

## Height matters: practicing consumer agency, gender, and body politics

Anu Valtonen\*

*Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lapland, Finland*

The significance of body and gender in the formation of consumers' identities and agencies has been widely scrutinized. Nevertheless, this study argues that this formation is not fully understood, unless the role of height is taken into account. It leans on a practice-based perspective and critical auto-ethnographic methodology so as to examine how a distinct agency is fabricated for a short-sized female body by a whole range of social, material, and sensory practices that are continuously enacted across various domains of life. It thereby adds to the existing literature on body, gender, and consumer agency by way of incorporating height into critical inquiries this far mostly concerned with weight; by way of materializing and sensorializing the fabrication of an embodied consumer agency this far addressed in visual terms; and by way of considering everyday life as the site in which it continuously unfolds. These insights bear important implications for the development of body politics.

**Keywords:** height; gender; consumer agency; practice theories; critical auto-ethnography; everyday life

### Introduction

This study argues that the formation of an embodied and gendered consumer agency is not fully understood, unless the role of height is taken into account. To date, it is the issue of weight and its connection to gender that has invited the majority of research interest (Bordo 1993; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Sobal and Mauer 1999; Campos 2004; LeBesco 2004; Colls 2006; Bell and McNaughton 2007), although the shortness or tallness of gendered consumers – not only their thinness or fatness – frames and conditions consumption activities and the formation of embodied identities and agencies in many ways.

Moreover, many of the existing studies on the body have pursued visual-centric approaches (for important exceptions, see Peñaloza 1998; Joy and Sherry 2003) in their inquiries. Accordingly, scholars have accorded primacy to questions of appearance and beauty (Featherstone 2010), and/or to the role of advertising and media imagery in offering and transforming our conceptions of gendered bodies (Elliott, Eccles, and Hodgson 1993; Stern 2003; Schroeder and Zwick 2004; Smeesters, Mussweiler, and Mandel 2010). Such an approach is arguably relevant in contemporary highly visualized consumer culture, but it nevertheless obscures other aspects through which bodies are fabricated. Namely, as a growing number of recent studies suggest (Borgerson 2005, 2009; Miller 2005; Molz 2006; Veijola and Valtonen

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\*Email: [rovaniemi.anu.valtonen@ulapland.fi](mailto:rovaniemi.anu.valtonen@ulapland.fi)

2007; Valtonen, Markuksela, and Moisander 2010), a whole range of material and sensorial practices – and not only visual – are embedded in processes through which consumer agencies are created and sustained in everyday life.

The focus on everyday life, in turn, renders visible the continuous fabrication of the body, an issue that has received less attention in the existing literature mostly concerned with single visible domains of consumer culture such as gyms or cosmetic surgery (Sayre 1999; Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 2002; Sassatelli 2010). Conceiving everyday life as the site in which a height-based consumer agency unfolds seems particularly reasonable in the present-day society in which consumption pervades all areas of social life (Schor and Holt 2000; Shove, Trentmann, and Wilk 2009).

Therefore, it is argued here that to attain an adequate understanding of the way a height-based consumer agency is constructed, one needs to pay attention to the manifold ways it is practiced through various domains of consumers' everyday life. To attain this goal, the study leans on a practice-based approach. The particular strength of this approach is that it enables us to consider height as an ongoing activity embedded in day-to-day situations and to highlight the way human and non-human, corporeal, social and material, and sensory aspects are involved in the construction of consumer agency (Butler 1990, 1993; Schatzki 1996, 2001; Martin 2003, 2006; Thrift 2007; Borgerson 2005; Miller 2005; Gherardi 2009; Valtonen, Markuksela, and Moisander 2010). In this treatise, the height of a gendered consuming body is not an essential attribute, but it is given existence and sustained through a set of practices and of a tacit, collective agreement to perform and repeat them (Butler 1990). These practices are manifestations of the prevalent cultural foundation of an appropriate combination of gender, body, and height. Once reiterated, they take hold of and construct bodies in particular ways, allocate value to some, and only some, forms of bodily beings, thereby influencing the possibilities of bodies to act as a consumer. Thus, they shape and constrain "the room for maneuver which social actors have when they act as consumers" (Sassatelli 2007, 91).

