

## Investigating the Link between Appearance-Related Self-Discrepancies and Retail Therapy Shopping Behavior

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**Introduction:** A self-discrepancy produces a wide variety of emotional discomforts that give rise to specific motivations and people engage in a certain behavior to relieve the source of self-discrepancy (Carver & Scheier, 1990). Retail therapy (RT) is a shopping behavior that helps consumers to improve their negative emotions through the consumption of products or services (Loundale, 1994). Prior literature has examined the role of self-discrepancies on consumer behaviors broadly (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006); however, almost no studies have attempted to examine how self-discrepancies in the domain of physical appearance affect RT shopping behavior. Further, the conceptual foundation underpinning the role of RT in serving as a coping strategy for dealing with the negative emotional consequences of appearance-related discrepancies is lacking in the literature. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the aforementioned gap by examining a conceptual framework linking appearance-related self-discrepancies to RT shopping behavior through motivations and coping mechanisms.

**Conceptual Framework/Hypothesis Development:** This study integrates the conceptual framework based on the regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) and compensatory consumption behavior model (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017) to identify consumers' strategic efforts to reduce appearance-related discrepancies through RT shopping behavior. An individual with the ideal discrepancy is motivated to engage in a specific behavior to regulate the absence of positive outcomes. For example, an individual with the ideal appearance discrepancy may be motivated to engage in plastic surgery to approach his/her ideal appearance attributes (i.e., the desired end-state). Whereas an individual with the ought discrepancy is motivated to engage in a specific behavior to avoid the presence of negative outcomes (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). For example, an individual with an ought appearance discrepancy may be motivated to avoid social settings where his/her appearance may fall short of what is perceived to be expected (i.e., the undesired end-state). Consumers take various cognitive and behavioral actions as coping strategies to approach the desired end-states and avoid the undesired end-states (Han, Duhachek, & Rucker, 2015). Coping literature suggests people cope with specific types of negative emotions through either problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping (Latack, 1986). Problem-focused coping has been considered as an effective strategy to approach positive outcomes (Han, Duhachek, & Rucker, 2015). For example, Pentina, Taylor, and Voelker (2009) found that aspiration for unrealistic idealized appearance may increase the actual-ideal discrepancy among young populations, and, in turn, lead an individual to indulge in cosmetic surgery consumption. Shopping experience leads an individual to approach future goals by reinforcing positive emotions in RT shopping behavior context. Emotion-focused coping involves cognitive processes that control one's negative emotional states (Carver & Vargas, 2011). Specifically, shopping is easily accessible to consumers compared to other activities, such as traveling for a holiday (Bloch, Ridgway, & Dawson, 1994). It is pervasive among young consumers because shopping provides entertainment value that allows them to forget their psychological problems or stressful situations. The following hypotheses are proposed, based on the above account.

H1. The ideal appearance self-discrepancy will positively influence approach motivation.

H2. The ought appearance self-discrepancy will positively influence avoidance motivation.

- H3. Approach motivation will positively influence problem-focused coping.  
H4. Problem-focused coping will positively influence RT shopping behavior.  
H5. Avoidance motivation will positively influence emotion-focused coping.  
H6. Emotion-focused coping will positively influence RT shopping behavior.

***Methods and Data Analysis:*** Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) 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); 13 items for approach motivation and 7 items for avoidance motivation (Carver & White 1994); 14 items for problem-focused coping and 25 items for emotion-focused coping (Han, Duhachek, & Rucker, 2015); 11 items for RT shopping behavior (Kang & Johnson, 2011)]. Demographic questions were also included. SPSS was used to run descriptive statistics and reliability analysis and 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 347 useable responses were collected representing U.S. national sample and who had RT shopping experiences, which consisted of 167 males (48.1%) and 180 females (54%) with a mean age of 36. The majority of respondents were Caucasian American (69.7%), followed by African American (13.8%), Hispanic (8.4%), and others. The largest majority of respondents had household income levels under \$74,999 (74.0%) and had full-time jobs (75.8%). All the scales used for measuring the research variables demonstrated internal consistency with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .70 or greater. The CFA revealed that the measurement model had an acceptable model fit ( $\chi^2= 1582.75$ ,  $df= 968$ ,  $CMIN/df=1.64$ ,  $CFI= .95$ ,  $IFI= .95$ ,  $TLI= .95$ , and  $RMSEA= .04$ ). Structural model fit indices suggested that the hypothesized structural relationships fit the data well ( $\chi^2= 1335.50$ ,  $df= 874$ ,  $CMIN/df= 1.53$ ,  $CFI= .96$ ,  $NFI= .91$ ,  $TLI= .96$ , and  $RMSEA= .04$ ). Findings suggested that the ideal appearance self-discrepancy had an inverse relationship with approach motivation ( $\beta= -.11$ ,  $p= .035$ ), rejecting H1. Whereas the ought appearance self-discrepancy significantly influenced avoidance motivation ( $\beta=.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H2. Approach motivation significantly influenced problem-focused coping strategy ( $\beta=.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and problem-focused coping also positively influenced RT shopping behavior ( $\beta=.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting H3 and H4. Furthermore, the results indicated that avoidance motivation positively influenced emotion focused coping ( $\beta=.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as emotion-focused coping significantly influenced RT shopping behavior ( $\beta=.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H5 and H6. In total, the hypothesized model explained 56.1% of the variance in RT shopping behavior.

***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 some practical implications as well as limitations. Importantly, the empirical findings of the present study for linking appearance self-discrepancies to RT shopping behavior through motivational and coping strategy routes 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 sample size, survey methodology, and geographical limitations among others. Future studies should also consider other factors such as gender, varied research methods, and cross-cultural studies.

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