

Subtle but spotted? Influencing factors of customer-perceived weight discrimination

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Abstract

Purpose – Studies report that frontline employees frequently discriminate against overweight customers, a group of vulnerable consumers that is growing worldwide. However, because most discrimination by frontline employees is covert, the authors ask whether overweight customers perceive discrimination and what influences this perception. Drawing on field theory, this paper aims to investigate how two environment factors (frontline employee overweight and frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers) and two person factors (customer pre-encounter affect and self-esteem) influence customer-perceived weight discrimination.

Design/methodology/approach – In a pilot study and three experimental studies, the authors examine the impact of covert discrimination of overweight customers by frontline employees on customers' perception of discrimination and the influencing effects of environment and person factors. Hypotheses are tested using regression analysis.

Findings – The authors find that overweight customers perceive covert weight discrimination by frontline employees. Frontline employee overweight mitigates the effect of covert discrimination, and (state and trait) self-esteem amplifies this effect. Frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers is insignificant. Customer (state and trait) negative affect directly increases customer-perceived discrimination independent of covert discrimination.

Originality/value – While extant research focuses on marketplace discrimination triggers and consequences, the perspective of the discriminated customer and what influences his or her perception of covert discrimination has attracted much less attention. Moreover, research rarely addresses overweight as a discrimination trigger. As environment and person influences frequently shape service encounters, the authors contribute novel and relevant insights to the literature. This is of high value, especially in light of the harmful consequences marketplace discrimination entails for customers and service firms.

Keywords Other customers, Self-esteem, Frontline employee, Overweight, Marketplace discrimination, Pre-encounter affect

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Overweight is a severe problem in developed countries. Over 70 per cent of the US population is overweight (National Center for Health Statistics, 2018). Worldwide, the overweight population doubled from 1980 until now, resulting in more than 1.9 billion overweight adults (World Health Organization, 2018). At the same time, society places a strong emphasis on appearance and body image (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2012), so overweight customers run a great risk of being stigmatized and experiencing unequal treatment (Ruggs *et al.*, 2015). Studies find that about 40 per cent of overweight people report frequent weight discrimination by firms and frontline employees in various services industries (Puhl *et al.*, 2008). Be it overt or covert, weight discrimination significantly reduces overweight customers' well-being (Walsh, 2009) and is associated with higher mortality (Sutin *et al.*, 2015). For service firms, discrimination negatively affects customer satisfaction (Baker *et al.*, 2008) and ultimately endangers financial performance (King *et al.*, 2006; Walsh, 2009).

Despite the alarming findings, research on marketplace discrimination – which studies discrimination by frontline employees against customers based on group-level traits such as race and gender (Fisk *et al.*, 2018) – rarely addresses overweight. Extant studies on weight discrimination focus on the prevalence of weight discrimination (Puhl *et al.*, 2008), the drivers of discriminatory behavior by frontline employees (King *et al.*, 2006; Ruggs *et al.*, 2015), and the consequences of weight discrimination for customers (Parkinson *et al.*, 2017; Puhl and Brownell, 2006) and service firms (Walsh, 2009). However, customers' perception of covert weight discrimination and the factors influencing their perception remain unaddressed. Insights into customer perception of covert marketplace discrimination due to other group-level traits are also scarce. Studies on race-based discrimination confirm the perception of an ambiguous incident as discrimination. However, these studies do not manipulate the discriminatory incident and thus cannot make causal statements (Baker *et al.*, 2008), and they focus on an observer's perspective instead of customers' perspective (Baker and Meyer, 2011). Thus, our

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understanding of customer perception of covert discrimination and specifically the factors influencing it are limited.

Shedding light on customer perception of discrimination is important because negative consequences of covert weight discrimination arise only when customers actually perceive an incident as discrimination. Moreover, studying customer perception of discrimination is also important because covert discrimination is common nowadays due to legislation that prohibits overt discriminating practices (e.g. Equality Act 2010 in the United Kingdom; Jones *et al.*, 2013). Covert discrimination is often high in ambiguity (King *et al.*, 2006), making it more difficult for overweight customers to recognize discrimination as such (Major *et al.*, 2002).

We contribute to the marketplace discrimination literature by experimentally studying customer perception of covert weight discrimination, which has received scarce scholarly attention despite the prevalence of overweight people in developed countries and worldwide (World Health Organization, 2018). We focus on overweight customers because they are much more frequently the target of weight discrimination than normal weight customers. As research on customer perception of weight discrimination is still in an early stage, we take a field theory approach (Lewin, 1935) and draw from extant research on marketplace discrimination and overweight in order to investigate boundary conditions that relate to the purchase situation (i.e. environment) and to the overweight customer (i.e. person).

Specifically, we study two environment factors that represent two crucial entities of the service encounter: the frontline employee and other customers (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007). Drawing on research showing that frontline employee weight influences customer judgment and behavior (Coward and Brady, 2014; McFerran *et al.*, 2010), we study the role of frontline employee weight in customer perception of covert weight discrimination. Extant studies investigating perceived discrimination recognize the importance of frontline employees; however, they do not consider the case of stigma similarity between customers and employees (Baker *et al.*, 2008; Baker and Meyer, 2011). Our research addresses this limitation by explicitly manipulating the weight of the frontline employee. Concerning other customers, we investigate the role of frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers in overweight customers' perception of covert weight discrimination. Extant studies demonstrate the importance of other customers in customer responses to discrimination (Baker *et al.*, 2008; Meyer and Baker, 2010), but do not address the role of other customers in an overweight customer's perception of covert weight discrimination. Moreover, extant studies focus on the presence and composition of other customers, but do not address the treatment that other customers receive from frontline employees. We investigate how the neutral treatment of other normal weight customers by a frontline employee affects the perception of discrimination of an overweight customer who was covertly discriminated by the same employee.

Regarding person factors, we account for cognitive and affective factors in examining self-esteem and affect. Whereas self-esteem and affect receive attention in discrimination research (Crocker *et al.*, 1991; Meyer and Baker, 2010), their role in influencing customers' perception of covert

discrimination is not studied. Self-esteem as a central psychological function is crucial in the case of customers with a visible unfavorable body feature, such as overweight (Crocker and Major, 1989). Self-esteem and overweight are associated (Miller and Downey, 1999) and research finds self-esteem to impact individuals' reactions towards ambiguous social interactions (Ford and Collins, 2010). Affect is a central variable in consumer behavior (Cohen *et al.*, 2006) and service research (Lechner and Paul, 2019). Studying affect is highly relevant, since research finds overweight people to experience affective irregularities and disorders (Friedman and Brownell, 1995).

