (98%) of the borrowed products were apparel items. Social needs (e.g., to attend a wedding) was the main reasons of product borrowing, followed by economic needs (e.g., High prices and low income). About one-third of the respondents sought to rationalize their product borrowing behavior or even blamed store policy, while about 25% expressed guilt.

While research investigated fashion consumer immoral behaviors in Korea investigated shoplifting or counterfeit purchasing area, the overall aspect of immoral consumer behavior at fashion stores has not been investigated extensively. Therefore, this study intends to examine the overall immoral behavior of fashion product consumers from the standpoint of salespeople at retail stores, where consumer consumption occurs.

III. Methods

1. Research Questions

The research questions of this study is what is the concept and facets(or dimensions) of the consumer's immoral behavior in fashion retail setting from sales associates' perspectives.

2. Focus group interview

Since the research problem was to explore the extent and nature of consumer immoral behavior in fashion retail setting, focus group interview method was used. Focus groups have been recognized as a research technique for clinical, exploratory or phenomenological studies in which

the shared experiences of a group of people are of interest³²⁾. Focus group interview offer insights that cannot be gathered through other forms of qualitative research method such as personal interview or quantitative research methods.

Five focus group interviews, with seven each,

were conducted during weekday evenings with salespeople of at least 6 months of fashion retail experiences. Focus groups provide the best results when composed of people who are reasonably homogeneous and who are unfamiliar with each other; therefore the researcher selected relatively homogeneous groups of participants

<Table 1> Characteristics of Interview Participants

Group	Participants' number	Sex	Age	Retail store type	Working Experience (year)
A	A1	F	23	street franchise store(road shop)	3
	A2	F	22	street franchise store(road shop)	1
	A3	F	27	street franchise store(road shop)	5
	A4	F	20	street specialty store	2
	A5	F	20	street specialty store	1
	A6	F	25	street franchise store(road shop)	5
	A7	F	23	street franchise store(road shop)	1.5
B	B1	F	20	street specialty store	1
	B2	M	22	street franchise store(road shop)	2
	B3	M	22	street franchise store(road shop)	1.5
	B4	M	27	street franchise store(road shop)	3
	B5	F	25	street franchise store(road shop)	2
	B6	F	25	street franchise store(road shop)	2
	B7	F	20	street specialty store	0.5
C	C1	F	28	department store	4
	C2	F	30	department store	5
	C3	F	32	department store	7
	C4	F	31	department store	3.5
	C5	F	23	department store	4
	C6	F	21	department store	1
	C7	F	26	department store	2
D	D1	F	22	street franchise store(road shop)	2
	D2	F	21	street franchise store(road shop)	3
	D3	F	19	street franchise store(road shop)	1
	D4	F	23	discount store	1
	D5	F	26	discount store	6
	D6	M	24	street franchise store(road shop)	4
	D7	M	23	street franchise store(road shop)	2
E	E1	F	22	street specialty store	2
	E2	F	25	street specialty store	3
	E3	F	20	street specialty store	1
	E4	F	20	street franchise store(road shop)	0.5
	E5	F	30	street franchise store(road shop)	8
	E6	F	29	street franchise store(road shop)	5
	E7	F	25	street franchise store(road shop)	2

in terms of retail sales experience and who are not acquainted with each other (see <Table 1>).

Each interviews lasted for an hour and a half on average. Interview was facilitated by an experienced moderator and a discussion protocol was prepared by the researcher based on the review of previous research about consumer immoral behavior. Prior to the start of the focus group interview, the moderator explained the purpose and procedures of the interview session. A semi-structured questionnaire was used, in which the moderator followed a topic guide that allowed an exploration of issues at the moderator's discretion as they arose. The questions focused on the following areas: 1) What is your experience of consumer's immoral behavior in the fashion retail store?; 2) what does consumer immoral behavior in fashion retail store mean to you?; and 3) what is your (or stores) reaction toward consumer immoral behavior.

3. Data analysis

The five focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed to text form. The transcriptions were analyzed, as suggested by Krueger³³⁾. First, the researchers read the transcripts to acquire a feel for the data. Then, recurring themes that related to the study's objectives were identified. In order to enhance the reliability of the analysis, descriptions were analyzed by researcher and a research assistant.

The results from the two analyzers were compared and were discussed to reconcile any differences that exist. For the manuscript, quoted transcription were translated to English by professional translator.

IV. Results

1. Types of immoral behavior related to product

The immoral consumer behaviors relative to products were classified into shoplifting, retail borrowing, and immoral returns.

