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Bounced between two cultures: Study of smoking behavior of Korean Americans

Loan Nguyen

Massachusetts College of Pharmacy & Health Science

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Smoking and tobacco-related diseases are the leading causes of mortality and morbidity in the United States. According to CDC statistics from 2012, 18.1 percent or 42.1 million people in the United States smoke cigarettes and over 16 million Americans have smoking related diseases. Among ethnic groups, Asian Americans are the group with the lowest smoking prevalence with 9.9 percent.¹ Despite having the lowest rates, specific subsets in this group have noticeably high consumption rates, and Korean Americans have the highest smoking prevalence with 26.6 percent.¹ Various studies have shown many factors influencing the high prevalence of smoking in this sub group, and the influence of both original culture and acculturation are among these contributing factors. Bounded between the American melting pot and Korean culture, Korean Americans show unique characteristics contributing to their smoking behaviors. This paper shows how acculturation and Korean culture influence Korean American men, women and adolescent smoking. The paper also points out the effect of tobacco companies as a culture factors on Korean American communities.

In American Asian Pacific groups, Korean American men have the highest smoking prevalence with 37.4 percent and lowest quit rates compared to other Asian Americans groups with 14.5 percent. Vietnamese Americans come second with 32.5 percent, Filipino with 25.5 percent respectively, Asian Indian 19.1 percent and Chinese with 13.9 percent.² One of the main reasons for this high rate among Korean American is the influence of their original culture. Many of these Korean Americans were born in South Korea and migrated to the States as young adults and adults; these Korean transplants tend to bring their social and cultural perceptions, beliefs and norms along with them when they settled in the United States.³ In Korean culture, cigarette smoking

plays an important role in the social lives of Korean men. Smoking, the offering and accepting of cigarettes, is common at social gatherings.⁴ It is a symbol of hierarchy in Korean society, with the younger or lower social ranks offering cigarettes to the older or higher. Smoking cigarettes as a practice also helps loosen people up and enliven the mood in conversation. Many Korean smokers believe that if they don't participate in smoking-related practices, it may influence their social relationships negatively.⁴

Cigarette smoking is a social norm for men in Korea. Korean men feel they have a strong pressure and don't have many options in whether or not to participate in smoking. Like many Asian countries influenced by Confucianism, the idea of following social norms as the symbol of harmony imprints in Korean thinking, and creates a strong pressure for them if they don't conform.⁵ If they don't smoke, they might likely to face humiliation or teasing from their peers, or even endure social ostracization.⁶ In addition, smoking is also a standard to justify the maturation and manhood in Korea. With Korean boys, smoking cigarettes is a symbol of coming of age as a man, and they strongly believe that smoking can make them look manlier and more mature than their peers. Additionally, it is mandatory for Korean men to serve in military. The frustration and pressure of joining the army also contribute to their smoking.⁷ Koreans also tend to have lower quit rate than others. They might be isolated or teased by their peers while trying to quit.³ And Korean men think that smoking is a habit and even if they do not find any enjoyment in smoking, they feel that without smoking they could not function properly.⁸

When coming to the States, Korean men still maintain higher level of smoking than other subgroups. But experiencing the influence of the American anti-smoking culture and the stigma against smoking, Korean American men have lower prevalence of

smoking and higher prevalence of quitting compared to their peer group in Korea.⁹ In the United States, the smoking restrictions in home, office and community places are much higher compared to Korea.¹⁰ Many studies have shown that as the longer amount of time Korean American men live in the United States the lower rate of smoking and the higher rate of quitting.¹¹ Plus, previous studies point out that if Korean American are married, Christian or affiliated with a different religion, receive more education and have higher English proficiency, they might engage less in smoking related practices and be more willing to participate smoking cessation.¹²

With Korean women, although a large number of them don't smoke or participate in smoking-related practices compared to their male counterpart,⁶ they also have a relatively high smoking rate with 20.1 percent and lower quit rates compared to women from other ethnic groups.² Because Confucianism is an important influence on Korea, wives are viewed as submissive to their husbands, and women are considered subservient to men.³ Smoking is socially acceptable to only men, but not for the women. Smoking also might have negative effects and a bad influence on the image of a woman as mother and wife.⁷

