



She loves the way you lie: Size-related self-concept and gender in vanity sizing

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ABSTRACT

This work investigates size-related self-concept (SRSC) – the extent to which apparel size defines one's identity – and its relationship to perceived deception and purchase intentions toward vanity-sized garments. Through the lens of self-enhancement theory, two studies reveal that SRSC exerts a significant influence on perceived deception and purchase intentions in garment size labeling contexts, moderated by gender. Study 1 indicates that among females, SRSC has no influence on perceived deception when a properly-fitting garment is labeled one size smaller than the consumer's typical size. However, when the garment is the same size as the typical, SRSC has a positive relationship with perceived deception. Study 2 shows that gender moderates the effect of SRSC on perceived deception of as well as purchase intentions toward a vanity-sized garment, such that SRSC positively predicts perceived deception among males but not among females, while SRSC positively predicts purchase intentions among females but not among males. This work contributes the concept and role of SRSC to the vanity sizing context, indicating that SRSC is just as important as gender in the vanity sizing discussion.

1. Introduction

The apparel industry is a major contributor to the overall economy. According to Statista (2017), the United States generated around \$315 billion in apparel sales last year, which is 1.7% of the GDP (\$18.57 trillion). Additionally, as of the last census in 2010, consumers spent around \$1800 per household per year on apparel, which is equivalent to 2.4% of the median income (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Thus, apparel represents a major component of consumer spending and constitutes a significant portion of the retailing world. As such, research into influences related to the apparel context could lead to insights that can represent differences of millions of dollars if appropriately understood and heeded.

Among apparel phenomena, vanity sizing is experiencing steadily growing interest in the literature. To date, several studies have documented the presence of vanity sizing and consumers' varying reactions to smaller-than-typical size labels, including both positive and negative outcomes (Kinley, 2003; Aydinoglu and Krishna, 2012; Hoegg et al., 2014; Ketron, 2016; Ketron and Spears, 2017; Ketron and Naletelich, 2017). However, to date, these studies have failed to examine the importance that a consumer places on his/her apparel size as a part of his/her self-concept. Theoretically, one's reaction to vanity-sized garments should depend on that level of importance – if apparel size is a significant component of a consumer's identity, then smaller-than-typical

size labeling should garner a different reaction from that consumer than for someone who places little to no importance on apparel size. Further, because of differences of gender in the vanity sizing domain (Franz, 2017), gender likely further alters these reactions.

Thus, the goal of this work is to determine the influence of this importance of apparel size to one's identity, termed *size-related self-concept*, on vanity sizing, including the moderating role of gender. Two experiments reveal the following: (1) in situations of vanity sizing, females with high size-related self-concept (SRSC) form stronger perceptions of deception when the garment size is the usual size required, and (2) gender influences the relationship between SRSC and consumer responses toward a vanity-sized garment, such that SRSC predicts perceived deception among males and purchase intentions among females.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Vanity sizing and self-enhancement theory

Label size can exert a significant influence on consumer responses to a garment if the consumer feels that the given labeled size is different from normal. The lack of standardization in apparel size labeling has led to several size and fit related discrepancies in the industry, including the notable occurrence of vanity sizing. Vanity sizing is the deliberate practice of labeling garments with artificial sizes intended to

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bolster consumers' perceptions of their own bodily dimensions (Kinley, 2003; Aydinoglu and Krishna, 2012; Ketron and Naletelich, 2017). Although the popular notion of vanity sizing is that size labels are superficially deflated to lead to smaller-than-actual bodily perceptions, it is important to note that vanity sizing can shift perceived size to larger or smaller levels depending on the socially optimal direction (Ketron and Naletelich, 2017). Because it is difficult and challenging to implement a standardized size system, vanity sizing is present in varying degrees across retailers (Faust and Carrier, 2009; Hoegg et al., 2014; Kinley, 2003). This deviation from the supposed dimensions that a given size represents allows consumers to create an identity based on vanity labeling.

Although this practice may be viewed as deceptive and unethical, consumers are interestingly receptive to vanity sizing. One reason for this acceptance is the promotion of the “thin ideal” (Aydinoglu and Krishna, 2012; Wertheim et al., 1997). For women, the pressure imposed by society to be model-thin often leads to “dissatisfaction and preoccupation” with appearance (Aydinoglu and Krishna, 2012). Moreover, the use of beauty ideals to make social comparisons creates self-perceptions that may or may not coincide with the actual self. Thus, the ideal self becomes the primary focus, and consumers become more accepting of vanity sizing practices that help them achieve this ideal.

Therefore, because vanity sizing serves as a self-enhancement mechanism, scholars must acknowledge the importance of self-enhancement theory to the study of vanity sizing. With roots in appearance, self-perception, and the ideal self, self-enhancement theory posits that consumers seek information or feedback that bolsters their self-views (Alicke and Sedikides, 2009; Brown, 1986; Brown et al., 2013; Rosen et al., 2012; Strahan et al., 2006; Swann et al., 1989). Self-enhancement can exert significant influences on consumer responses to size labels and the influence of size labels on one's identity. Within the vanity sizing domain, consumers may use artificial sizing to improve or enhance self-image, positioning vanity sizing as a viable vehicle of self-enhancement. According to Morf and Rhodewalt (2001), this motivation or desire has a deeper meaning – one that directly ties appearance with narcissistic self-portrayal.