To test the influence of the proposed environment and person-related factors in customer perception of weight discrimination, we study weight discrimination in a food retail setting. We thus follow Ruggs *et al.*'s (2015) call to study weight discrimination in a weight-related context, since extant studies largely focus on weight-unrelated products in retail settings (e.g. household items; King *et al.*, 2006; Ruggs *et al.*, 2015). In a food retail setting, overweight customers' well-being is particularly threatened (Skinner *et al.*, 2016) because there they are extremely vulnerable (Kidwell *et al.*, 2008; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, food retail is an important service industry evidenced by its contribution of more than 25 per cent to the total retail sales in the US (US Census Bureau, 2018).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we present our conceptual framework and develop our hypotheses. To test our hypotheses, we conduct a pilot-study and three experiments. We conclude our paper by discussing implications and limitations of our study.

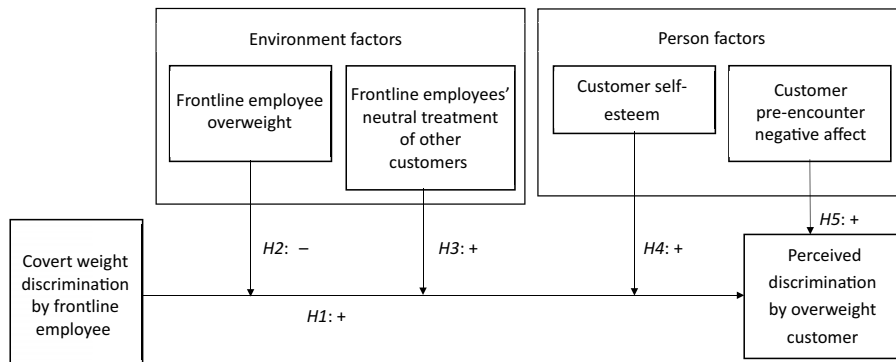
Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Overview

We present our conceptual framework in Figure 1. We hypothesize a positive main effect of covert weight discrimination by a frontline employee on perceived discrimination of overweight customers. In addition, we posit that frontline employee overweight negatively moderates the relationship between covert and perceived discrimination, whereas frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers as well as customer self-esteem positively moderate this relationship. Furthermore, we postulate a positive main effect of customer pre-encounter negative affect on perceived discrimination.

We deduct our framework from the well-established distinction between environment and person and from extant research on marketplace discrimination and overweight. Drawing on Lewin's field theory (Hui *et al.*, 1998; Lewin, 1935), we account for both environment and person. Regarding environment factors, we concentrate on the customer's social environment, as marketplace exchanges also fulfill social functions (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007). Building on marketplace discrimination studies (Baker *et al.*, 2008; Baker and Meyer, 2011), we consider the frontline employee, who the customer directly interacts with, as the primary information source, and other customers as the secondary information source. In terms of person factors, we include two variables covering the emotion-cognition

Figure 1 Conceptual framework



spectrum: pre-encounter negative affect and self-esteem (both state and trait). As extant research recognizes the importance of both in regard to consumption (Knowles *et al.*, 1993; Sirgy, 1982) and overweight (Friedman and Brownell, 1995; Miller and Downey, 1999), we investigate how these well-established factors are associated with a novel issue: customer perception of weight discrimination.

Customer perception of weight discrimination

Being overweight is often a stigma, an attribute to which a person is reduced in a degrading way (Goffman, 1963). Customers who carry a certain stigma frequently experience prejudice and discrimination – that is, “differential treatment in the marketplace based on group membership rather than individual differences” (Crockett *et al.*, 2003, p. 1). Acknowledging that this treatment leads to favorable outcomes for in-groups and disadvantageous outcomes for out-groups (Crockett *et al.*, 2003), we conceive of discrimination as a negative experience. In general, the perception of discrimination is very subjective, as a person might not automatically recognize a discriminatory event as such (Crocker and Major, 1989). Whenever discrimination is not occurring overtly and unmistakably, but rather in a subtle, indirect and thus covert way (King *et al.*, 2006), affected individuals are experiencing attributional ambiguity, not knowing whether their treatment is based on a discriminatory attitude or other reasons (e.g. an employee is in a bad mood and is treating everyone badly) (Crocker *et al.*, 1993). Extant research highlights covert discrimination in the form of shorter interaction length, higher uneasiness, decreased eye contact, or less smiling (Hebl *et al.*, 2002; King *et al.*, 2006).

Despite this subjectivity, we draw on research that supports our expectation that customers perceive covert weight discrimination (Walsh, 2009; Walsh and Hammes, 2017). We propose a positive relationship between covert and perceived discrimination based on the following rationales. Stigmatized people are generally particularly aware of the prevalence of stereotypes and discrimination within their surroundings (Crocker and Major, 1989) and vigilant for discriminatory behavior (Mendoza-Denton *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, research shows that knowing that a potential discriminator can see them and their stigma, which is the case in a person-to-person service encounter, makes stigmatized individuals more prone to perceiving discrimination (Crocker *et al.*, 1991). Lastly, our

study is set in a common, impersonal consumption context. Extant research suggests that in such contexts overweight customers are more likely to attribute negative experiences to an external cause (such as a discriminatory employee) than in more personal contexts (such as dating), where they tend to blame themselves (Crocker *et al.*, 1993). Therefore, we hypothesize:

- H1. Covert discrimination of overweight customers by a frontline employee positively influences customer-perceived discrimination.