The argument of the paper is developed from the vantage point of a short-sized female body. This body type represents a "body in trouble," as will be discussed, and that is precisely why it provides a theoretically fruitful stance for the study. It allows me to draw attention to the role of height in the everyday lives of consumers, an issue that tends to go unnoticed by bodies that occupy a "normal" height position. It hence facilitates the constitution of a critical reflexive stance (Adkins 2003; Molz 2006) toward normalized conceptions of gender and height and toward the ways these conceptions are expressed and stabilized through a number of commonplace marketplace practices from labeling practices of the clothing industry (XS, S, M, L, XL, etc.), to salary payment (Persico, Posteleweite, and Silverman 2004; Heineck 2005), and distribution practices associated with the "pettiness" or "greatness" of potential customers.

Methodologically, the study draws on the auto-ethnographic tradition. Accordingly, it uses the researcher's own cultural membership in a social category as the primary source of data (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993; Reed-Danahay 1997; Coffey 1999). This method allows the author-researcher to get close to height-related practices that permeate the entire social, material, and sensory world – throughout the lifespan (Miller 2002). The use of auto-ethnography is here linked with the research interests and practices inscribed in critical methodologies (Clifford and Marcus 1986;

Conquergood 1991; Peñaloza 1994; Holman Jones 2005; Gould 2008) that aim, roughly put, at problematizing the naturalized shape of social reality.

Thus, the study at hand provides an account of the production of a height-based consumer agency through the prism of my 152 cm (5 ft.) tall body living in Finland, northern Europe. In accordance with the non-individualistic practice lens, the guiding thread of my analysis will be the idea that the social, material, and sensory practices identified are politically charged and manifested unintentionally yet continuously through my body. Commonplace sayings such as “small and peppery,” material arrangements such as the height of a chair, or physical issues such as being touched by colleagues are treated as means of marking my body – and other bodies of the same size – in particular and political ways. Hence, instead of being a phenomenological account, this study presents an argument concerning the supra-individual, unintentional, all-pervasive, and political nature of height-producing practices through which consumer agency unfolds. In this case, it is a childish agency that unfolds for my body.

All in all, this study provides, from the perspective of height, a detailed empirical analysis of how the body and the market interact, and how markets are set up for particular kinds of bodies. This reading opens up a new angle to existing studies concerned with the way marketplace produces consumer agencies and identities (e.g. Peñaloza 1994; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998) and to studies concerned with unsettling or changing bodily ideals (e.g. Garde 2008). It is concluded here that the practice of regulation of the amount and content of advertising and media images is not enough, as bodily ideals are reproduced everywhere, all the time. Therefore, it is suggested that the everyday life is to be incorporated into the agenda of body politics.

## **Theoretical underpinnings**

### ***Previous studies on gender and body***

The vast amount of literature generated by the corporeal turn (e.g. Falk 1994; Veijola and Jokinen 1994; Featherstone 2010) cogently demonstrates how the body has become a central field of political, economic, and cultural activity in post-industrial societies, and thereby an important basis of subjectivity and agency for contemporary people. Gender and body also constitute vital categories within the analysis of consumer culture (Joy and Venkatesh 1993; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Peñaloza 1998; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998; Patterson and Elliott 2002; Schroeder and Zwick 2004; Patterson and Schroeder 2010). This literature commonly conceives of gender and body as being constructed (in some sense) in and through social action. One influential stream of research has, leaning on theoretical traditions such as semiotics and art history, placed emphasis upon the role of visual representations in advertising and media in promulgating and prescribing bodily forms for female and male consumers (Goffman 1979; Elliott, Eccles, and Hodgson 1993; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998; Patterson and Elliott 2002; Stern 2003; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Another stream has, taking a phenomenological or psychological perspective, drawn attention to the ways in which embodied consumers experience, and re-negotiate, bodily ideals in different contexts of consumption (Sayre 1999; Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 2002; Colls 2006). Thirdly, identifying with either Goffman’s or Butler’s account, and using subsequent conceptual tools of performance and performativity, a group of scholars has investigated the interactional and/or citational practices through which

gendered bodies are performed, and hence made up, in day-to-day life (Veijola and Valtonen 2007).

The existing literature has been invaluable in drawing consumer scholarship's attention to the intertwined nature of body and gender. It also has opened up critical discussions on the rigid requirements to which both female and male bodies are expected to conform, and on the various social, political, and economic consequences that these ideals bring about. Nevertheless, it seems that there is a need to incorporate *more* aspects into the existing inquiries.