However, when coming to the States, where the females have more freedom and less scrutiny over their traditional image as wives and mothers. Korean American women are more likely to smoke than their counterpart in Korea. American-born Korean-American women are even more likely to smoke. Korean-American women think that it is acceptable for women to smoke in non-Korea context.⁷ Moreover, in America, people place a high value on their individualism and have high stigma against gender discrimination.¹³ They are more comfortable and less judgmental toward the women

whom smoke.⁴ In contrast with their male counterparts, the longer the Korean American females stay in the States, the more open and willing to smoke than women in the same age groups in Korea.⁹ In addition, the higher acculturation, education and more English language acquisition, the higher rate of women to smoke. Even so, they also are consistent with the male peers in the low smoking rate among who are married and Christian.³

Among Korean Americans groups, not only do adults have high smoking prevalence, but so too do adolescent and young adults. As smoking behavior normally initiates at a young age and adolescent, usually during adolescence, Korean American young adults have a high smoking rate among youth compared to other Asian-American subgroups. The prevalence ranges from 36 to 38 percent.¹⁴ For instance, at 12 years of age, Korean American have higher risk of smoking initiation than other Asian-Pacific subgroups. They surpass other sub groups in their initiation rate at age 12. And they even have higher number of initiation than the Caucasian group at age 15.¹⁴

As with adult smokers, many previous studies show that original culture and acculturation are both important factors that contribute to the smoking initiations and behaviors of Korean American adolescents. Korean young adults also experience peer pressure. If their friends engage in smoking practice, they don't want to be left out and be an outsider.³ Moreover many Korean Americans choose to live in linguistically isolated communities such as Korea town in California.⁷ Despite the anti-smoking cultures in the United States overall, in linguistically isolated communities, the smoking rates still is higher compare to other non-isolated communities.¹¹ Living in a highly Korean context, Korean American adolescents are influenced significantly by the pressure of Korean

culture and the high prevalence of smoking in their environment. Besides, in these communities, it is easy for Korean American to have access to cigarettes in Korean-owned businesses such as market or convenient stores. Also in these stores, there sometimes is no restriction on indoor smoking.⁷ Another factor that contributes to the initiation of smoking for Korean American is the family influence. Despite of home smoking restriction in The United States especially in California, Korean men still practice smoking at home and influence to other family members.¹⁰ By observing their fathers' smoking behavior, many young Korean Americans also are affected and followed their smoking practice. The pressure coming from the conflicts between ethnic groups also contribute to the initiation of smoking.¹⁴ As Korean Americans are considered as a new immigrant group. In their early settlement, many Korean-Americans are the victims of violent harassment and crime, also racial tensions in the communities in which they live and work.¹⁵ Also some new immigrants face with language barrier in school or work, and lack of social connections in the new cultures. Therefore, many of them seek toward smoking to relieve frustrations and pressure.¹³

Moreover, the influence of tobacco companies has always been an essential factor in shaping the initiation of smoking in American youth, and Korean American adolescents are not an exception. Many previous studies show that tobacco companies target the adolescents with advertisement that promote independence and maturity. The tobacco companies also tailor their ads message to target specific groups.¹³ As young adult, many Korean Americans also find these ads appealing and find smoking to be a vehicle to enhance their self-image.¹¹ The Legacy Tobacco Documents that are available online provide clear indications of tobacco company tactics related to the Korean and

Korean American communities¹⁵ Although documents in this database do not cover the period after 1998 on this topic very thoroughly, many documents from the 1980s and 1990s reveal tobacco company practices and strategies.

Not only presenting advertisement with “positive” self-images to adolescent, tobacco companies also enhance their influence in Korean American community. These companies themselves make a culture contribution in the Korean American community. For Korean American, running a grocery store is one of the most viable and prominent businesses.¹⁶ Their stores are easy to access with their presence in various urban communities not only in Korean ones, but also elsewhere, especially in predominately African Americans areas.¹⁶ Plus Korean groceries also are an essential place to provide and promote smoking behaviors and initiation of smoking. Phillip Morris, the biggest tobacco company in the United States, has various strategies to establish relationships and build their influence in Korean grocery business. Documents from their internal record describe their research into Asian- American groceries. One such document, from the Philip Morris files show how the company did advance research into Korean American communities before developing their plans.¹⁷ They engaged and supported the National Korean American Grocers Association (KAGRO) and through it they strengthened their relationship with leaders in the Korean- American communities. Phillip Morris supported and sponsored KAGRO activities and in the long term tried to influence and join the faculty and board members of the communities.¹⁸ As a result of their detailed plans and tactics, Philip Morris built up a quite strong relationship with the KAGRO with many emails and letters back and forth showing their closeness. For

example, in November 1995, one employee of Philip Morris requested for KARGO representatives attend their local meeting to share their culture and improve business.¹⁹