Frontline employee overweight

Due to the direct interaction, the customer will not only consider the frontline employee a primary information source in an ambiguous situation, but will also assess whether the employee is a potential member of the same stigmatized group. Individuals have a social identity, which refers to one’s own knowledge of membership in and emotional attachment to a certain group (Tajfel, 1974). By organizing their environment into meaningful groups, individuals engage in social categorization that fosters simplification and orientation (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). An individual’s definition and categorization of the self and others is the basis for psychological group formation and interpersonal affinity towards group members (Turner, 1982). Individuals differentiate groups into in-groups, with which they identify, and out-groups, which they consider outsiders. Literature confirms a strong favoritism for the in-group in contrast to the out-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Recent research supports a general influence of overweight frontline employees on customers (Coward and Brady, 2014; Wan and Wyer, 2018). In line with this and literature confirming customers’ felt connection with the frontline employee in the case of physical similarity (McFerran *et al.*, 2010; Pounders *et al.*, 2015), we expect that customers may include frontline employees in the in-group, and thus a mutual stigma may generate liking and a feeling of shared hardship. Consequently, in a situation where the customer and employee are both overweight, we expect customers to associate themselves with this employee in a favorable way, which in turn should mitigate the perception of covert discriminatory behavior of the employee. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H2. Frontline employee overweight moderates the relationship between covert discrimination of overweight customers by a frontline employee and customer-perceived discrimination. Covert discrimination will have a weaker effect on perceived discrimination when the frontline employee is overweight (vs. normal weight).

Frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers

Scholars acknowledge the relevance of the social servicescape – that is, the presence of other customers in service delivery (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007) – as an essential element affecting the service (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). Thus, similarly to the employee, other customers can serve as a reference point in the interpretation of ambiguous situations. Because of a missing direct interaction and hence a greater distance, we consider them a secondary information source. As postulated by Festinger (1954), comparing themselves to others in an uncertain situation provides individuals with a sense of stability. In a service context, comparisons between customers in terms of their treatment by the employee are common (Söderlund *et al.*, 2014), but likely to be particularly relevant when customers differ in important physical features and in ambiguous situations. However, instead of only passively featuring other customers in the service environment (Baker *et al.*, 2008), we advance the literature by manipulating a neutral interaction with the frontline employee as a boundary condition. If an overweight customer observes that physically different (i.e. normal weight) customers are being treated differently (i.e. neutrally), it makes customer treatment appear controllable by the frontline employee and thus might prompt the customer to attribute the own treatment to discrimination (Weiner, 2000). Thus, we expect the likelihood of overweight customers perceiving an incident as discrimination to be higher. Consequently, we suggest:

H3. Frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers moderates the relationship between covert discrimination of overweight customers by a frontline employee and customer-perceived discrimination. Covert discrimination will have a stronger effect on perceived discrimination when customers have information that the frontline employee treats other customers, who are normal weight, in a neutral way (vs no information on their treatment).

Customer self-esteem

Self-esteem is fundamental to humans' psychological functioning (Crocker and Major, 1989). We define self-esteem as the subjective appraisal of one's own worth (Donnellan *et al.*, 2011). In line with striving for a positive social identity and self-concept, individuals attempt to uphold or increase their self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). There has been an ongoing debate whether self-esteem is more state- or trait-like (Donnellan *et al.*, 2011). Leary (1999) defines state self-esteem as short-lived fluctuations in one's self-view and trait self-esteem as the general appraisal of one's own value. We thus distinguish state and trait self-esteem based on whether self-esteem changes transiently (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991) or

whether it is comparable to a stable personality trait (Donnellan *et al.*, 2011). Following Crocker *et al.* (1993), we believe that in ambiguous, covert discriminatory situations, both state and trait self-esteem may be of importance in customer perception.

Self-esteem has appeared in distinct forms in discrimination research. It has been explored as an outcome (Crocker *et al.*, 1991) and as a moderator of outcomes of perceived discrimination (Corning, 2002), but its role in the perception of discrimination has not been examined. We contribute to the literature by examining self-esteem in a novel way, namely as a moderator of the relationship between covert and perceived discrimination. To explain the moderating role of self-esteem, we refer to stigmatized individuals' self-esteem preservation reported in the literature (Crocker and Major, 1989). Drawing on the protective effects of ascribing negative events to external causes (Abramson *et al.*, 1978; Weiner, 1985), individuals may reduce their own role in generating negative experiences by attributing negative experiences to external reasons (Crocker and Major, 1989). Therefore, they can protect their self-perception (Crocker *et al.*, 1991). However, this mechanism depends on the level of state or trait self-esteem (Crocker and Major, 1989). Overweight customers high in self-esteem can take advantage of this function and perceive a negative experience with a frontline employee as discrimination. In contrast, overweight customers low in self-esteem are more likely to attribute failures to internal reasons (Fitch, 1970). Thus, their low self-esteem might influence their perception of the negative experience in a way that it leads to less perception of discrimination, but higher attribution to the self. Accordingly, we postulate:

H4. Customer self-esteem moderates the relationship between covert discrimination of overweight customers by a frontline employee and customer-perceived discrimination. Covert discrimination will have a stronger effect on perceived discrimination when customer self-esteem is high (vs low).

Customer pre-encounter negative affect

We define affect as a superordinate set of valenced mental conditions (Lechner and Paul, 2019) that influence cognition, judgment, and behavior (Forgas *et al.*, 1984). Negative affect describes individual distress and unpleasantness, such as anxiety or irritation, while positive affect comprises alertness, enthusiasm, and liveliness (Watson *et al.*, 1988). In this study, we focus on customer pre-encounter negative affect, which can refer both to the customer's affective state shortly before entering a service encounter (Lechner and Paul, 2019) and to the customer's general trait of negative emotionality (Watson *et al.*, 1988).

People make use of their affective experience to interpret (ambiguous) situations and to evaluate the behavior of others in congruence with their affective state (or trait) (Bower, 1991). Service research finds affect congruency in perceptions of the service employee (Liljander and Mattsson, 2002) and the overall service experience (Mattila and Wirtz, 2000). Affect-as-information theories further support the notion that affect directly shapes judgment (Forgas, 1995). Rather than contrasting and evaluating attributes, customers use a heuristic

and make a judgment by considering how they are feeling (Pham, 1998; Schwarz and Clore, 1983). It is especially prevalent in cases of low-involvement products (Curren and Harich, 1994) and in situations with time and information constraints (Clore *et al.*, 1994) such as brief, impersonal service encounters. Research finds the affect-congruency effect to be asymmetrical and stronger for negative than for positive affect (Mayer *et al.*, 1992). Due to a negativity bias, people weigh negative information in evaluations higher than positive information (Rozin and Royzman, 2001). Moreover, people in a negative affective state interpret actions more suspiciously (Forgas, 1998), adding further to the negativity bias. Additionally, according to associative network theory, negative thoughts occur automatically in people with negative affect because these thoughts are most accessible to them (Wenzlaff *et al.*, 1988). Negative affect may thus directly lead to perceived discrimination. Correspondingly, we expect a positive main effect of pre-encounter negative affect on perceived discrimination, but no effect of positive affect. Hence, we postulate:

H5. Customer pre-encounter negative affect positively influences customer-perceived discrimination.