First of all, while the question of bodily size (e.g. Bordo 1993) occupies a central place in existing scholarly discourse, it is commonly equated with the issue of weight as indicated in the vast body of studies exploring underweight, overweight, thinness, fatness, bigness, slenderness, etc. The other dimension of bodily size – height – has, for some reason, remained largely unexplored, although it plays a role in the way consuming bodies consume and interact with the social and material world. To illustrate, gendered height ideals are recurrently negotiated in the media (“Is Shakira too short?”), talked about on various self-help forums (e.g. a Facebook group “I can’t reach anything!”), and manifested in various body modification techniques available on the market (e.g. the use of hormonal treatments to hasten/slow bodily growth of children). Yet, even ethnographic studies, which probably could pay attention to height in investigating embodied activities within the sphere of consumption such as fashion, often ignore it altogether (e.g. Pettinger 2004). There are studies, though, that notice height, but do not elaborate on it theoretically (e.g. Forseth 2005). The latter study provides an illuminating example, in the context of the airline industry, of how the height of the gendered bodies frames the social interaction between the service manager and the consumer, thereby molding consumers’ willingness and capacity to act. Grete, service manager, tells us:

If a difficult situation should arise, it’s much easier being a man, especially if he’s tall . . . Women have to prove themselves to be competent . . . I notice that I often use my height as I’m a tall girl and not so old. When I use high-heeled shoes nobody is able to look straight into my eyes. As a result, passengers often collapse like a heap of pancakes. Suddenly their demands disappear. (quote in Forseth 2005, 53)

My study thereby contends that height is to be embraced in analyses on body, gender, and consumer agency. It also contends that there is a need to draw more careful attention to the manifold and subtle ways in which height-based consumer agency is continuously fabricated in day-to-day life across various domains. While consumer scholars have long recognized the importance of everyday life for meaning-making (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh 1995, 249), most scholars have assumed a highly visible domain of consumer culture as the site where the body, and thereby agency and identity, is produced. As a result, an extant number of studies have investigated how the body is produced, established, and transformed in domains such as advertising (Schroeder and Zwick 2004), cosmetic surgery (Sayre 1999; Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 2002), shopping (Colls 2006), and the fitness industry (Sassatelli 2010). The question of how the production of the body happens across various everyday domains has been less prominent. Similarly, the question of how a whole range of other than visual practices play role in the formation of consumer agencies has been less prominent.

Hence, this article aims at advancing the current understanding on the formation of embodied consumer agency through conceptualizing everyday life (Shove,

Trentmann, and Wilk 2009) as the site in which a height-based consumer agency is fabricated for a female body. It is concerned with exploring the continuous ways in which this agency is constructed across various domains and through various forms of practices. For this purpose, it leans on a practice approach, which is discussed next.

### ***Outline of practice thought***

The practice approach has recently gained increasing interest in social and cultural research (e.g. Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001) and it has also been vividly employed in marketing and consumer research (Shove and Pantzar 2005; Warde 2005; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Laine 2011). Practice thought – far from being a unified school of thought – is a non-individualistic form of cultural theory founded upon explaining and understanding social action and social order in a specific way (Schatzki 1996; Reckwitz 2002). In line with other cultural theories, it stresses the significance of collective structures of knowledge, meanings, and understandings in order to grasp both action and social order. Yet, it differs from the other forms of cultural theory – culturalist mentalism, textualism, and intersubjectivism as classified by Reckwitz (2002) – in that it situates the basic unit of cultural analysis in practices.

In its simple form, a practice refers to a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings that are organized around a shared understanding (Schatzki 1996, 89–90). A practice, in which a consumer participates, guides, and organizes his or her activities, thoughts, and behavior, thus provides structures of action and thinking. Accordingly, instead of supposing that consumers act on subjective meanings, their activity is thought to be dependent on, and organized by, the social practices in which they participate. As Sassatelli puts it “consumption happens within ordinary social practices” (2007, 113). The practice approach hence stands opposed to cognitive and rationale accounts of consumer behavior. The individual, in this treatise, acts as a carrier of practices, including patterns of bodily behavior, routinized ways of understanding and thinking, knowing how, and desiring (Reckwitz 2002, 249–50). These are thought to be qualities of a practice, not qualities of an individual. In fact, many features of individuals are claimed to arise from the incorporation of humans into social practices. Through this incorporation, there come to be people with identities and genders (Schatzki 2001, 20).

