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Amanda Cohen

Deborah J.C. Brosdahl

K. Annette Burnsed

Joohyung Park

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Reflections in the Mirror: Women's Self Comparisons to Mannequins and Peers

Amanda Cohen, M.S.

Deborah J.C. Brosdahl, Ph.D.

K. Annette Burnsed, Ph.D.

Joohyung Park, Ph.D.

Department of Retailing

University of South Carolina

ABSTRACT

The fashion industry has been under fire for years for using unrealistic body sizes in the form of stick-thin fashion models to promote the sale of clothing. Typical Western fashion models in today's society are sized 0-2 and weigh approximately 23% less than the average U.S. woman, who weighs approximately 163 pounds and wears a size 14 (Vesilind, 2009). According to Vartanian (2009), many women suffer from body image self-discrepancies when they compare themselves with others, including fashion models. As such, social comparison has been documented to create negative emotions, such as body dissatisfaction and disappointment (Posavac & Posavac, 2002).

Although a number of studies have investigated how an idealized body image in media impacts social comparison among females, no research has explored to what extent comparisons of mannequins to a customer's self may impact self-image and consumer behavior. Since mannequins serve to show consumers how clothing may look on the human body and consumers may be drawn to the clothing due to the way the clothing fits the mannequin and/or the poise, stature, or grace of the mannequin itself (Schneider, 1997), it should be expected that mannequins would also influence self-image and behavior.

Utilizing Social Comparison Theory as the theoretical foundation, this study examines the influencing factors affecting U.S. females' social comparison tendencies and psychological well-being when a female compares her body to that of a mannequin and to other women. Data was collected using an online survey through the use of snowball convenience sampling, yielding 314 usable responses. Results indicate that the use of idealized mannequins in retail stores have a significant impact on social comparison and body dissatisfaction for female consumers. These results suggest that female consumers do indeed compare their bodies to those of mannequins and that the greater the discrepancy between the size of the mannequin and their own size, the more dissatisfied the woman is with her body. This research extends Social Comparison Theory as the findings show women also compare themselves to mannequins. In addition, results of this study show that women who are categorized with a BMI classification of overweight or obese are more likely to compare themselves to other females. Results also show that the top five body parts/characteristics most commonly compared to mannequins and other females are body size, weight, body shape, waist, and legs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ms. Amanda Cohen graduated with a Master of Retailing degree in May 2015 from the Dept. of Retailing at the University of South Carolina. She is currently employed in retail industry working as an online analyst.

Dr. Deborah J.C. Brosdahl received her PhD from Iowa State University and has been an Associate Professor in the Dept. of Retailing at the University of South Carolina since 2009 after being a faculty member at Kansas State University for 11 years. She has received numerous teaching awards, is author of over 30 journal articles and book chapters, and has received over one million dollars in grants.

Dr. K. Annette Burnsed, Assistant Professor in the Department of Retailing at the University of South Carolina, received her Ph.D. in Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She holds a Master's degree in Textiles, Merchandising, and Interiors and a B.S. in Furnishings and Interiors; both degrees were earned from the University of Georgia. Dr. Burnsed has published in various journals such as: *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior, Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, Clothing Cultures, Journal of African Development, and International Journal of Sales, Retailing, and Marketing*. She is a member of the American Collegiate Retailing Association, International Textile and Apparel Association, and American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences.

Dr. Joohyung Park received her PhD in Consumer Behavior from Purdue University and is an assistant professor in the Department of Retailing at University of South Carolina. Her research interest includes small business CSR strategy, service marketing, e-retailing, and consumer behavior. Her research has been published in various journals including the *Journal of Business Research* and the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*.