Procedure of testing the conceptual framework

In the subsequent sections, we present a pilot study and three experiments to test our hypotheses. In the pilot study, we develop and test our experimental manipulations and demonstrate the particular vulnerability of overweight customers compared to normal weight customers. Across three subsequent experiments, we test the influence of covert weight discrimination on customer-perceived discrimination as well as the moderating role of employee overweight (Study 1), information on frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers (Study 1), and trait (Study 1) and state (Study 2) self-esteem. We also test the coloring effect of state (Study 1) and trait (Study 3) negative affect and rule out positive affect as an alternative explanatory variable.

Pilot study

Goals

The pilot study had two major goals. First, we sought to develop and test experimental stimuli for the manipulation of covert discrimination, employee weight, and information on frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers. Second, we sought to demonstrate the particular vulnerability of overweight customers by showing that overweight customers compared to normal weight customers perceive higher discrimination when confronted with covert discrimination.

Participants and procedure

We cooperated with a market research firm specialized in providing online panels for data collection. In line with previous discrimination research (Crocker *et al.*, 1993; King *et al.*, 2006), we obtained data from 161 females with a mean age of 36.66 (SD = 10.93). Following the World Health Organization's (2018) threshold for overweight (i.e. body mass index (BMI) of 25 or larger), 80 participants were overweight ($M_{\text{BMI}} = 34.62$, $SD = 6.20$) and 81 were normal weight

($M_{\text{BMI}} = 19.85$, $SD = 1.66$). In the pilot study, we informed participants that this study focused on retail service experiences (Ruggs *et al.*, 2015). Participants were asked to imagine shopping for their preferred chocolate at a local grocery store and were shown one of eight randomly assigned series of drawn pictures, which we used to manipulate covert discrimination, frontline employee weight, and information on frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers. They then completed the survey and were debriefed afterwards.

Stimuli development and experimental manipulations

As in previous studies (Choi and Mattila, 2014; Orth *et al.*, 2016), we used a series of professionally drawn pictures for our manipulations. A professional artist created a series of three drawn pictures portraying a retail service experience. The first picture showed a female frontline employee filling a shelf while a normal weight customer browses another shelf[1]. The second picture displayed only the employee who responds to the participant's query about where to find their preferred chocolate. The third picture showed the employee again filling a shelf while another normal weight customer browses another shelf. We added a brief description of each situation to each picture to assist the storyline.

Following previous studies (King *et al.*, 2006), we manipulated discrimination by means of a covert cue, since covert discrimination shows high ecological validity (Jones *et al.*, 2013). We embedded the covert discrimination cue in the response of the frontline employee to the participant's query in the second picture. In the discrimination condition, the employee pointed out the respective shelf and hinted at a diet version of the same chocolate ("You can find it right over there. We also sell a diet version of this chocolate, if that is of interest to you."). In the nondiscrimination condition, the employee only pointed out the respective shelf ("You can find it right over there."). To ensure that our stimulus manipulated covert (and not overt) discrimination, we conducted five interviews with female overweight and normal weight individuals of different ages. All interviewees interpreted the manipulation as covert (e.g. it was ambiguous whether the differential treatment by the employee was based on a discriminatory attitude or on other reasons).

We manipulated employee weight by displaying a normal weight employee or an overweight employee in all three pictures. Finally, we manipulated information on frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers by altering the content of the first and third picture. Whereas in the no information condition, both pictures displayed the employee and customers as described above, in the information condition, other customers (who were normal weight in each picture) approached the employee and asked for the same chocolate the participant was looking for. The employee responded by pointing out the respective shelf in line with the nondiscrimination condition ("You can find it right over there."). We provide examples of our manipulations in Appendix 1.

Measures

We measured all constructs on seven-point agreement scales. We measured perceived discrimination with three items adapted from Williams *et al.* (1997; $\alpha = 0.92$) to assess the

vulnerability of overweight customers compared to normal weight customers (see [Appendix 2](#) for a list of all items). To test the success of our manipulations, we used the item “without being asked, the employee proposed diet chocolate” as a manipulation check for covert discrimination. The items “the employee was overweight” and “other customers asked the employee about the same chocolate” served as manipulation checks for employee overweight and information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers, respectively. Lastly, to test the realism of our scenario, we used two items from [Dabholkar \(1996\)](#); split half reliability = 0.84).

Results

In the first step, we assessed the effectiveness of our newly developed experimental manipulations. Participants accurately reported being offered diet chocolate without asking for it ($M_{\text{discrimination: yes}} = 6.44$; $M_{\text{discrimination: no}} = 1.67$; $t(159) = 20.47$, $p < 0.05$), which indicates a successful manipulation of covert discrimination. Also, the employee overweight manipulation was perceived correctly ($M_{\text{overweight}} = 5.51$; $M_{\text{normal weight}} = 1.98$; $t(159) = 14.89$, $p < 0.05$). Lastly, participants accurately perceived the available information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers ($M_{\text{information: yes}} = 6.53$; $M_{\text{information: no}} = 2.67$; $t(159) = 13.18$, $p < 0.05$). There were no confounding effects between manipulations and no significant differences in the effectiveness of our manipulations between overweight and normal weight participants. Participants rated the scenario as highly realistic on a seven-point scale ($M = 5.06$; $SD = 1.68$). Thus, we consider the stimuli for the manipulation of covert discrimination, employee weight, and information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers effective.

In the second step, we tested the particular vulnerability of overweight individuals compared to normal weight individuals. We regressed perceived discrimination on covert discrimination, individuals’ weight category, and their interaction. We used the SPSS macro Process (Model 1, [Hayes, 2013](#)) with effect coding of individuals’ weight category (1 overweight, – 1 normal weight) and covert discrimination (1 yes, – 1 no).

