Lack of diversity in sale associates as stigmatized identity threat to female customers
in an apparel store

Domenique Jones (University of Tennessee) & Heejin (Jeanie) Lim (University of Tennessee)

Keywords: *diversity, brand stereotype, physical appearance, stigmatized identity threat, self-objectification*

Purpose/Rationale. Many fashion retail brands facilitate *aesthetic labor* strategy by controlling frontline employees' physical appearance (Otterbring et al., 2018, p.78). In this way, they showcase a stereotypical brand image (Walters, 2016). However, this approach that reinforces the Western beauty ideal of being thin, heterosexual, white, able-bodied and young (Davis, 2018) has generated backlash from consumers, particularly for those who do not fit within the confines of these standards (McColl & Truong, 2013). Szymanski et al. (2011) contended that sexually objectifying environments foster sexual objectification of women and female self-objectification. However, few studies have investigated this issue in a retail setting, that is, how frontline employees' appearance management creates the objectifying environment for female customers. Thus, this study examines how the aesthetic labor strategy influences consumers' self-concept in fashion retailing.

Conceptual Framework/Hypotheses Development. Grounded on social identity threat theory and objectification theory, we propose that the female Western-beauty-based stereotype (e.g., thin and White) of frontline employees in an apparel store increases customers' perception of stigmatized identity threat through self-objectification. Social identity threat theory posits that one's identifiable attributes can function as stigmatized identity threat cues by making another person assess their own identity and feel excluded in a certain setting (Wooten & Rank-Christman, 2018). Applied to a retail setting, stereotypical visual images of retail sales-associates cultivate a social trigger that conveys the retailer's value and a degree of welcomeness to a customer (Chaney et al., 2018; Wooten & Rank-Christman, 2018). Customers recognize whether or not they fit in the conveyed aesthetic the brand represents and feel welcomed in the store accordingly (Chaney et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). Taken together, we propose that a Western-beauty-based stereotype of saleswomen in an apparel store will enhance female customers' stigmatized identity threat (H1). We also propose self-objectification as a mediator between perceived diversity and stigmatized identity threat (H2). Additionally, we hypothesize that lack of perceived ethnicity among saleswomen amplifies the indirect effect (H3). We selected warmth as a mediator in this study because this characteristic is more important than competence in interpersonal contexts (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Thus, we hypothesize that perceived lack of diversity in body size and ethnicity will decreased perceived warmth (H4), which will adversely influence store attitude (H5).

Method. This study utilizes a 2 x 2 (body size: thin vs plus size, ethnicity: all White vs diverse ethnicities (i.e., White, Black, Hispanic)) between-subjects experimental design where 72 female college students from a public university in the US were randomly assigned to four experimental

conditions. Each condition presented three images of female saleswomen in a hypothetic apparel store. A pre-test of 43 female students identified 32 images used in different body size conditions. In the main study, participants were asked to assess self-objectification (McKinley & Hyde, 1996), perceived stigmatized identity threat (Branscombe et al., 1999), perceived warmth of saleswomen (Aaker et al., 2010), and store attitude (Lafferty et al., 2002). All measures were adapted from the literature and measured on a 9-point Likert scales.

Results. Manipulation checks confirmed that different conditions of body sizes (F=18.90, p < .001) and ethnicity (F=5.74, p =.018) as intended. The results of one-way ANOVA revealed that respondents in a thin-saleswomen condition perceived a higher level of stigmatized identity threat (M=6.46) than those in a plus-size-saleswomen conditions (M=4.25), confirming H1 ($F_{1,70}$=68.82, p < .001). The results of PROCESS model 4 confirmed self-objectification as a significant mediator (Bootstrap 95% CI = 1.4052, 4.0904), supporting H2. That is, respondents in a Western-beauty-ideal condition presented a higher level of self-objectification (b = 5.56, p < .001), which resulted in a higher level of stigmatized identity threat (b = .43, p < .001). The results of PROCESS model 7 confirmed a moderated mediation with perceived ethnic diversity as a moderator (Bootstrap 95% CI = -5.1462, -1.6717). However, in contrast to our hypothesis, the indirect effect was significant only for those who were exposed to an ethnically diverse group of saleswomen ($b_{diverse}$= 3.29, Bootstrap 95% CI = 1.6411, 5.2334; $b_{all\ white}$ = -.01, Bootstrap 95% CI = -.4284, .4048). Thus, H3 was partially supported. The results of two-way ANOVA revealed that perceived lack of diversity both in body size and ethnic diversity decreased perceived warmth ($M_{plus-size}$ = 3.83, M_{thin} = 1.39, $F_{1,64}$ = 45.44, p < .001; $M_{diverse}$ = 3.67, $M_{all\ white}$= 1.49, F_{64} = 42.115, p < .001). The interaction effect was significant ($F_{1,64}$ = 83.33, p < .001). The results of PROCESS model 7 confirmed this result and further demonstrated a positive relationship between perceived warmth and store attitude (b = .16, p < .05). In brief, perceived lack of diversity in body size and ethnicity decreased perceived warmth, which, then, lowered store attitude. The moderated mediation was statistically significant (Bootstrap 95% CI = .6150, 3.3582). However, further examination revealed that the interaction effect and the indirect effect were significant only for those in an ethnic diversity condition. Therefore, H4 and H5 were partially supported.

Discussion. This research adds to the body of research surrounding brand stereotype by demonstrating the effects of perceived diversity in sales associates' appearance on customers' self-concept and store attitude in a fashion retail setting. The limitations of this study include a small sample size and homogeneous sample. One previous study showed that customers who do not possess these industry stereotypical physical characteristics feel more comfortable interacting with sales associates who also do not subscribe to this ideal, while the opposite is true for those who fit the stereotype standards (Arndt et al., 2019). Therefore, future research is recommended to test our research model by recruiting respondents with diverse ethnic/racial backgrounds.

Selected References

Aaker, J., Vohs, K. D., & Mogilner, C. (2010). Nonprofits are seen as warm and for-profits as competent: Firm stereotypes matter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *37*(2), 224-237.

Abel, J. I., Buff, C. L., & O'Neill, J. C. (2013). Actual self-concept versus ideal self-concept. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*.

Branscombe, N. R., Schmitt, M. T., & Harvey, R. D. (1999). Perceiving pervasive discrimination among African Americans: Implications for group identification and well-being. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *77*(1), 135.

Chaney, K. E., Sanchez, D. T., and Maimon, M. R. (2019). Stigmatized-identity cues in consumer spaces. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *29*(1), 130-141.

Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., Glick, P., & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *82*(6), 878-902.

Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *21*(2), 173-206.

Lafferty, B. A., Goldsmith, R. E., & Newell, S. J. (2002). The dual credibility model: The influence of corporate and endorser credibility on attitudes and purchase intentions. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *10*(3), 1-11.

McKinley, N. M., & Hyde, J. S. (1996). The objectified body consciousness scale: Development and validation. *Psychology of women quarterly*, *20*(2), 181-215.

Otterbring, T., Ringler, C., Sirianni, N. J., & Gustafsson, A. (2018). The Abercrombie & Fitch effect: The impact of physical dominance on male customers' status-signaling consumption. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *55*(1), 69-79.

Szymanski, D. M., Moffitt, L. B., & Carr, E. R. (2011). Sexual objectification of women: advances to theory and research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 39*(1), 6-38.

Wooten, D. & Rank-Christman, T. (2019). Stigmatized-identity cues: Threats as opportunities for consumer psychology. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *29*(1), 142-151.