

Research Report

# The flip side of vanity sizing: How consumers respond to and compensate for larger than expected clothing sizes ☆

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Received 2 May 2012; received in revised form 18 July 2013; accepted 18 July 2013

Available online 26 July 2013

## Abstract

Vanity sizing has become a popular retail trend and recent work shows it has a favorable impact on consumers. However, as the current research demonstrates, significant variations in sizing standards across retailers mean that consumers are as likely to encounter larger sizes as they are smaller, “vanity” sizes when shopping, highlighting the importance of understanding how consumers react to this potential threat in the marketplace. Across five studies we demonstrate that larger sizes result in negative evaluations of clothing and show that these effects are driven by consumers’ appearance self-esteem. Importantly, we also find that instead of unilaterally lowering purchase intent as one might assume, larger sizes can actually increase spending, as consumers engage in compensatory consumption to help repair their damaged self-esteem. In so doing, this research reveals a dynamic and complex relationship between consumers and sizing labels, where shopping can serve to build, strengthen, threaten, and/or repair appearance self-esteem.

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*Keywords:* Vanity sizing; Self-esteem; Appearance; Compensatory consumption

## Introduction

Vanity sizing, the practice of altering measurement specifications for garments to enable consumers to fit into smaller sizes (Alexander, Connell, & Presley, 2005), has been shown to lead to more positive evaluations of clothing, based on the positive mental imagery that is evoked when consumers visualize themselves in a smaller size (Aydinoglu & Krishna,

2012). However, because manufacturers do not adhere to sizing guidelines and can pursue vanity sizing to varying degrees, significant variation exists across retailers (Kinley, 2003). This variation suggests that consumers will frequently encounter sizes that are either smaller or larger than their expected sizes, highlighting the importance of studying consumer reactions to altered sizes on both ends of the spectrum. As such, the debates over vanity sizing’s impact on female consumers (Clifford, 2011) ironically may be too narrow in focus. This research explores how consumers respond when they find that their usual size is too *small* and they require a *larger* size.

Across five studies we show that requiring a larger size results in negative evaluations of clothing, but can also lead to compensatory consumption of other products. These effects are driven by the impact of sizing on consumers’ appearance self-esteem. Specifically we demonstrate that requiring a larger size in clothing reduces appearance self-esteem, which negatively impacts attitudes toward the clothing. In contrast, a heightened

☆ First authorship is shared by the first and second authors. Third authorship is shared by the third and fourth authors. The authors are grateful to the editor, associate editor, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful guidance. They would also like to express appreciation to Shalina Bhagat for her assistance with the studies. The authors gratefully acknowledge support from a MSI-ACR Shopper Marketing Grant.

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level of appearance self-esteem can render consumers immune to the influence of larger sizes. Importantly, although consumers respond unfavorably to larger clothing sizes, they respond more favorably to products that can help to repair their damaged appearance self-esteem or that can help to affirm their self-esteem in another domain, such as intellect.

## Vanity sizing

### *Encountering altered sizes*

The industry shift toward smaller sizes suggests that most consumers expect that the garments they purchase will be labeled with a fairly low number. In other words, particularly for younger individuals who do not remember a time when a size 0 did not exist, vanity sizing represents normal sizing. The question of interest, then, is what happens when a consumer shops at a store that has not followed the vanity-sizing trend, has inconsistent sizing standards, or has downshifted sizes to a lesser degree. Previous research has suggested that while size labels indicating a smaller-than-expected size can generate positive mental imagery, labels indicating a larger-than-expected size do not generate such imagery, because mental imagery about being a larger size could be detrimental to self-worth (Aydinoglu & Krishna, 2012). Building on this notion, we suggest that being faced with larger-than-expected sizes can, indeed, be damaging to a consumer's self-worth because they act as a threat to consumers' appearance self-esteem. People's clothing can be conceived of as a part of their self-view (Belk, 1988; Cassut, 2008; Fromm, 1976), and similar to the manner in which a brand label can reflect desired identities (Berger & Ward, 2010), a size label can be an aspect of a consumer's self-concept (e.g., "I am a 6."). If the size label suggests a size that is larger than what a consumer is used to, this can have a temporary negative effect on appearance self-esteem, which will carry over to negative evaluations of the clothing item.

If the effect of larger-than-expected sizes on clothing evaluation occurs as a result of a threat to consumers' state-level appearance self-esteem, then increasing appearance self-esteem should protect consumers from this threat. A central, underlying motivation of human behavior is the protection of self-esteem (Baumeister, 1998; Crocker & Park, 2004). Self-affirmation can maintain positive self-esteem and buttress consumers against esteem threats (Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). Thus, bolstering appearance self-esteem should reduce the threat of a larger size and attenuate its influence on clothing evaluation. More formally,

**H1.** For consumers with bolstered appearance self-esteem, the negative impact of requiring a larger-than-expected size on clothing evaluations will be mitigated.

It is important to note that we expect a domain-specific bolstering effect. That is, only bolstered appearance self-esteem will mitigate sizing effects, whereas boosts from other domains (e.g., intelligence) should still leave individuals vulnerable in the appearance self-esteem domain (Park & Maner, 2009). Appearance self-esteem is a particularly important aspect of women's self-worth (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008), and

appearance self-esteem threats have different effects than threats to other aspects of a woman's self-esteem (Park & Maner, 2009).

### *Coping through compensatory consumption*

One way consumers compensate for threats to their self-esteem is by consuming (Braun & Wicklund, 1989). When specific dimensions of consumers' self-esteem are threatened, they will seek out products that can affirm those threatened aspects of the self (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). A threat to appearance self-esteem due to larger than expected clothing sizing should therefore increase the desire for products which have affirmational properties for appearance. Thus, products designed to enhance one's appearance (e.g., makeup, jewelry) would provide affirmational value to one's sense of appearance, while mitigating further threats. Importantly, however, because other sized items (e.g., clothing) would provide additional potential threats, they should be less desirable. By purchasing appearance-enhancing, non-sized products, consumers can compensate for the threat of requiring a larger than expected clothing size with a success in the same appearance domain (Carver, Blaney, & Scheier, 1979). Formally,

**H2.** Consumers who find that they require a larger clothing size than expected will be more likely to purchase non-sized, appearance-enhancing products than consumers who fit into their expected clothing size.

Consumers may also seek out products from an unrelated domain when faced with an appearance self-esteem threat. When people experience a threat in one domain they may utilize consumption to reaffirm themselves in an unrelated domain (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). For example, once consumers have had their appearance esteem threatened, they may seek to affirm themselves in a different domain, such as intelligence. This could lead them to purchase products that would make them feel smart, such as sophisticated reading material. We propose,

**H3.** When consumers find that they require a larger clothing size than expected, they will be more likely to purchase products that affirm a different esteem domain than consumers who fit into their expected clothing size.

Note the asymmetry in the domain specificity of self-esteem and sizing effects. As noted earlier, with regard to protection from an imminent appearance self-esteem threat (i.e., requiring a larger-than-expected size in clothing), a boost in a distinct domain such as intelligence will not be effective. Only enhanced self-esteem in the relevant domain (i.e., appearance) will insulate consumers from this threat. However, after appearance self-esteem has been threatened, consumers may seek affirmation in a distinct domain in an effort to restore overall levels of self-esteem (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

## Study 1

Study 1 tests the moderating role of appearance self-esteem on the effects of larger sizing on attitudes toward clothing (H1). We

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