The main effect of individuals’ weight was significant ($\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that overweight individuals perceived higher discrimination than normal weight individuals do, regardless of the actual treatment. The main effect of covert discrimination was also significant ($\beta = 0.98$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$), and both main effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction of individuals’ weight and covert discrimination ($\beta = 0.39$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$). Specifically, overweight individuals perceived significantly higher discrimination ($\beta = 1.36$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$) than normal weight individuals ($\beta = 0.59$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$). The findings support our account for the particular vulnerability of overweight individuals and provide first evidence for *H1*. We therefore focus on overweight customers in the following studies.

Study 1

Goals

In Study 1, we sought to test and replicate the effect of covert discrimination on perceived discrimination found in the pilot

study (*H1*). We furthermore tested employee weight (*H2*), information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers (*H3*), and self-esteem (*H4*) as boundary conditions of the effect that covert discrimination has on perceived discrimination. In Study 1, we took a trait perspective of self-esteem to highlight individual differences among customers ([Corning, 2002](#)). Finally, with Study 1, we sought to test the role of negative affect in the perception of discrimination (*H5*) by adopting a state perspective of affect, which service managers can actively induce ([Knowles et al., 1993](#)).

Participants and procedure

We conducted a 2 (covert discrimination: yes vs. no) by 2 (employee weight: overweight vs. normal weight) by 2 (information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers: yes vs. no) randomized, between-subjects online scenario experiment. We cooperated with a market research firm specialized in providing online panels for data collection. In line with previous discrimination research ([Crocker et al., 1993](#); [King et al., 2006](#)), we obtained 268 complete and usable cases from overweight females with a BMI of 25 or larger ($M = 31.36$; $SD = 5.94$; [World Health Organization, 2018](#)) [2]. The mean age was 43.38 years ($SD = 14.84$). Cell sizes ranged from 26 to 41. The procedure was similar to the pilot study, with the exception that participants completed a survey on their pre-encounter affect before the scenario experiment started.

Experimental manipulations, measures, and manipulation checks

We used the experimental manipulations for covert discrimination, employee weight, and information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers developed in the pilot study. We measured all constructs on seven-point agreement scales by using established multi-item scales. We measured state positive and negative affect before the experimental manipulation with four items, each taken from [Larsen and Diener \(1992\)](#); $\alpha_{\text{positive affect}} = 0.92$; $\alpha_{\text{negative affect}} = 0.94$. After the experimental manipulations, we measured the manipulation checks and perceived discrimination ($\alpha = 0.87$) as in the pilot study and self-esteem with four items taken from [O’Guinn and Faber \(1989\)](#); $\alpha = 0.90$; see [Appendix 2](#). All constructs showed acceptable levels of reliability, with no Cronbach’s Alpha values below 0.8 ([Shook et al., 2004](#)).

As in the pilot study, all manipulations worked as intended (covert discrimination: $M_{\text{discrimination: yes}} = 6.00$; $M_{\text{discrimination: no}} = 1.27$; $t(266) = 25.28$, $p < 0.05$; employee overweight: $M_{\text{overweight}} = 5.07$; $M_{\text{normal weight}} = 1.93$; $t(266) = 14.82$, $p < 0.05$; information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers: $M_{\text{information: yes}} = 6.23$; $M_{\text{information: no}} = 2.48$; $t(266) = 16.60$, $p < 0.05$). We found one unintended effect as the covert discrimination manipulation affected perception of employee overweight (employee overweight: $M_{\text{discrimination: yes}} = 4.02$; $M_{\text{discrimination: no}} = 3.11$; $t(266) = 3.22$, $p < 0.05$). However, the effect size for the unintended effect was substantially smaller than for the intended manipulation (partial $\eta^2 = 0.037$ versus 0.706), indicating that our manipulations worked effectively ([Perdue and Summers, 1986](#)).

Lastly, we sought to rule out that participants perceived the offered diet option as a customer-centric and positive provision of information, which is a form of reverse retail discrimination due to superior service (Rosenbaum et al., 2012). We included a one-item measure of perceived employee rudeness (“the employee was rude as she indirectly told be to control my weight”). Participants in the discrimination condition reported significantly higher perception of employee rudeness compared to the nondiscrimination condition ($M_{\text{discrimination: yes}} = 3.85$; $M_{\text{discrimination: no}} = 1.72$; $t(266) = 9.32, p < 0.05$), indicating that our manipulation was perceived as offensive.

Results

We used the SPSS macro Process (Model 1, Hayes, 2013) to test our hypotheses. For ease of interpretation, we mean centered both affect scales and self-esteem, and we effect-coded the experimental manipulations. Covert discrimination was coded 1 = yes, -1 = no; employee weight 1 = overweight, -1 = normal weight; and information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers 1 = yes, -1 = no. All VIFs were smaller than 1.5; thus, multicollinearity was absent.

Supporting *H1*, we found a significant positive main effect of covert discrimination on perceived discrimination ($\beta = 0.83, SE = 0.08, p < 0.05$), replicating the finding from the pilot study. *H2* also received support as we found a significant negative interaction effect of covert discrimination and employee weight ($\beta = -0.18, SE = 0.08, p < 0.05$). Probing the interaction indicated that, in line with our theoretical reasoning, individuals perceived discrimination stronger when the employee was normal weight ($\beta = 1.01, SE = 0.12, p < 0.05$) compared to overweight ($\beta = 0.65, SE = 0.12, p < 0.05$). The weight of the employee thus affected the attribution of the discriminatory incident. Figure 2 illustrates this interaction.

We did not find a significant interaction effect of covert discrimination and information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers ($\beta = -0.12, SE = 0.08, ns$). Surprisingly, individuals did not make use of how the frontline employee treated other customers in their own perception of discrimination. Thus, *H3* did not receive support.

Regarding *H4*, we found a significant positive interaction effect of covert discrimination and self-esteem ($\beta = 0.11, SE = 0.05, p < 0.05$). Probing the interaction showed that, as expected, individuals high in self-esteem perceived the discrimination more strongly ($M + 1 SD; \beta = 1.05, SE = 0.12, p < 0.05$) compared to individuals low in self-esteem ($M - 1 SD; \beta = 0.68, SE = 0.12, p < 0.05$). Results from a floodlight analysis showed no statistical significance transition points; that is, the interaction was fully significant within the observed range of self-esteem (see Figure 3 Panel A). Thus, *H4* received support.

