The Weight Bias: An Empirical Study of Body Size and Basket Healthiness on Consumer Helping Behaviors Toward Thin, Average, and Obese Shoppers (Abstract)

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Abstract Obesity is a leading health crisis in the United States; however, there is almost no research in the arena of obesity within the social space of a retail environment. While some studies examine prejudices toward thin and obese people in general, there are no studies that investigate how shoppers judge one another based on body size. This is an important aspect of consumer behavior as consumer interactions are relevant criteria for determining customer satisfaction (Huang and Hsu 2009). We attempt to bridge this gap in research and provide initial empirical insights into how brand attitudes and the emotional response people have toward other shoppers are affected by other shoppers' body size (thin, average, obese) and their shopping basket (healthy, unhealthy).

The results of this study should be taken as a starting point to further delve into the nuances of shopper appearance in the retail domain. Specifically, body image and the “weight bias” are an important signal in the eyes of consumers who share retail space. It seems that the weight bias is not only reserved for the obese—but should be applied to those viewed as “too thin.” This study highlights how emotional responses to shoppers can vary based on both body type and the composition of the shopping basket. This is important since shopping scenarios almost always include more cues about a person than merely appearance. Results also suggest that brand attitudes can be negatively influenced by weight biases; however, we only found this to prevail for thin shoppers purchasing unhealthy items. Brand attitudes were unaffected by the obese shopper, which seems contradictory to previous studies about the weight bias. A deeper investigation into this finding is needed.

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