Many of the existing practice-based studies have explored the *integrative* form of practices (Schatzki 1996, 2002, 2005). That is, they have investigated complex forms of practices, such as car driving (Warde 2005), Nordic walking (Shove and Pantzar 2005), and branding (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009), which entail their own integral logics, ends, and structures. In this study, however, the primary focus is on *dispersed practices*, which refer to “an open spatial-temporal manifold of actions largely organized by understanding alone” (Schatzki 2005, 481) and which weave through integrative practices. Hence, in the case at hand, commonplace height-related sayings and doings typically circulate through different sectors of life ranging from fashion, media, shopping, and traveling, but they nevertheless share a common cultural foundation.

In identifying the dispersed practices that play a role in the constitution of a consumer agency for a short-sized female body, the study joins the current trend, stressing that practices take several forms: they may be linguistic and non-representational,

social and material, and corporeal and sensual, and involve both human and non-human entities (Bourdieu 1977; Thrift 2007; Strati 2007; Valtonen, Markuksela, and Moisander 2010). In line with critical practice scholarship (Geiger 2009; Gherardi 2009; Mathieu 2009), the emphasis is on the generative character of these practices. The study is thus interested in what people do – socially, materially, and sensorially – and how this doing shapes and constrains the consumer agency for a body of my size.

### ***Practice-based approach to body, height, and gender***

A vast number of contemporary analyses understand gender and body as a social practice (West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990, 1993; Katila and Meriläinen 1999; Gherardi 2009). In line with this stream of thought, this study explores the way dispersed practices, referred to as “gendered height practices,” play a role in constituting an embodied consumer agency for a body of my size. Gendered practices refer to “a class of activities that are available – culturally, socially, narratively, discursively, and physically – to be done, asserted, and performed in social contexts” (Gherardi 2009, 122). They are hence widely available and usually unquestioned acts that are performed effortlessly and more or less spontaneously in the dense and continuous interflow of everyday conduct (Mathieu 2009). *Practicing* height, in turn, refers to such action being performed (Martin 2003). It is this practicing that produces a distinct body-subject and a distinct agency for such a subject (Thrift 2007, 142).

Agency is here understood as a socio-culturally mediated capacity to act offering ideas about who can act, what can be done, and how to act in a particular context. More precisely, in accordance with many practice theorists, agency is here detached from the human subject and is seen as a distributed capacity that lies and is realized in practice-order bundles (Schatzki 2001, 2002), and in the subsequent social, material, and sensory relations (Borgerson 2005; Gherardi 2009; Valtonen and Veijola 2011). Thus, the manifold relations and interactions constrain, or enable, and generally shape the individuals’ dispositions toward, and capacities for, action. Thereby, they become sites in which consumer agency is created and stabilized.

The way height is practiced – and hence consumer agency created – denotes a certain system of reasoning and thought which structures social assumptions and constructions of gender and height (Butler 1990, 1993). Here, they imply the underlying heterosexual regulatory frame that sorts consumers into different height-based categories: short woman, short man, tall woman, and tall man (West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990; Mathieu 2009). The gender and the physical inches provide “natural” grounds for such categorization, and once the difference has been constructed, these grounds are used to reinforce the “essentialness” of body-subjects (West and Zimmerman 1987). The power of these categories lies in their ability to provide taken-for-granted and normative ways of interpreting, knowing, and talking about height and gender. They also organize qualities, desires, and activities regarded as appropriate or inappropriate for particular bodies, thereby ensuing inequalities between bodies (Mathieu 2009, 181). Through a regulatory process of repetition, the categories efficiently stabilize what counts as proper height for each gender, securing particular effects in the world. Today, the sphere of consumption and marketing plays a significant role in making categories available and stabilizing them (Moisander and Valtonen 2006).

Central to my purpose is the category of “little woman,” which is mobilized and sustained in everyday interactions (Hacking 2004). Both Goffman (1963, 1967) and

Butler (1990, 1993) provide valuable theoretical tools for analyzing how this category is performed and conceived. While Butler's definition of performativity derives from the speech act theory, Goffman bases his account on the metaphor of theatre, hence conceptualizing human action as scripted and staged performances. The former insight is valuable for the purposes of this study, as it draws attention to the generative character of speech acts (such as the act of labeling certain bodies as short); the latter in turn is valuable for an analysis of consumer culture in which the expected action of a consuming body is commonly carefully scripted and prescribed, both socially and materially. The work of Goffman also is essential in providing a detailed understanding of how consumers are formed in everyday social interaction through the use of words, the tone of voice, bodily gestures, silences, laughter, and so forth (Goffman 1956, 1963, 1967; Hacking 2004). Moreover, both Goffman and Butler are helpful in understanding how particular consuming bodies *fail* to perform the sort of behavior that is expected and thereby become stigmatized.