Finally, *H5* received support, as we found a positive main effect of customer pre-encounter negative affect on perceived discrimination ($\beta = 0.15, SE = 0.05, p < 0.05$). The effect of positive affect on perceived discrimination was insignificant ($\beta = -0.06, SE = 0.06, ns$), as expected. Thus, affect colors discrimination perception in that individuals felt more discriminated when experiencing negative affective states.

As robustness tests, we also tested non-hypothesized interaction effects on perceived discrimination. The interaction of covert discrimination and affect was insignificant for both positive and negative affect. Furthermore, the three-way interaction of covert discrimination, employee overweight, and information on frontline employees’ neutral treatment of other customers was insignificant. These results provide additional support for our theoretical rationale. To further test the robustness of our results, we reran our model using weighted effect coding, which one typically applies when data are strongly unbalanced (te Grotenhuis et al., 2017). As we observe only small cell size differences, weighted effect coding could provide a more conservative estimate of our model. The results of our hypotheses tests remained unchanged.

Study 2

Goals

In Study 2, we sought to take a different perspective of self-esteem to strengthen further the evidence for *H4*. Customer self-esteem is not solely a stable trait (Study 1), but also subject to

Figure 2 Covert weight discrimination and employee weight (Study 1)

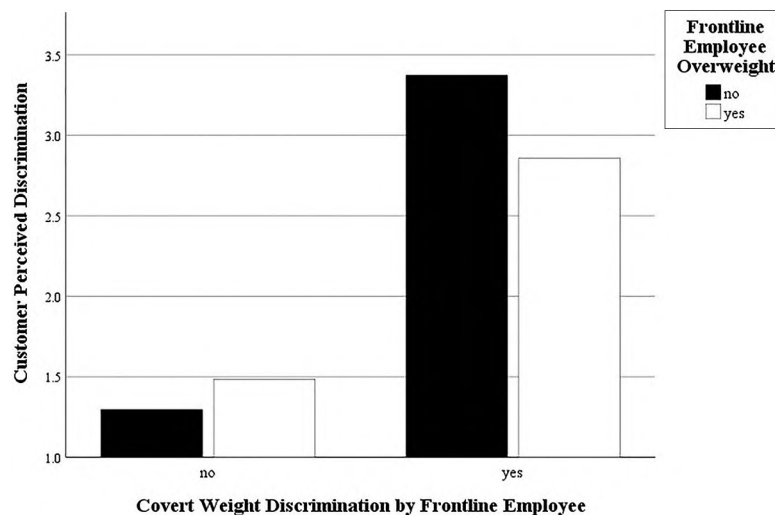
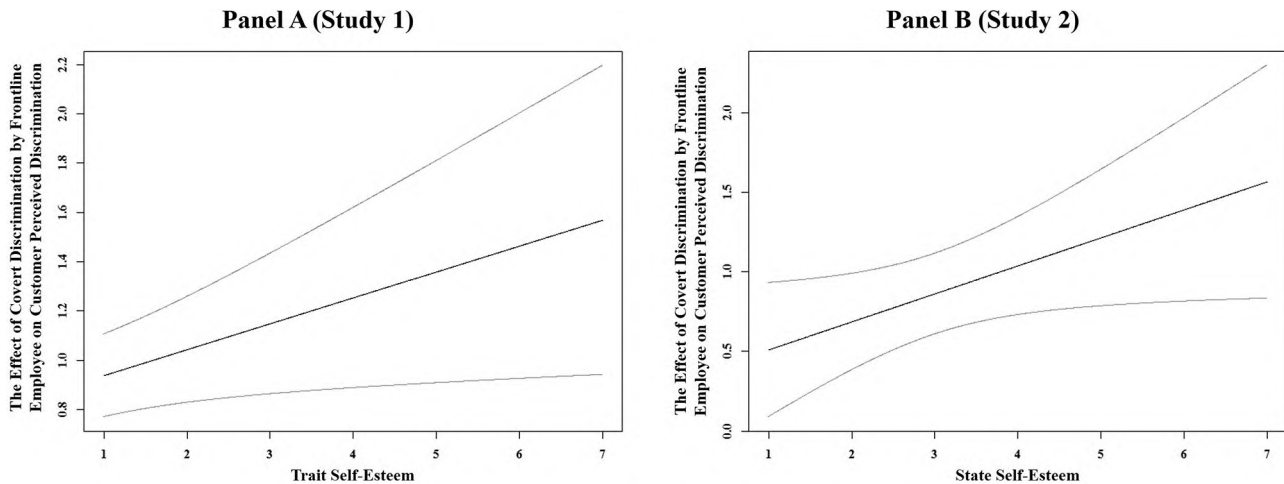


Figure 3 Covert weight discrimination and customer self-esteem



Notes: The graph is based on a floodlight analysis (Spiller *et al.*, 2013) and illustrates the effect of covert discrimination by the frontline employee on customer-perceived discrimination for any value of customer self-esteem. The gray lines represent confidence intervals. There were no J-N points, that is, the effect of covert discrimination on perceived discrimination was significant for all values of self-esteem

situational variation (Crocker *et al.*, 1993). Thus, we sought to replicate the moderating effect of customer self-esteem adopting a state perspective of self-esteem to increase the generalizability of our results (Major *et al.*, 2003). We again sought to replicate the effect of covert weight discrimination by a frontline employee on customer-perceived discrimination (*H1*).

Participants and procedure

We cooperated with a market research firm specialized in providing online panels for data collection. We collected 99 complete and usable cases from overweight females ($M_{\text{BMI}} = 31.86$; $SD = 5.70$) in a between-subjects online scenario experiment, in which we manipulated covert discrimination (yes vs. no). The mean age was 35.23 years ($SD = 11.34$). Cell sizes ranged from 49 to 50. The procedure was similar to the pilot study with the exception that participants completed a survey on their state self-esteem before the scenario experiment started.

Experimental manipulation, measures, and manipulation checks

We used the experimental manipulation for covert discrimination from the pilot study. We measured state self-esteem with four adapted items from Study 1 before the experimental manipulation ($\alpha = 0.92$; see Appendix 2). We measured perceived discrimination ($\alpha = 0.89$) and the manipulation check for covert discrimination, as in the pilot study after the experimental manipulation. All constructs showed acceptable levels of reliability (Shook *et al.*, 2004). The covert discrimination manipulation worked as intended ($M_{\text{discrimination}} = 6.37$; $M_{\text{no discrimination}} = 2.38$; $t(97) = 12.37, p < 0.05$).