1) Shoplifting

Shoplifting, which refers to secretly carrying the product out of the shop without paying for it, was considered the most serious type of consumer behavior at fashion shops. Most participants of this research experienced shoplifting or had experience in which they were suspicious of shoplifting. Participants indicated that most of the shoplifters they dealt with were amateur shoplifters who stole items to satisfy their needs. They also pointed out that adolescents tended to shoplift with friends compared to adult shoplifters. Participants agreed that most consumers do not shoplift because of economic reasons. They pointed out that most consumers steal merchandise, even though they have enough money to purchase the items.

Not often, but once in a while, shoplifting occurs in the store I work. It is a very delicate situation. We do not want to wrongly accuse customers of shoplifting. In many cases, they (shoplifters) are just ordinary housewives or college students (A6).

It seems to me that they are not shoplifting because they do not have money. They are just normal people on the surface. They are never demented or habitual shoplifters. They may shoplift because they are keen to have the clothes. The other day, a middle-aged woman

was caught after having stolen clothes that was not her size at all. They shoplift even if they have money in their purse (E5).

...adolescents tend to steal with friends. It may not be because they have no money. They seem not to think seriously when they are caught and just say that they would pay for the product that they stole. They have money. Well...they may steal for fun (B2).

Though shoplifters are often identified on the scene, the loss of products are found during stocktaking, which implies that much of the shoplifting remains unidentified.

On the very day when a new product was shipped to the store, it was lost. It was thought that the product was simply lost in the shop, as it was very busy. A few days later, a person came in with that product that was lost that he claimed to have purchased at our store and asked for an exchange (D7).

Most shoplifters steal fashion items from stores by hiding them in a bag or in their shopping bag. Oftentimes, they merely sneak out of the shop in shoes or clothes which they have put on in the dressing room. Specifically, small accessories or clothes are main targets of shoplifting, and shops that target adolescents or young people see shoplifting more often. Participants also indicated that shoplifting occurs more often in stores when they are packed with customers.

Accessories are easily sneaked out of the shop. They steal small items like T-shirts, leaving only the hanger behind. It is hard to monitor when the shop is busy and crowded

with customers... We cannot rely on CCTV completely. It cannot identify students in similar school uniforms... We tried, but we have never caught shoplifters (A3).

I pay more attention to customers with a large bag or a shopping bag. Specifically, some customers pretend to browse clothes in the stall and put them instantly in their bags or shopping bags. It's very hard to ask them to open their bags to check unless you have seen them putting such stolen items in. Sometimes, security spots such action earlier than we do (C2).

From time to time, consumers sneak out wearing the clothes that they have put on in the dressing room. In particular, during the sale period, there are consumers sneaking out of the dressing room with merchandise and are not spotted at all because the store is very busy and crowded with people (C4).

Though most shoplifting involves consumers, some participants mentioned the seriousness of shoplifting committed by sales associates at the retail store, which suggests that further studies are needed on employee theft in the fashion retail industry.

I saw a sales associate go out during break with wrapped new clothes in her shopping bag, and asked one of her friends in a nearby store to keep that clothes until she finished her work. Then she brought that item to her home and never returned it. That sort of thing happened very often, and later, the owner of the store found out about it...However, that sales associate was allowed to stay because it was very hard to hire a new sales associate in this industry (E2).

I heard that sales associates at department stores accumulate an enormous amount of mileage of customers into their own account or income deduction receipt if the customers pay in cash. (C4).

Fashion retail stores install surveillance systems such as CCTV or anti-theft devices to prevent shoplifting. However, because of the extra cost of installing and maintaining surveillance systems or preventive device conflict with merchandise characteristics, many stores do not use surveillance equipment or anti-theft devices. In fact, some sales associates expressed some concern about using this equipment. It was pointed out that it would be more effective for sales associates to pay closer attention to consumers in fashion retail stores.

(Stores) do not attach Wafers (anti-theft device) because they are afraid that the clothes may be damaged... It is hard to prevent shoplifting or to catch shoplifters. So, all we can do may be to just leave it as it is...There seems to be no way to prevent shoplifting, except putting sales associates close to the stalls or making them respond to any sign of shoplifting swiftly (D2).

You can approach the customer if you saw the shoplifting incident. But it is hard in other situations... So if they are suspicious, before something happens, I approach the consumers and tell them the price or provide product information before they attempt to shoplift. (B4).