2.2. The Moderating Role of Size-Related Self-Concept (SRSC)

However, not all consumers are likely to respond equally to vanity sizing. Importantly, individual consumers differ in the extent to which apparel sizes influence their overall perceptions of a garment. A vital aspect of these influences is the contribution of one's apparel size to one's identity. We term this variance in importance *size-related self-concept* (SRSC). Given that clothing is part of an individual's self-view (Belk, 1988), label size is often a component of a consumer's self-concept. Moreover, label size may reflect the ideal self (or discrepancies between ideal and actual selves) when the alpha-numeric value on a size label controls consumers' perception of appearance (Hoegg et al., 2014). Indeed, apparel often contributes greatly to one's self-concept and identity, signaling both internal and external consumer characteristics and often either showcasing or obscuring the physique (LaBat and DeLong, 1990; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Thomas and Peters, 2009; Kinley, 2010; Shin and Baytar, 2014).

Consumers who significantly associate label size with their appearance-related self-views have high SRSC and may seek vanity-sized apparel items to bolster those views (i.e., size 6 jeans that fit like size 8 jeans). Likewise, consumers who hold no such association have low SRSC, and self-enhancement practices related to apparel sizes are thus far less important. Therefore, this theoretical perspective enables better understanding of how consumers perceive themselves through SRSC and the extent to which SRSC motivates consumers to engage in size-related self-enhancement practices.

Societal norms dictate that individuals expect others to see them the same way they see themselves (Swann, 2011). Namely, individuals with favorable appearance-related self-views expect others to perceive them

in a positive manner, and individuals with unfavorable appearance-related self-views expect others to perceive them in a negative manner. As such, individuals with high SRSC engage in cognitive and behavioral self-enhancement practices, such as vanity sizing, to establish or protect favorable views of the self (Hepper et al., 2011). The results from these practices may or may not provide an accurate portrayal of the self. Rather, the result may contribute to the development of an ideal self that becomes the primary identity promoted to others (Gregg et al., 2011). Conversely, individuals with low SRSC do not place a strong emphasis on label size. Therefore, the impact of size labels on appearance-related self-view is likely minimal, and the need for self-enhancement practices related to size labeling is diminished.

2.3. Differentiating SRSC from appearance self-esteem (ASE)

2.3.1. Appearance self-esteem in vanity sizing research

In a similar vein, preoccupation with appearance has led to an increase in the purchase of vanity-sized apparel items that increase consumers' self-esteem and enhance their self-views (Hoegg et al., 2014). Aydinoglu and Krishna (2012) found that consumers respond to vanity sizing as a function of the relationship between mental imagery and appearance self-esteem. With body image as the primary focus, the authors proposed that individuals have an internal motivation to “feel thin,” and vanity-sized apparel items generate self-positivity for the consumer. Results revealed that consumers - women in particular - have a positive self-view when apparel items have a smaller label size and a negative self-view when apparel items have a larger label size.

Likewise, Kinley (2010) examined the effects of label size on self-esteem and body image. Participants who had positive self-esteem and neutral feelings toward body image were asked to try on pants that were either smaller than their typical sizes or labeled according to their usual sizes. Kinley (2010) revealed that attitude and perception toward fitting into a smaller [or expected] pant size was positive, especially for younger participants. It is also worthy to note that participants who needed a larger than expected size did not experience low self-esteem or have a negative perception of their body image.

Lastly, Hoegg et al. (2014) examined the impact that label size has on consumers when the size is larger than expected. The authors focused on the outcomes of ASE and compensatory consumption behaviors. Findings from the study revealed that larger than expected sizes have a negative effect on clothing evaluations for women. When female consumers are presented with a larger than expected size option, they will compensate for the larger size by purchasing other items that enhance either their appearance, such as makeup and hair products, or a non-appearance self-domain, such as written media that enhance self-perceived intelligence.

2.3.2. How SRSC differs from ASE

Despite their common ties to self-enhancement, it is important to note that SRSC is conceptually distinguishable from appearance-related self-esteem (ASE) in that one's apparel size may or may not inform one's appearance-related self-view. ASE is based on a subjective interpretation of body image that may be directly or indirectly influenced by the external environment. This interpretation may be positive or negative in nature, and the emphasis placed on that view of one's body image directly impacts in an individual's appearance-related evaluation. In sum, individuals who have positive (negative) feelings about their bodies tend to have favorable (unfavorable) views of their appearances.

Meanwhile, size-related self-concept (SRSC) focuses on consumers' perception of label size and the role these perceptions play in appearance-related identities, regardless of one's ASE. Simply put, SRSC leads consumers to perceive label size in one of two ways: either important or unimportant. Specifically, when consumers have high SRSC, they perceive label size as very important. Conversely, when consumers have low SRSC, label size is not as important a part of their appearance-related identities.

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