Philip Morris and other tobacco companies not only supported and developed their relationships with KAGRO and other grocery associations, they also expanded their influence by supporting and sponsoring for culture events and festivals in Korean communities. For the Korean Harvest and Folklore Festival in New York in 1995, the president of Ramhurst corporation, a company taking charge of publicity for the event, wrote to vice president of Phillip Morris to ask for support and sponsorship for the event.²⁰ In addition, to support for the 17th Korean Harvest and Folklore Festival in Queens, New York in 1998, tobacco company RJ Reynolds provided \$5000 for the festival for a bronze sponsorship, which allowed the company to have a tent booth and gave out free product samples.²²

Not only sponsoring cultural festivals and events, tobacco companies also sponsored memorial or tribute events for Korean American veterans. In the tribute for the Korean Veteran in the memorial in 1998, Philip Morris was the main sponsor for the events.²² Previously, in July 1988, Philip Morris issued a grant of \$225,000 to the New York Korean Veterans Memorial Commission.²² Also tobacco companies sponsored scholarship awards event in the community, such as when in November 1996, Phillip Morris paid \$500.00 to sponsor the 4th Annual Scholarship Awards Banquet for high school and college youth in Orange County in California.²³

Unfortunately. Evidence of tobacco company activities related to Korean Americans is only available up to 1998. With tobacco companies expanding their participation and influence in Korean American communities more and more, they gain a

positive image therein the process doing so. They increase their access and influence and likely increase the initiation of Korean American smoking.

Besides, supporting and sponsoring events and communities, tobacco companies also have participated in many youth prevention programs for Korean American to upgrade their companies' image. In fact, studies show that tobacco company youth smoking prevention efforts have had no beneficial effects for youth.²⁴ In December 1998, Philip Morris launched youth smoking prevention programs, which had advertisements targeting to Asian Americans and Korean American. They collaborated with Kang and Lee Advertising in 1999 to design the print and media advertisement for Korean American. Philip Morris had done rigorous researches about the adolescent in these sub groups to design the programs.²³ Kang & Lee advertising, Philip Morris' advertising company for Asian youth prevent programs, also did researches about Korean and other subgroups to develop these ads.²⁴ In 1999, Philip Morris with Kang & Lee Advertising published a series of print ad such as "Little Boy", "Smiling Girl", etc.²⁶ and the television ads such as "Dinner Time"²⁶ targeting youth and their parents by exploring parent-teenage interactions in Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese.²⁴ However, Korean American did not positively react these ads, with only 8 percent of parents of 10-12 years old find them very informative and 14 percent among parents of 13-14 years old.²⁸ Also RJ Reynolds also took part in promoting the "We Card" program in the Korean harvest and folklore festival.²⁹ These strategies superficially attempt to reduce the initiation smoking among adolescent smokers, but previous researches show that there is no association between increased exposure to tobacco company youth smoking prevention advertising and the results of their smoking. Like their other activities, the tobacco

companies only target on constructing a “positive image” in Korean American youth instead of providing real beneficial.

My study shows that Korean Americans deem smoking cigarettes to be a part of their original culture and a social norm. When immigrating to the States, they also bring their social belief and perception about smoking to the States; however, under the influence of anti-smoking culture of America, the smoking rates decline compared to the same subs groups in Korea. Also Korean men with religion, higher education, more English proficiency and longer time in the States, they tend to smoke less. However, these characteristics apparently opposite among Korean women smokers, with the longer time in the States, higher English fluency and education, they tend to smoke more compare to women in Korea. Therefore, when designing culturally tailored tobacco preventing and cessation campaigns, these programs must pay attention to the different characteristics between Korean men and women. Also factors about culturally social norms and perceptions about smoking needs more focus.

With adolescent and young adult smokers, the home restrictions policy must be more enforced in Korean families. As adolescence Korean Americans tend to smoke under peer pressure from other Korean Americans, it is important to incorporate culturally methods of against peer related effects to smoking initiation and behaviors. Environment also is an crucial part of shaping Korean Americans smoking behaviors, stricter policies or completely ban in indoor smoking in business and restricted smoking areas also must be reinforced to decline the frequent permissive perspective of smoking in the Korean community. Also tighten policies toward the influence of tobacco companies to Korean grocery associations, communities and their attempts on youth

prevention programs also must strengthen to reduce their “positive” image influence to Korean American communities. Therefore, they may help lower the smoking initiation and behavior in Korean Americans.

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