Importantly, this study takes the view that consumers are formed in constant interaction not only with people but *also* with things, machines, and places that surround them (Miller 1998; Borgerson 2005). For one part, the performances of most actions require material consumption objects, and for the other, many actions are directed to consumption objects. This is particularly true in today's consumer society: contemporary consumers live their lives surrounded by an indefinite number of material things, but the nature of these things tends to go unnoticed. Yet, "[t]he less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior" (Miller 2005, 5). Material entities in a way educate consumers into the normative orders and expectations of their society and offer guidelines for how to act and behave in them (Bourdieu 1977). The layout of servicescapes, for instance, bears on consumers' activity, shaping the forms of their coexistence and action. To illustrate, the design and arrangement of seats in an aircraft represents a way to communicate what kinds of bodies are expected to occupy the seats and how they are supposed to act there (Veijola and Valtonen 2007).

The notion of materiality involves taking into account the material qualities of the consuming body. The matter of bodies provides a much debated topic within feminist and cultural analysis (see e.g. Butler 1993; Grosz 1994; Hughes and Witz 1997; Witz 2000). It is commonly argued that studies following the poststructuralist tradition reduce all bodily materiality into linguistic stuff and thereby neglect the corporeal aspects of the body (e.g. Grosz 1994). In *Bodies that matter*, Butler focuses on fleshy matters and attempts to find new modes of thinking which neither presume nor negate bodily materiality (Hughes and Witz 1997). Butler is primarily preoccupied with the discursively constituted materiality of the sexed body and takes the view that "the matter of bodies will be dissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization" (1993, 2). For her, bodies are thus materialized through regulatory discourses and matrices of power. Likewise, the study at hand treats the physicality of the body as being culturally fabricated: matter and meaning are inextricably linked.

Thus, the consuming body is understood to be a body in the flesh: a body that eats and sleeps, feels pain and pleasure, endures illness and violence, is touched upon, and tries to reach things. Essentially, it is a sensing body. This study therefore joins the growing body of work examining the poly-sensual nature of consumption and consuming bodies (Peñaloza 1998; Joy and Sherry 2003; Pink 2009; Valtonen, Markuksela, and Moisander 2010). Then, the question is not merely of a body that is "looking and being looked at," but also of one that is touching and being touched, hearing

phrases and laughter, and moving in the material world and interacting with it through the entire sensory register. These embodied sensory acts are political acts in the sense that they play a part in the process through which some bodies are made to matter more than others.

Within this process, a range of emotions are evidently mobilized. In this paper, embarrassment is treated as a kind of “master emotion” that is in operation. Embarrassment refers to a milder form of shame (Goffman 1967, 105), and three different types of embarrassment can be identified (Billig 2001, 26–27): “faux pas” refers to social situations when the consumer or service worker fails to negotiate routine social interaction (e.g. spilling a cup of coffee on the table); “sticky situation” discredits the performance of someone else in the interaction (e.g. neglecting the demands of a customer); and “being at the center of attention” makes someone “foolish” in front of others.

In the approach of this study, emotions, as well as being bodily experienced, are inherently socially situated and discursively constructed (Billig 2001; Ahmed 2004): emotions move *between* bodies in social situations. They are hence not treated as a private matter simply belonging to individuals, but rather the role of emotions is crucial in the constitution of consumer agencies. The baby talk, associated with a gentle smile, of a sales person saying “you are *so* petite” and the humiliating feelings it evokes in me is a way to create a distinct agency to a body of my size.

### **Critical auto-ethnography as a method for studying practices**

To study situated and ongoing practices, the study leans on ethnographic tradition (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Peñalosa 1994; Moisander and Valtonen 2006, 45–67), and more specifically, it deploys – and combines – two ethnographic varieties: auto-ethnography and critical ethnography. In the following, this methodological strategy, as well as the materials of the study, is portrayed.

### ***Combining auto-ethnography and critical ethnography***

In recent years, auto-ethnography has gained widespread acceptance within anthropological and sociological communities (see e.g. Anderson 2006; Allen Collinson 2008), but in consumer research it has not been as widely employed. One of the distinctive features of an auto-ethnographic inquiry is that the researcher uses his/her own cultural position as a member of a social group or category to gather data and to build an ethnographic interpretation (Reed-Danahay 1997; Coffey 1999; Ellis and Bochner 2000). Put differently, auto-ethnography is “research, writing, and a method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” (Ellis and Bochner 2000, xix). It is precisely this wider socio-cultural focus – and subsequent focus on *cultural* meanings and *structures* of signification (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993) – that is of interest in this study as well.