Results

We used the SPSS macro Process (Model 1, Hayes, 2013) to test our hypotheses. As in Study 1, self-esteem was mean centered before the analysis and covert discrimination was

effect-coded. All VIFs were smaller than 1.5; thus, multicollinearity was absent.

The main effect of covert discrimination was significant ($\beta = 0.85, SE = 0.13, p < 0.05$), again supporting *H1*. The main effect of self-esteem was also significant ($\beta = 0.28, SE = 0.09, p < 0.05$), and both main effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction of covert discrimination and self-esteem ($\beta = 0.18, SE = 0.09, p < 0.05$). Similar to Study 1, probing the interaction showed that individuals high in self-esteem perceived the discrimination more strongly ($M + 1 SD$; $\beta = 1.13, SE = 0.19, p < 0.05$) compared to individuals low in self-esteem ($M - 1 SD$; $\beta = 0.58, SE = 0.19, p < 0.05$). Results from a floodlight analysis showed no statistical significance transition points; that is, the interaction was fully significant within the observed range of self-esteem (see Figure 3 Panel B). Thus, we again found support for *H4* adopting a state (vs. trait) perspective of self-esteem.

Study 3

Goals

In Study 3, we sought to take a different perspective of affect to strengthen further the evidence for *H5*. Whereas, Study 1 adopted a state perspective of affect, we adopted a trait perspective of affect in Study 3 to highlight individual differences among customers. We again sought to replicate the effect of covert weight discrimination by a frontline employee on customer-perceived discrimination (*H1*).

Participants and procedure

We cooperated with a market research firm specialized in providing online panels for data collection. We collected 107 complete and usable cases from overweight females ($M_{\text{BMI}} = 35.57$; $SD = 11.62$) in a between-subjects online scenario experiment, in which we manipulated covert discrimination (yes vs. no). The mean age was 33.71 years ($SD = 9.24$). Cell

sizes ranged from 51 to 56. The procedure was similar to the pilot study.

Experimental manipulation, measures, and manipulation checks

We used the experimental manipulation for covert discrimination from the pilot study. We measured perceived discrimination ($\alpha = 0.91$) and the manipulation check for covert discrimination as in the pilot study. We measured trait positive and negative affect with the adapted items from Study 1 at the end of the study ($\alpha_{\text{positive affect}} = 0.90$; $\alpha_{\text{negative affect}} = 0.91$). All constructs showed acceptable levels of reliability (Shook *et al.*, 2004). The covert discrimination manipulation worked as intended ($M_{\text{discrimination}} = 6.02$; $M_{\text{no discrimination}} = 1.82$; $t(105) = 13.76, p < 0.05$).

Results

We used OLS regression to test our hypotheses. As in Study 1, both affect scales were mean centered before analysis, and covert discrimination was effect-coded. All VIFs were smaller than 1.5; thus, multicollinearity was absent.

The main effect of covert discrimination was significant ($\beta = 0.80, SE = 0.14, p < 0.05$), again supporting *H1*. The main effect of negative affect was also significant ($\beta = 0.24, SE = 0.10, p < 0.05$), providing further support to *H5*. As in Study 1, the main effect of positive affect was insignificant ($\beta = -0.03, SE = 0.12, ns$). These findings demonstrate that trait negative affect colors discrimination perception in that individuals felt more discriminated when high in negative affectivity. As robustness tests, we also tested non-hypothesized interaction effects of covert discrimination and positive and negative affect, which were insignificant as in Study 1.

Discussion

Weight discrimination is a recurring experience for many service customers as overweight surges worldwide (Puhl *et al.*, 2008; World Health Organization, 2018). Extant studies on weight discrimination focus on the drivers and consequences of discriminatory behavior by frontline employees (King *et al.*, 2006; Parkinson *et al.*, 2017); however, these studies do not address customers' perception of weight discrimination and the factors influencing their perception.

Our study contributes to research on marketplace discrimination by bringing customer perception of covert weight discrimination into focus. Across one pilot study and three studies, we present causal evidence that customers perceive subtle and ambiguous weight-related cues as weight discrimination. Extant research confirms that employees nowadays express discrimination covertly (King *et al.*, 2006; Ruggs *et al.*, 2015) in light of recent changes in law (e.g., Equality Act 2010 in the United Kingdom). This study adds to our understanding of how customers perceive this covert discrimination when it occurs. Specifically, our study complements extant research by causally linking covert discriminatory behaviors by employees to customer-perceived weight discrimination. We thus show that discrimination still affects customers despite political intervention. Furthermore, negative consequences of overt weight discrimination reported

in the literature (Walsh, 2009) will likely also occur with covert weight discrimination, as customers perceive discrimination.

Moreover, we do not only show that customers perceive weight discrimination, but also that the perception of weight discrimination is bound to environment and person-related factors. Specifically, we demonstrate the amplifying influence of both customer state and trait self-esteem on the effect of covert weight discrimination by frontline employees on customer-perceived discrimination. This finding adds to literature that has identified self-esteem as an outcome variable (Crocker *et al.*, 1991) and as a moderator of outcomes of perceived discrimination (Corning, 2002), thus fostering a more holistic understanding of the role of self-esteem in customer perception and reactions to covert discrimination.

We furthermore find that customer negative affect amplifies perceived discrimination regardless of discriminatory incident. This finding is in line with affect-as-information theories (Forgas, 1995), which suggest that individuals use negative affect as a heuristic that informs judgments. Interestingly, previous discrimination research has found negative affect (anger) as an outcome of perceived discrimination (Baker *et al.*, 2008; Baker and Meyer, 2011), which taken together with our findings may suggest a reciprocal effect of negative affect in discrimination.

Our study also shows that frontline employee overweight mitigates the effect of covert discrimination on customer-perceived discrimination. In contrast to previous marketplace discrimination studies, in which only the customer possesses the stigmatizing characteristic (Baker *et al.*, 2008; Baker and Meyer, 2011), our study demonstrates the moderating effect of stigma similarity and thus meaningfully adds to the literature.

In this study, we do not find a moderating influence of frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers (who are normal weight) in overweight customers' perception of weight discrimination. Our findings suggest that customers rely predominantly on the primary information source (i.e. the employee) when perceiving discrimination and disregard information from secondary information sources (i.e. other customers; Styles, 2005). This is because overweight customers might have classified other normal weight customers as an out-group, which renders information emanating from the out-group less relevant in the perception of ambiguous events (Wilder, 1990).

