



Consumer cynicism and perceived deception in vanity sizing: The moderating role of retailer (dis)honesty



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ABSTRACT

While prior scholarship has acknowledged the overall positive influence of vanity sizing on consumer outcomes, no work to date has addressed the psychological process that occurs when consumers suspect retailers of dishonest sizing information. This is an important process to understand because perceptions of deceptive retailer motives lead consumers to react negatively to the product and the retailer, regardless of the retailer's actual motives. Thus, this research utilizes attribution theory to examine perceived deception as a mediator between consumer cynicism (a dispositional trait) and consumer outcomes. The results reveal that at higher levels of consumer cynicism, prior knowledge of deceptive sizing practices has an amplifying effect on the influence of consumer cynicism on perceived deception, while retailer honesty with sizing issues helps to block this influence. Further, perceived deception leads to reduced consumer outcomes, confirming prior findings in the literature.

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1. Introduction

Consumers encountering information about products – for example, size information – attribute motives behind that information to certain intentions of the retailer in question (Heider, 1958; Folkes, 1988; Weiner, 2000). Importantly, *perceived* retailer motives – not actual retailer motives – are what matter in these information encounters (Riquelme et al., 2016). For example, if the consumer perceives that a retailer is employing deceptive size information in its product offerings, that consumer will act according to that perception, regardless of whether or not the retailer is actually being deceitful. This is a vital point in that retailers must understand the nature of perceived deception and how retailers can overcome its effects.

A common issue involving consumer perceptions of potentially deceptive product information is vanity sizing, defined as the intentional labeling of garments with sizes that are smaller than the actual dimensions of those garments with the intent to deceive consumers (Aydinoglu and Krishna, 2012). A key element of vanity sizing is its reliance on successful *deception* (Aydinoglu and Krishna, 2012) – that is, an intentional attempt on the part of the retailer to influence the beliefs of the customer that a given entity holds attributes that may not be accurately represented (Bok, 1989). For vanity sizing to work as intended, consumers must be unaware that labeled sizes are smaller than actual sizes. Otherwise, consumers who recognize problematic size labeling may

attribute the sizing to retailer deception, leading to negative outcomes for the retailer (Riquelme et al., 2016). Given these ideas, vanity sizing is an ideal context in which to study perceived deception related to product information in retail environments.

In addition to a lack of understanding around how perceived deception relates to product size information, consumer research has not named clear dispositional antecedents of perceived deception, such as consumer cynicism (Chylinski and Chu, 2010; Odou and de Pechpeyrou, 2011; Helm et al., 2015), that help to predict when consumers are more likely to perceive deceptive retailer motives (a notable exception is Riquelme and Román's [2014] naming of risk aversion and materialism as antecedents, but these traits were situational to their study). Additionally, while previous work has determined that perceived deception negatively impacts consumer responses (Riquelme et al., 2016), research has not revealed any means of preventing perceived deception in retail environments.

The goal of this research is to investigate the role of consumer attributions of deceptive retailer motivations in the evaluation of questionable product information, such as gaps between actual and labeled sizing information in contexts of potential vanity sizing. Further, this research examines how these perceptions can be amplified or suppressed. This work seeks to make a number of contributions. First, past research has revealed an overall influence of perceived deception on consumer satisfaction (Riquelme et al., 2016), but this effect has not been explored in the understudied area of product sizing information. Thus, this research extends the idea of perceived deception's negative effect on consumer outcomes directly related to the product itself (i.e., purchase

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intentions). Second, perceived deception mediates consumer cynicism and consumer outcomes, indicating that consumer cynicism can indirectly influence consumer responses in the presence of questionable product information. Third, this work shows that the impact of consumer cynicism on perceptions of deception is amplified when the consumer has prior knowledge of a retailer's deceptive size labeling. Finally, that effect is suppressed when retailers exhibit honesty about sizing issues, offering retailers a means of countering perceived deception.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The focus of this research

Scholars have long held that the brand and the retailer are often separate entities in the consumer's mind, as evidenced most notably by the difference drawn between retailer loyalty and brand loyalty (Cunningham, 1961; Stearns et al., 1982; Ewing, 2000). Additionally, retailers house multiple and often competing brands within the same stores and spaces. Past research has generally found a positive relationship between brand loyalty and retailer loyalty, such that changes in loyalty to one entity influence loyalty to the other entity. Further, brands and retailers can capitalize on co-reputation effects – for example, a brand can boost perceptions of its quality and reputation by selling through a high quality retailer (Chu and Chu, 1994). Likewise, this direct relationship can apply in situations of poor reputation, such that consumers perceive a brand to be of low quality if the retailer is of low quality.