The auto-ethnographer is, hence, simultaneously the researcher and the researched; one who does not necessarily “go to the field” but rather “lives in the field.” The self–other interaction that usually characterizes ethnographic fieldwork therefore takes a slightly different shape. The purpose of the fieldwork is not to “see it from the point of view of the others,” rather, the purpose is to invite “others” to see the field from the point of view of “the self.” Accordingly, the choice of the point of view plays a significant role in an auto-ethnographic inquiry. Many of the existing inquiries take a marginal, hidden, or muted vantage point, with the aim of drawing attention to this

marginalized perspective and thereby enriching existing scholarly debates (see e.g. Coffey 1999).

Through this specific knowledge-producing perspective, auto-ethnographers are commonly committed to create space for dialogue and debate, which also instigates social and cultural change (Holman Jones 2005; cf. Gould 2008). In this sense, they are allied with the principles of critical ethnography that are committed to promoting a change by working toward alternative ways of seeing, thinking, and acting (Foley and Valenzuela 2005). In the words of Thomas (1993, vii), “[c]ritical ethnography is a way of applying a subversive worldview to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry.” Accordingly, the hermeneutical task of critical ethnography is “to call into question the social and cultural conditioning of human activity and the prevailing socio-political structures” (Kinscheloe and McLaren 2005, 326). The position of the researcher and the purposes of knowledge production are hence carefully scrutinized, as are the representational strategies and issues of power (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Conquergood 1991).

In cultural consumer research, the benefits of such an approach have been evidenced, for instance, by Peñaloza, whose study rendered visible and called into question the cultural effects of basic marketing practices such as segmentation and targeting (1994). Gould, for his part, discusses the uses and links of introspection in relation to critical marketing thought (2008). He suggests that a coherent introspective–reflexive perspective – that is, briefly put, based upon a continuous critical reading of culture and self – is a key to the construction of critical thought in the sense that it enables scholars to take a critical position in the field relative to existing disciplinary knowledge-producing practices. To illustrate, he uses, among other examples, his own study in which he explored the relation between self-perceived vital energy and consumption practices in phenomenological consciousness and narratological terms (Gould 1991). This approach, he argues, allowed him to mindfully explore consumption because he could follow himself in vast detail over time while simultaneously examining existing theory (Gould 1995, 2008, 313).

In my study, the unique position of the author-researcher as a member of the cultural category of short-sized women provides a fruitful epistemic stance for rendering visible the subtle practices through which some bodies are made to matter more than others. Namely, as feminist and practice scholars have stressed (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993; Katila and Meriläinen 2002; Martin 2006; Mathieu 2009), most everyday practices remain typically unrecognized by those occupying a “normal” position of power. In characterizing discriminatory practices, Martin aptly notes: “As a rule, only members who experience them at the ‘raw end of power’ even know they exist” (2006, 255). The author of the present study is well prepared to know height-related issues because on the one hand, her particular body form represents a normatively acceptable body as it conforms to the regulatory forms of culture in which women are expected to be shorter than men. On the other hand, it deviates from them, as it fails to meet even the average height of women. In Finland, the average height of women in 2005 was 165 cm (5 ft. 5 in.). The corresponding figure for men was 178 cm (5 ft. 10.2 in.).

The use of the researcher’s self has been a classic topic in academic debates (see e.g. Mills 1959), and it been newly accentuated in many fields (see e.g. Anderson 2006), including consumer research (Gould 1991, 1995, 2008; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993; Sayre 1999). It has contributed to academic knowledge production by way of problematizing the relations of the researcher and the researched, and by way of

opening up new areas of investigation that otherwise might remain unexplored, as Gould (2008), among others, points out.

There are, obviously, many ways of using the researcher's self, depending on the theoretical and philosophical assumptions informing the study. For instance, studies drawing upon psychological and phenomenological tradition often use the researcher's self because, as they argue, it enables them to gain access to individual inner thoughts, feelings, and experiences otherwise inaccessible (Gould 1991; Sayre 1999). Studies grounded on feminist and ethnographic tradition, in turn, commonly use the researcher's self because it provides a cultural stance that enables them to explore, and problematize, aspects of culture that otherwise remain unnoticed due to their naturalized character (Reed-Danahay 1997; Coffey 1999; Katila and Meriläinen 2002).