Managerial implications

Our study yields beneficial insights for service managers. First, the results show that customers notice covert marketplace discrimination. Therefore, it is best to prevent the occurrence of marketplace discrimination in the first place in order to prevent the negative consequences of marketplace discrimination, such as negative word-of-mouth, decreased customer loyalty, and lower financial returns (Walsh, 2009). Managers are encouraged to train their frontline employees to treat vulnerable customers in an appropriate, nondiscriminatory and inclusive way, conveying a welcoming and positive environment (Fisk *et al.*, 2018). Second, customers seem to rely on a categorization of the frontline employee in terms of similarity when facing a possibly discriminatory incident. In order to maximize

instances in which customers consider themselves similar to the employees, managers should pursue a diverse workforce. Diversity as the distribution of disparities among organizational members with regard to a mutual attribute (Harrison and Klein, 2007) can thus contribute to a lower potential for discrimination in service situations. Third, managers should adapt the servicescape in order to influence customers' pre-encounter affect positively so that negative affect diminishes. For example, they could make use of music (Garlin and Owen, 2006) or color (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992) to reduce negative affect.

Limitations and future research

This study has limitations, which provide direction for further research. First, we designed the study as an online experiment, which besides other limitations has less control compared to experiments conducted in a laboratory (Reips, 2000). However, we used established data cleaning techniques in order to ensure high data quality. A second limitation is the use of pictures as stimulus material. Although research considers pictures as ecologically valid stimuli (Bateson and Hui, 1992), future research may replicate our findings using video stimuli or conducting the study in a field setting.

Third, our study samples only overweight females. Although this is common in discrimination research (Crocker et al., 1993; King et al., 2006), future research should replicate our findings using mixed gender samples. Fourth, our stimuli depict only other normal weight customers. Future research should investigate how the presence of other overweight customers, who may be included in an in-group, influences fairness judgments and thus the perception of discrimination. Fifth, future research should replicate our findings in different service contexts.

Sixth and lastly, research may address the context of our study also from the transformative service research angle, seeking to improve customers' well-being with a special focus on vulnerable customers (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). In order to improve those customers' well-being, we first need a thorough understanding of their perceptual processes. Transformative service research may thus use our findings as a starting point in exploring how service environments can reduce overweight customers' vulnerability and increase their well-being.

Conclusion

Weight discrimination is a recurring experience for many service customers as overweight surges worldwide. Drawing on field theory, this paper investigates how two environment factors, frontline employee overweight and frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers, and two person factors, customer pre-encounter affect and self-esteem, influence customer perception of covert weight discrimination by frontline employees. Across a pilot study and three experimental studies, we find that customers perceive covert weight discrimination. Frontline employee overweight mitigates the effect of covert discrimination, and (state and trait) self-esteem amplifies this effect. Frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers is insignificant. Customer (state and trait) negative affect influences perceived discrimination independent of covert discrimination. Overall,

our findings advance extant knowledge by demonstrating initial drivers and boundary conditions of customer-perceived weight discrimination.

Notes

- 1 Previous discrimination research finds no effect of discriminator gender (Ruggiero and Major, 1998; Ruggiero and Taylor, 1997). We depicted a female instead of a male employee, as the share of females in various service industries is higher (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).
- 2 In addition to measuring the BMI, we asked participants to categorize their weight by using a single item five-point overweight self-categorization scale. The correlation of the BMI with the self-categorization scale was 0.74. This indicates that women accurately perceive their weight.

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Appendix 1. Exemplary experimental stimuli

(1) Covert discrimination, normal weight employee, information on frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers.

<p>While standing in front of the candy shelf, you see another customer approaching the employee asking for help finding the same chocolate bar you are looking for.</p>  <p>Excuse me, where can I find Milka milk chocolate?</p> <p>You can find it right over there.</p>	<p>You are unable to find your favorite chocolate bar and didn't get where to find it. You approach the employee: "Excuse me, where can I find Milka milk chocolate?" The employee replies:</p>  <p>You can find it right over there. We also sell a diet version of this chocolate, if that is of interest to you.</p>	<p>You go back to the chocolate shelf. Another customer is standing in front of the shelf looking for a particular chocolate bar. He approaches the employee asking for help.</p>  <p>Hi, excuse me, where can I find Milka milk chocolate?</p> <p>You can find it right over there.</p>
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(2) No covert discrimination, overweight employee, no information on frontline employees' neutral treatment of other customers

<p>While standing in front of the candy shelf, you see an employee filling a shelf. Another customer standing next to you is browsing the different chocolate bars.</p> 	<p>You are unable to find your favorite chocolate bar. You approach the employee: "Excuse me, where can I find Milka milk chocolate?" The employee replies:</p>  <p>You can find it right over there.</p>	<p>You go back to the chocolate shelf. Another customer is standing in front of the shelf browsing the different chocolate bars. The employee continues filling the shelves.</p> 
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Appendix 2. List of items

State self-esteem (Study 2) (O'Guinn and Faber, 1989)

Right now, I am lacking in self-confidence.

Right now, I think little of my ability.

Right now, I feel useless.

Right now, I feel as if I have done something wrong or evil.

Trait self-esteem (Study 1) (O'Guinn and Faber, 1989)

I am certainly lacking in self-confidence.

I have several times given up doing a thing because I thought too little of my ability.

I certainly feel useless at times.

Much of the time, I feel as if I have done something wrong or evil.

Perceived discrimination (Williams *et al.*, 1997)

I was discriminated against by the employee based on a personal trait.

I was treated worse than other customers based on a personal trait.

I received poorer service than other customers based on a personal trait.

Pre-encounter positive affect (Larsen and Diener, 1992)

I feel this way right now [...] (Study 1)/In general, I feel [...] (Study 3)

excited;

elated;

enthusiastic; and

euphoric.

Pre-encounter negative affect (Larsen and Diener, 1992)

I feel this way right now [...] (Study 1)/In general, I feel [...] (Study 3)

annoyed;

irritated;

unhappy; and

miserable.

Scenario realism (Dabholkar, 1996)

The purchase situation described was realistic.

The purchase situation described is likely to happen in reality.

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