**Examining the Relationship between Beauty, Body Image, and Trust in**

**Omnichannel Beauty Retailers**

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**Introduction**

 The beauty industry has made multiple shifts to adapt to changing consumer expectations during the pandemic. Although online beauty sales have grown considerably throughout 2020, this increase does not offset the decline of in-store sales (Gerstel, 2020). In recent months, Sephora and Ulta Beauty have created a partnership with two big-box retailers, Kohl's and Target, respectively, to help boost their sales (Coresight Research, 2020). Small-scale beauty retailers' have the potential to tap into the consumers, retail space, and shopping channels of big-box retailers like Kohl's and Target. This study assessed the relationship between consumers' conceptions of beauty, body appreciation, and social norms. The study hypothesized that the combined effect of the consumers' relationship to beauty, their body, and society would influence their trust and intention to purchase online from omnichannel beauty retailers (Sephora, Ulta, Target, Walmart, Macy's, Nordstrom, Kohl's, CVS, and Walgreens).

**Literature Review**

The beauty industrial complex has objectified women to the male gaze, making them feel as if they must constantly work on their external appearance to meet society's expectations (Wolf, 1991). As women's roles in society change, the beauty industry also innovates in order to capitalize off of women's changing conceptualizations of beauty (Faludi, 1991). In light of this, objectification theory, which refers to viewing women's bodies as objects (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), informs the variables chosen for this study. Researchers developed a measurement for a broad conceptualization of how women define beauty (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016). In this research, we separate beauty conceptualization and body appreciation. Beauty conceptualization relates to individual beliefs that restrict women's beauty, whereas body appreciation relates to the individual's attitude and awareness of their own body (i.e., characteristics of their own body). Body appreciation can be defined as accepting, having a favorable opinion, and respecting an individual's own body (Avalos et al., 2005).

The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) states that an individual's overall attitude is derived from their beliefs and feelings towards a specific object. In this research, we integrate an individual's belief of beauty concepts and their attitude and awareness of their own body related to social norms that may influence their purchase behavior.

In previous research, beauty standards have been linked to societal norms. Social norms can be defined as specific rules or criteria that can direct a person's behavior (Reese et al., 2019). Social norms can impact how consumers see themselves and others, including companies. The concept of trust in previous studies is a critical component in customers' online shopping behavior (Raman, 2019). Trust in this study relates to customers' beliefs and confidence in the online retailer. Purchase intention can be defined as an individual conscious plan to make a future purchase of a specific product through the online retailer (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Therefore, the following hypotheses were suggested.

H1: Beauty concept has a positive effect on Social Norms.

H2: Body appreciation has a positive effect on Social Norms.

H3: Social Norms have a positive effect on purchase intention.

H4: Social Norms have a positive effect on trust.

H5: The effect of Social Norms on purchase intention is mediated by trust.

**Methods**

Scale items were developed to measure each construct in the theoretical framework. The measurement items were adapted from previous research using a 5-point Likert scale. Some items were reworded to adjust to the focus of the study and improve readability. Amazon MTurk was used to administer a questionnaire for data collection. At the beginning of the survey, a selection of omnichannel beauty retailers (i.e., Sephora, Ulta, Target, Walmart, Macy's, Nordstrom, Kohl's, CVS, and Walgreens) was presented for the respondents to choose from to ensure that the respondents have shopped in one or more of the stores listed in the past 12 months. A total of 429 participants were used for the data analysis (males 38% and females 62%; median age = 34). Next, participants were asked to answer questions adopted from the literature (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Tylka et al., 2015; Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016; Ma, 2017; Paul et al., 2016). To test the hypotheses, this study employed structural equation modeling using MPlus.

**Results**

 The confirmatory factor analysis $(CFI=.924, TLI=.914, RMSEA=.055, SRMR=.046, χ^{2}= 559.60, df=242, p<.001) $and SEM analysis $(CFI=.921, TLI=.912, RMSEA=.056, SRMR=.053, χ^{2}= 577.11, df=246, p<.001)$. In the model $(n=429)$, beauty concept $(H1;β=.053, p<.001)$ had no significant effect on the social norm; hence our H1 was not supported. Body appreciation $(H2;β=-.470, p<.001)$ had a negative effect on the social norm, therefore, not supporting H2. Social norm has a direct effect on purchase intention $(H3;β=.375, p<.001),$ and social norm $(H4;β=.620, p<.001)$ has a direct effect on trust. Social norm had an indirect effect through trust $(H5;β=-.075, p<.001)$ on purchase intention, thus H5 was supported in our model.

**Discussion and Implications**

 Findings reveal that conceptualizations of beauty had no significant effect on the social norm. This suggests that beauty conceptualizations, regardless of the customer's environment, do not influence their social behavior. However, the concept of beauty is diverse, meaning it is challenging to generalize beauty conceptualizations to the general population. Hence for future study, comparing beauty conceptualizations across cultures and ages will significantly contribute to the understanding of beauty concepts cross-culturally. This study finds that customers' appreciation of their bodies negatively influences their social behavior, affecting their intention to purchase. We suggest beauty retailers adjust their advertising strategy to reach their target audience. For example, finding the right influencer to reach a target customer should involve assessing the influencer's views of beauty. This study suggests that the influencer's conceptualizations of beauty could impact customers purchasing decisions. Finally, this study also finds that trust mediates customers' social norms and purchase intention. This finding suggests that beauty retailers should build customers' trust or confidence in online shopping, increasing the likelihood of growing purchases in their online channels.

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