Although shoplifting is considered the most serious immoral consumer behavior, most shoplifters are released from the shop after they are caught. Participants pointed out the difficulty

to treat shoplifters officially because shoplifters are also their customers and retailers are more concerned about long-term customer relations. Specifically, adolescent shoplifters just return the merchandise and are released. Adult shoplifters are often asked to purchase the merchandise that they attempt to steal, or such goods are merely recovered, except in department stores or large retailing shops.

Most shoplifters are normal housewives or company workers. They are not mentally deranged or habitual shoplifters. Sometimes, they are found to have money inside their purse. In that case, we just ask them to pay for the product (A4).

Retailers seem to handle shoplifting without raising much of a racket if the shoplifter is caught and the shoplifted product is recovered. They cannot make even the shoplifter feel humiliated very much because of the relationship with the customer (D2).

2) Inappropriate Returns

(1) Retail borrowing

Retail borrowing refers to the return of non-defective products that customers return subsequently to its use for a specific purpose without any intention to purchase them³⁴⁾. From the focus group interview, many participants mentioned cases of retail borrowing and pointed out that this seems to be a serious problem, especially to the fashion retail industry. Specifically, customers often return high-priced suits or dresses immediately after they use them for special occasions. Previous research in other countries has found similar results, in that social events are the major cause of retail borrowing in

fashion stores.

Customers often return clothes during the graduation seasons. They seem to take a photo of the clothes by hiding the tag inside. The shop cannot help but exchange the product unless it is stained with a spot or cosmetics. Though I ask them whether they have worn the clothes, they just say that they have not. Recently, shops exchange or refund if customers just have second thoughts. So, they can wear the clothes, bring them back the next day to the shop, and get the refund (E6).

In some situations, a consumer who accomplishes a short-lasting, specific need with the merchandise (e.g., dress for a special occasion) exchanges the item for another with long-lasting satisfaction (e.g., casual day wear). This is very similar to the findings of Piron & Young³⁵⁾

In the children's wear section, customers sometimes buy formal dresses for the celebration of a baby's first birthday or musical concert and have their babies wear them for one day, and bring them back to the shop and exchange them with everyday comfortable clothes like T-shirt or jeans. We cannot say anything to them because it constitutes the exchange of a product if the clothes are not stained... I somewhat understand customers because children grow fast, and such formal dresses are put on just one to two times, but it is not easy on the part of stores (C2).

(2) Immoral returns

Immoral return refers to the situation in which consumers demand exchanges or refunds, even if the product has lost its "merchantability" and

cannot be returned because a long time has passed since the purchase, or the product has been damaged. Specifically, this problem has occurred very often in small specialty retail stores where the product cycle is very short and assortments of products change, depending on the wholesale store.

Some customers argue that the clothes have defects in their open or invisible area, though they must have put them on after purchasing them. In other words, they are just trying to find faults. Some even complain that they are not comfortable with the shoes even after they put them on after purchasing them. I do not mean that they have to put on the shoes just for one day or two days, but they have used the shoes to a degree that they have their soles worn away (D2).

Some bring clothes that they bought several years ago. It is all right to repair them, but they insist on an exchange. Some customers bring back clothes that were discolored after washing. Such problems come from mistake in washing them at home. They are not defective. However, customers insist that they are defective and sometimes file complaints with the Consumer Agency. Nearly all problems stem from mistakes on the part of consumers, but saying it in that way makes them feel offended (C3).

3) Damage to merchandise

It is considered an immoral behavior for customers not to inform shops of damage to products arising from acts of trying on fashion products or browsing them, pretending not to notice them or just getting away with such results. In particular, women's apparel is often stained with cosmetics when blouses or shirts

are tried on, and sometimes, the products are torn apart. Some customers inform the shop of such conditions, but most do not let shops know about them and simply leave the retail store. Retailers put tissues or handkerchiefs in dressing rooms for customers who try on tops. Sales associates indicated that since damaged products cannot be sold to consumers, it is also a serious problem for fashion retailers. Some small specialty store retailers indicated that they do not allow consumers to try on tops in their stores.

We ask customers to be careful when they try on T-shirts or tops if they put on makeup, but the products are stained with cosmetics from time to time. I find the clothes are stained with foundation or lipstick after customers just leave the store because they "do not like" the product...I think customers do not think that leaving a stain or tearing some parts are big problems. But for us... it is like shoplifting or old returns, because we cannot sell the stained items... (A3).

Shops put handkerchiefs or tissues alongside the products for use by customers, who put on makeup, in the dressing room.... (Retailers) check the product immediately after customers try them on to see whether the product is stained or not before the customers leave the shop (C5).

