

Investigating the Link between Appearance-Related Self-Discrepancies and Retail Therapy Shopping Behavior Through Emotional Route

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Introduction: Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) suggests that the experience of an inconsistent belief between an actual-self and a desired-self produces many different types of emotional discomforts, such as anxiety and depression. Several studies in consumer behavioral context found that people are likely to engage in a certain behavior, such as eating and shopping, when they attempt to regulate their emotional discomforts (Hess, Kacen, & Kim, 2006). Particularly, some consumers consider shopping as retail therapy (RT) to make oneself feel better with the primary purpose of improving his/her emotional discomfort (Lonsdale, 1994). Many previous studies have attempted to examine the relationship between self-discrepancies and consumer behaviors broadly (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). However, no studies have attempted to investigate the link between appearance-related self-discrepancies and RT shopping behavior. Therefore, to fill this research gap, the purpose of this study was to build a mechanistic model that delineate how appearance-related self-discrepancies influence RT shopping behavior through two different emotional routes (dejection-related emotions and agitation-related emotions).

Conceptual Framework/Hypothesis Development: Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) serves as the theoretical framework for the investigation of the relationships between appearance-related self-discrepancy, emotional discomfort, and RT shopping behavior. People may experience different types of appearance-related discrepancies that produce various types of emotional discomforts (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999). Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and extant literature suggest that the ideal self-discrepancy produces dejection-related emotions, such as disappointment and dissatisfaction. However, prior studies found that ideal self-discrepancy can also be linked with agitation-related emotions, such as anxiety and guilt (Tangney, Niedenthal, Covert, & Barlow, 1998). For example, Brown and Dittmar (2005) found that individuals, who paid attention to an advertising model who possess an ideal body shape evoking the ideal appearance self-discrepancy, experience a high level of appearance anxiety towards their body image. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) also suggests that the ought self-discrepancy can produce more agitation-related emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and shame. For example, negative appearance evaluations by significant others may also give rise to social appearance anxiety which arise from negative thoughts about one's appearance and discomfort during a physique evaluation (Park & Maner, 2009). There is ample evidence indicating that consumers purchase a wide range of appearance-related products (e.g., clothing and cosmetics) and services (e.g., plastic surgery), as well as engage in various appearance management behaviors (e.g., dieting and exercising) to reduce such negative emotional outcomes from the appearance-related self-discrepancies (Custers & Aarts, 2007). For example, consumers buy high-status products, such as executive pens and briefcase, when they feel powerless (Rucker & Gailinsky, 2014). RT is a pervasive shopping behavior by consumers because shopping provides entertainment value that allows them to forget their psychological problems or stressful situations. Based on the above account, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1. The ideal appearance self-discrepancy will positively influence dejection-related emotions.
H2. The ideal appearance self-discrepancy will positively influence agitation-related emotions.
H3. The ought appearance self-discrepancy will positively influence agitation-related emotions.

- H4. Dejection-related emotions will positively influence retail therapy shopping behavior.
- H5. Agitation-related emotions will positively influence retail therapy shopping behavior.
- H6. Dejection-related emotions will mediate the relationship between the ideal appearance self-discrepancy and retail therapy shopping behavior.
- H7. Agitation-related emotions will mediate the relationship between the ideal appearance self-discrepancy and retail therapy shopping behavior.
- H8. Agitation-related emotions will mediate the relationships between the ought appearance self-discrepancy and retail therapy shopping behavior.

Methods and Data Analysis: The Sample Network, a third-party online market research platform's consumer panel was used for collecting the data through an online survey developed in Qualtrics. The online survey included 7-point Likert type scales with all measurement items adapted from existing scales to measure each research variable [11 items for the ideal appearance self-discrepancy and 11 items for the ought appearance self-discrepancy (Szymanski & Cash, 1995); 5 items for dejection-related emotions and 5 items for agitation-related emotions (Szymanski & Cash, 1995); and 11 items for RT shopping behavior (Kang & Johnson, 2011)]. Demographic questions were also included. SPSS was used to run descriptive statistics and reliability analysis. AMOS was used to run confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) in order to examine the measurement model and to test research hypotheses.

Results: A total of 532 useable responses were collected from participants who are 19 or older representing U.S. national sample and who had RT shopping experiences. Sample consisted of 255 males (47.9%) and 277 females (52.1%) with a mean age of 44. The majority of respondents were Caucasian American (75.8%), followed by African American (9.0%), Hispanic (7.5%), and others (7.7%). The largest majority of respondents had household income levels under \$74,999 (73.1%) and had full-time jobs (46.2%). All the scales used for measuring the research variables demonstrated internal consistency with Cronbach's α of .70 or greater. The CFA revealed that the measurement model had an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2=916.60$, $df=403$, $CFI=.96$, $NFI=.93$, $TLI=.95$, and $RMSEA=.05$). Structural model fit indices suggested that the hypothesized structural relationships fit the data well ($\chi^2=961.51$, $df=434$, $CFI=.96$, $NFI=.93$, $TLI=.95$, and $RMSEA=.05$). Findings suggested that the ideal appearance self-discrepancy had a statistically significant influence on dejection-related emotions (Std. $\beta=.56$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Furthermore, the ideal appearance self-discrepancy also had a statistically significant influence on agitation-related emotions (Std. $\beta=.44$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. However, the ought appearance self-discrepancy did not significantly influence agitation-related emotion (Std. $\beta = -.01$, $p = .99$), rejecting H3. As proposed by H4, dejection-related emotion had a statistically significant influence on RT shopping behavior (Std. $\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$). However, H4 was not supported because of the negative relationship between variables, opposite to the expected hypothesized positive valence. The SEM result revealed agitation-related emotion had a statistically significant influence on RT shopping behavior (Std. $\beta = .23$, $p < .001$). Thus, H5 was supported. Two-tailed tests from the bias-correlated percentile method revealed a non-significant direct effect for the ideal appearance self-discrepancy on RT shopping behavior, but the indirect effects were found statistically significant for the ideal appearance self-discrepancy on RT shopping behavior through dejection-related emotion (Std. $\beta = .07$, $p < .05$) and agitation-related emotion (Std. $\beta = .08$, $p < .01$) as the mediators. Whereas two-tailed tests for the direct effect for the ought appearance self-discrepancy on RT shopping behavior was not significant, but the

indirect effects were found statistically significant through agitation-related emotion (Std. $\beta = .03$, $p < .05$), as the mediator. Thus, H6, H7, and H8 were supported.

Conclusion and Implications: To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to demonstrate the link between appearance-related self-discrepancies and RT shopping behavior. The present study has important theoretical and practical implications. Importantly, the empirical findings of the present study for linking appearance self-discrepancies to RT shopping behavior through emotional route contributed to the existing consumer behavior literature by elaborating the psychological and behavioral mechanisms underlying RT shopping behavior. Findings provide practical implications for retailers, marketers, and consumer welfare to develop more fine-tuned strategies to help different types of shoppers achieve their RT shopping goals in the other domains. On the other hand, some limitations include survey methodology and geographical limitations among others. Therefore, we suggest that future studies should consider other factors such as gender, various research methods (e.g., experimental design), and cross-cultural studies to investigate this phenomenon further.

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