While my study joins this latter way of using the self in research, I contend that it is a good scholarly practice to allow the different streams of research to flourish in a research community (Moisander, Peñaloza, and Valtonen 2009). Hence, the coexistence of different ways of using the self in consumer research enriches our understanding of the phenomenal world of consumption, and the recognition of the different assumptions guiding the use of self allows the scholarship to develop a more valid criticism. Namely, many critics have presented doubts about the potential of studies that rely on the researcher's to make a theoretical contribution to consumer research (see e.g. Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). Nevertheless, many of the critics are commonly confined to considering auto-ethnography as a unified form of inquiry neglecting the existence of different varieties within the auto-ethnographic tradition (e.g. *analytic* auto-ethnography distinguishes itself from more emotional variations, Anderson 2006). The critics also commonly silence the point that the auto-ethnographic approach – like any other method – takes different forms depending on the theoretical and philosophical frame that guides its usage (Moisander and Valtonen 2006). In this study, the attention is not on matters internal to the individual, but on day-to-day doings and sayings and the material settings in which they occur.

### ***Research process, data, and analysis***

Originally, the study emerged from the process of attending a feminist reading group at my (then) business academy. In this group, I was familiarizing myself with various bases for subjectivity, such as sex, gender, age, ethnicity, race, class, outlook, weight, and education, discussed in feminist literature. Reflecting these insights upon my personal experiences, I started to ponder why no one talks about height – the dimension that has ruled my entire life. This silence was the initiator of the paper at hand. The beginning of the study was hence a reflexive process involving life experiences and academic literature which is aptly described in the classic piece of text by Mills:

You must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product you may work. (1959, 196–7)

In this study, I conceive myself as a member of consumer culture in which processes of consumption facilitate and constitute contexts basic to human life (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Moisander and Valtonen 2006; Sassatelli 2007). Accordingly,

I buy things and use services to express my personal and professional identity; my friends make comments about my purchases as consumption provides resources for social conversation; I travel and spend time in restaurants for leisure purposes and to form and solidify social bonds; I consume many forms of on-line and off-line media; I use public and private services for various purposes; I go shopping to normal and specialty stores so as to find appropriate clothes and thereby to obtain peer respect, etc. When I engage in these consumption activities, they make available a culturally constituted consumer agency for a body of my size.

The fieldwork of the study thus entails numerous sites and social practices that are part of the normal course of the author's everyday life and in which consumption occurs (Sassatelli 2007). The data set, gathered during 2001–2010, consists of multiple ethnographic materials. First, I kept an ethnographic journal of my daily life (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995): I observed and made notes on social situations in which size was mentioned; in shopping situations, service encounters, corridor conversations, seminars, chats over coffee, discussions with co-consumers, etc. The notes also include sensory aspects related to consumption such as bodily pain after sitting in an uncomfortable chair in a restaurant or being touched by co-consumers (Valtonen, Markuksela, and Moisander 2010). These ethnographic field notes provide situated and personalized accounts of cultural practices enacted in particular social events. They were complemented with head notes (Sanjek 1990) that refer here to instances and practices that were recalled from memory, including both long- and short-term retrospective accounts (see Wallendorf and Brucks 1993, 343–5). These head notes enable us to draw attention to the ways in which practices appear throughout one's lifespan.

Second, cultural texts of various kinds (media texts, advertisements, on-line texts, novels, movies, and TV series) provide another data set. As a media consumer, I have randomly encountered texts that are replete with height-related meanings. This data set renders visible ways in which height-related meanings and understandings are recurrently made available through various cultural channels. Third, the very process of conducting this research – writing drafts, presenting them in seminars, and receiving feedback – plays a particular role in the data generation and interpretative process (Meriläinen et al. 2008). The comments I received from other deviant people who conceived themselves as *too* short or *too* tall, the dismissive comments by average-height people, and the rejections of the submitted paper on the grounds that “it was not properly connected to the vast body of literature on disability” all expressed the set of meanings related to female shortness.