2. Immoral Behaviors Related to Consumers

1) Abusive behavior

Abusive behavior toward store employees and other consumers is rampant (e.g., Richins³⁶), and appears to be growing rapidly³⁷. As to immoral behaviors of customers that many sales

associates mentioned, participants pointed out that they found it difficult to put up with the rude way of speaking by customers or impolite verbal behavior of consumers, such as shouting or showing anger toward them. Specifically, they mentioned that many customers showed rude and abusive behavior if their demands (e.g., if the return of a damaged product) was not accepted, and they sometimes succeeded in making their demands accepted by resorting to such abusive behaviors toward sales associates.

Most customers at the shop are young students because this store attracts many adolescents. Nonetheless, they use crude language or swear at me if I say to them that the return cannot be accepted because it was already put on. If I repeatedly say that the return is not allowed, even the parents of those young customers call me and swear at me over the phone without reasoning. I feel these days it is very hard to deal with people (B1).

The company instructs that sales staffs should encourage customers to take the option of exchange, repair, and the purchase of other products in the first place if they demand return of their purchases. However, some customers get peevish and angry with me whenever I try to follow such instructions (D2).

Participants pointed out that some consumers use abusive behavior to acquire their demands from the store. Although the retail store has a store policy, if a consumer whose demands are not accepted by the retailer shows abusive verbal behavior or exhibit "rage" in stores, retailers tend to accept consumers' demands after all. The interviews revealed that the retailers accept much of the consumers' immoral

behavior toward the store employees. Many participants indicated the consumers' abusive behavior is the unhappiest experience among various consumer immoral behavior of being sales associates.

I understand customers, but it is somewhat difficult... Particularly, some customers get angry and say that they will call the headquarters... if I say to them that the products cannot be returned because they brought them in too late or they cannot be returned because they are final sale products that are not allowed to be returned. That is a situation that a sales staff cannot deal with. I just let the manager take over and work it out.

I can hardly stand the crude language and swearing by customers. I cannot respond to them in the same way because they're customers. They are much older than I, but they seem to behave in that way all the more because I deal with them kindly, even when they shout at me. The management just accepts what customers want if they continue to shout and raise a commotion, even if the product is not allowed to be refunded... If the refund is not allowed, it should not be allowed in the end, but the management hates the commotion and those who make their voices heard loudly win in the end (E7).

2) Excessive demand

The "excessive demand" occurs when customers have excessive demands for services or compensation when they are not satisfied with their purchase. It also includes consumers asking for more gifts, regardless of the condition of the promotion, when the retail store has the special promotion to give a free gift, or free

gifts on the special conditions of purchasing. Specifically, some customers make excessive demands of many different kinds in relation to giveaways at department stores. Participants mentioned that customers' demands to some degree can be accepted, but they pointed out that there are often cases when customers' demands exceed the level of moral consumer behavior.

These days, many customers try to take advantage of adverse publicity using the Internet. They threat to post their complaints on the Internet, and the headquarters try to handle such problems without raising a commotion because they are sensitive to such threats. Meanwhile, customers sometimes demand more than a refund. It seems to me that they want more if they get what they want once (D7).

Things have changed a lot, but they (customers) often ask to give separate receipts, as they want to get more giveaways at the department store...Some customers ask or demand stores to give remaining receipts if they do not have enough receipts. Even store managers handed them receipts, though it was not easy... Since there were many problems with the phony receipts, the department store has now changed its giveaway system (C5).

3. Summary of Immoral Fashion Shopping Behavior from Apparel Retail Salespeoples' Perspectives

The five focus group interviews with the sales associates at fashion retail stores indicated that the immoral behaviors of fashion consumers were analyzed and the results divided into two categories: one was the immoral behavior associated

<Table 2>Types of immoral fashion shopping behavior

Types of Immoral Behavior		Examples	
Merchandise – Related	Shoplifting	Carrying the product out of the store without paying for it	
	Inappropriate Returns	Retail Borrowing	Returning the merchandise after having used them without any intention to purchase them
		Immoral Returns	Asking for refunds, even if the product is damaged by the customer
	Damage to Merchandise	Putting a cosmetic stain on clothing when trying it on and just leaving the retail store	
Customer– Related	Abusive Behaviors	Speaking in a rude way or shouting at sales associates by consumers	
	Excessive Demands	Asking for excessive gifts	

with the product, and the other was the immoral behavior relative to the consumer. The immoral behavior associated with the merchandise was classified into three types: shoplifting, inappropriate returns and damaging to merchandise. Consumer-related immoral behavior included two types: abusive behaviors and excessive demand (see <Table 2>).