Sometimes, retailer and brand significantly overlap. For example, private label brands often form the basis of many retailer strategies, especially in grocery contexts (i.e., Geyskens et al., 2010). For many apparel retailers, retailer and brand are synonymous. This is often the case specialty apparel market, which is concentrated with large retail chains selling largely, if not only, private label brands of the same names as their respective retailers. In these cases, perceptions of the retailer are the same as perceptions of the brand, because the retailer is the brand.

Because the present research is an initial investigation into perceived deception in a vanity sizing context, the present research focuses on the retailer and the brand as the same entity. Therefore, this work does not distinguish between attributions of brand deception versus retailer deception because the differences in these two perceptions of deception are beyond the scope of this work. Future research should address differences in brand versus retailer attributions of perceived deception (discussed in the Limitations and Future Research section of this work).

2.2. Vanity sizing and attribution theory

Attribution theory argues that individuals perceive the actions of others and form impressions of why those actions have occurred (Heider, 1958; Folkes, 1988; Weiner, 2000). That is, individuals attribute actions of others to various motives that are either intrinsic (internally motivated) or extrinsic (situational) in nature. Depending on the attributions made, attitudes and other outcomes related to the actor(s) in question differ. Prior scholars have used attribution theory in consumer behavior research to investigate various consumer responses to marketing-related situations, including endorsements, advertising, product failures, CSR, and brand attachment (Folkes, 1988, 1984; Weiner, 2000, 1985; Wang, 2008; Ellen et al., 2006; Klein and Dawar, 2004; Vlachos et al., 2009; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013; Orth et al., 2012).

When consumers recognize problems with product sizing

information such as labeled-versus-actual sizing discrepancies, those consumers are likely to form attributions about the retailer's role in these discrepancies. In these cases, consumers may attribute discrepant information to vanity sizing, blaming the sizing on the retailer's intentional manipulation of product information. Such attributions of deceptive retailer motives influence consumer responses negatively. Thus, attribution theory provides a useful framework for understanding consumer perceptions of discrepant sizing information (i.e., Riquelme et al., 2016).

According to Román (2010), retailers generally engage in deceptive practices in order to bolster perceived attractiveness of product offerings and spark greater intentions to purchase. In a vanity sizing context, smaller-than-actual size labels lead to a bolstered attractiveness effect in that these labels attempt to induce feelings of thinness, which cause consumers to feel better about themselves and subsequently buy the apparel (Kinley, 2003; Aydinoglu and Krishna, 2012). As such, vanity-sized apparel boosts the wearer's self-esteem, which adds value to the product that would not otherwise be present with congruous labeled and actual sizes. However, vanity sizing is a manipulation of a product attribute (size), and prior research has shown that consumers perceive such 'fluffing' of product attributes as unethical and dishonest (Riquelme and Román, 2014). As such, the success of vanity sizing depends on lack of consumer realization that labeled sizes are inaccurate. Per attribution theory, consumers who recognize sizing as inaccurate and attribute its presence to vanity sizing will view the retailer in a negative light, leading to reduced consumer responses (Riquelme et al., 2016).

2.3. Attributions and the role of consumer cynicism

An important factor concerning consumer attributions of retailer motives in scenarios of sizing issues is consumer cynicism – a dispositional skepticism or belief that firms' motives and actions in consumer situations are self-serving and manipulative (i.e., Chylinski and Chu, 2010; Odou and de Pechpeyrou, 2011; Helm et al., 2015). Consumer cynicism is widespread among consumers; influences cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes; and exists across the general domain of consumer behavior, with no specific demarcations or boundaries (Kanter and Wortzel, 1985; Chylinski and Chu, 2010). As such, cynical consumers carry a natural suspicion of retailer motives across various shopping contexts and apply skeptical viewpoints to different consumer-related situations. These cynical attitudes are dispositional and operant in many consumer contexts (Berlo et al., 1969; Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013; Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998; Obermiller et al., 2005; Gupta and Cooper, 1992; Lunardo, 2012).

The negative effect of consumer cynicism toward retailer motives on consumer responses is clearly documented in the literature and is amplified when the retailer in question is perceived as pursuing intentionally deceptive or manipulative tactics (i.e., Ellen et al., 2000; Forehand, 2000; Forehand and Grier, 2003). Thus, because vanity sizing is an intentionally deceptive practice (Aydinoglu and Krishna, 2012), consumers who attribute discrepancies between labeled and actual sizes to manipulative motives are likely to exhibit stronger negative responses to the product and retailer.

Although consumer cynicism leads to greater negative impressions of retailer motives, prior research suggests that cynicism itself is not a direct influence on consumer outcomes (i.e., Forehand and Grier, 2003). Rather, consumer cynicism sways consumer judgments and attributions related to the retailer and associated motives, and these judgments and attributions influence consumer outcomes. If this is the case, then consumer cynicism itself should not have a direct relationship with consumer

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