V. Discussion

This study examined immoral behavior of fashion consumers from the viewpoint of sales associates at retail stores and classified the types of such behaviors into a few categories. The focus group interviews with sales associates at fashion retail stores indicated that the immoral behavior of fashion product consumers were divided into two categories: one was the immoral behavior associated with the product, and the other was the immoral behavior relative to the consumer. The immoral behavior associated with the product was classified into three types: shoplifting, retail-borrowing, and inappropriate returns. Shoplifting was the primary immoral behavior

mentioned by all interview participants, and was often found to occur at fashion retail stores targeting adolescents. However, most sales associates failed to recognize shoplifting as a serious criminal behavior, and shoplifters who were caught on the scene were found to be released after admonition and after having returned the merchandise. The most commonly immoral consumer behaviors mentioned by sales associates were retail borrowing, which refers to purchasing fashion items with the purpose of returning items after wearing them. As consumer empowerment has recently increased in the retail industry, consumers are able to obtain exchanges, refunds, or returns at stores simply by changing their minds, and not for defects of their purchases. Retail borrowing is considered to be a side effect of this liberal return policy. Retail borrowing may pose serious problems to the fashion industry, given that stores cannot deny return as far as the product is not stained or visibly damaged. Specifically, borrowing may erode sales at stores that offer highly visible and conspicuous products. All participants in the interview indicated that they had experienced inappropriate returns at stores, implying that

such immoral behavior was very common.

Immoral behaviors relative to consumers were classified into two types: abusive behavior by consumers toward sales associates and excessive demands. Sales associates indicated that they found it hard to deal with consumers who used crude and impolite language or who shout or delivered furious vituperations to them as if they were "flying off the handle." Specifically, many customers resort to crude language when their demands are not accepted (i.e., if their returns are not accepted), and they browbeat the sales associates into agreeing by using crude language or by shouting at them, which suggests that such inconsistent responses by stores tend to increase such impolite behaviors. In addition, excessive demands for service or rewards also constitute immoral consumer behavior.

Based on the results of the research, the following research ideas can be recommended for future research. First, there may be differences in perspectives between consumers and sellers (salespeoples in this study) toward immoral behaviors relative to the consumer. It is very likely that sellers consider immoral behaviors of the consumer as very serious. Thus, research on immoral behaviors of the consumer from the angle of consumers may be useful in determining the difference in views.

Secondly, preceding studies in foreign countries show that women are more likely to be involved in immoral behaviors at fashion stores, such as shoplifting, which implies that there may be differences in the perceptions toward immoral behaviors between men and women. Differences may exist in the perceptions toward immoral behaviors of consumer, depending on the characteristics of consumers, such as gender, age, work experience in distribution, experience

with immoral behaviors, and other factors. The older a consumer is, the more likely it is that he or she may have made excessive demands or engaged in rude behavior. Older consumers may believe that nothing is wrong with such consumer behaviors, compared to younger consumers. Meanwhile, younger consumer groups, such as adolescents, are more likely to be engaged in immoral behaviors, such as shoplifting, and show less unfavorable views about it than older consumer groups, which suggests that age may have a different effect, depending on the type of immoral behavior. Consumers who have extensive experience with shopping may consider immoral behaviors favorably compared to those with less experience in shopping, given that they may be more familiar with consumer rights.

Finally, the perceptions toward immoral behaviors of consumers may vary, depending on the type of store. There may be differences in the perceptions toward immoral consumer behaviors in department stores with clear policies regarding the returns, exchanges, or refunds, and the immoral consumer behaviors in bonded stores without clear policies. In addition, There may be differences in the perceptions toward immoral consumer behaviors between online and offline stores due to the different sales environments and different shopping system.

This study has several limitations: First, it may be difficult to generalize the findings of this study, as focus group interviews were employed with associates at apparel stores. Quantitative studies need to be carried out by building on the results of this study. Second, the interviews indicated that the type or seriousness of immoral consumer behaviors may differ, depending on the characteristics of the retail shop (type,

location, major customer groups, product range, size, number of associates). Therefore, further studies need to examine the factors influencing these immoral consumer behaviors.

The findings of this study may facilitate an understanding of the consumer immoral behavior, which will provide a basis for approaches that may help decrease immoral consumer behavior at fashion retail stores. The findings may also provide materials for consumer education over the long term.

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