The reading of the data follows the basic procedures of a cultural analysis (Moisander and Valtonen 2006): through an iterative back-and-forth process between data and theory, I developed a practice-based, non-individualistic, interpretive framework that guides the reading of the seemingly individualistic data. This frame also allows me to cultivate the analytic distance necessary in studies where the researcher is closely engaged in the phenomenon under study (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993), allowing me to consider my body as a product of practices and the sayings and doings of people as features of practices, not as intentional acts.

The analysis that follows sorts out three forms of practices – structures of signification in the Geertzian lexicon – *social practices* that comprise sayings, doings, and laughter of other consumers or market actors; *material practices* that comprise the use of material consumption artifacts and environments; and *sensory practices* that comprise visual, tactile, and kinesthetic practices enacted in interaction with other corporeal consumers and the material surroundings. This repertoire of practices is presented in the

form of auto-ethnographic *fragments*. This genre of writing allows me to bring to the fore the variety and sudden nature of continuous height-producing practices as they happen in the dense flow of everyday life, throughout my life. While the text makes references to my life course, the study is not a life story but rather an ethnography of one's own culture. It "tells about culture at the same time that it tells about a life" (Reed-Danahay 1997, 6; Miller 2002). Here, it tells about a life of a short-sized female consumer.

## Constitution of the consumer agency of a short-sized female body

### *Denial of adulthood*

Some years ago, I visited a family whose daughter was under 10 at that time. We were playing together in the garden, when suddenly she asked:

- Anu, are you really an adult?
- Yes, of course, why do you ask?
- Because you are so small.

This snippet of conversation summarizes the basic agency available for a short woman: she is likened to a child. My data are replete with similar incidents. One example from my journal: we go for lunch in a canteen with my friends. It is a place where customers fetch their food on a tray. A friend of mine asks, "Can you carry that by yourself?" Also, the following headline from a major Finnish newspaper replicates the message. An article that deals with short-sized women is titled: "Little woman. Height 153.5 cm. 'She is small, she is a child,' people think" (Pulliainen 2002). Another one is when my workmates and I were visiting Helsinki, the capital of Finland. We arrived at the railway station and saw a group of daycare children. We stopped and let them pass by. "Anu, you could join them," said one of my colleagues, laughing.

All these performative acts cite subject positions that are deemed appropriate for children, or to be more precise, for *girls*. The process of "girthing the girl" (Butler 1993, 7–8) starts from being identified as a girl in a prenatal ultrasound examination or at birth and continues with a range of consumption acts and objects. My story is more about *remaining* a girl. It is a story of a female consuming body that has failed in the culturally important process of growing up. The significance of this process is implicated, for instance, in sayings through which parents motivate their children to eat properly "so as to grow up" and in the practice of measurement. In our family, supposedly in many other families too, we had the practice of measuring the heights of the children every now and then by way of marking the heights on a wall with a pencil. The signs of my then growing body are still visible at our summer house. In the present-day consumer culture, specific products are sold for measuring the growth of children at home.

The social and cultural effects of failing in the cultural process of growing up mean, above all, denial of many of the capabilities normally attributed to the agency of adulthood, such as autonomy, competence, expertise, and intellect. The newspaper excerpt below is a good example of this cultural belief; the article deals with an extensive debate concerning the opening hours of the retail sector in Finland and it contains an interview of a female lawyer. She is presented as follows:

It is hard to believe that already in the mid-90s, this small, delicate, and attractive female lawyer has been waging a war on opening hours against the behemoths of large shopping malls. (Aaltonen 2009)

The quote illustrates how the competence of a manager of a central pillar of consumer culture – the retail sector – is challenged, or even denied, due to her shortness. The story now turns to detail how female consumers of the same size are recognized as being short through gestures, glances, tones of voice, smiles, public questions concerning height, nicknames, pouncing, being sold children’s tickets, recommendations to use children’s clothes by sales attendants, patting the head by colleagues, having difficulties reaching things in shops and at home, and laughter of co-consumers. In doing so, it exemplifies these various strategies of “infantilization” (Hall 1997, 262), suggesting patronizing and subjugation. This “infantilization” displaces my body from the category of adulthood, which in Western understanding is *the* category that occupies power.

### **Social practices**

The data exhibit a wide repertoire of sayings – laughter being one specific form of them – through which my consuming body is rendered short. Sayings commonly take the form of *recommendations*, and many of them are related to the fields of fashion and outlook (Featherstone 2010) implying that a short body is not acceptable as such and that it should be disguised. Accordingly, my colleagues, relatives, and friends frequently give me hints on how to look taller by the use, or avoidance, of certain consumer objects. One morning I was walking along the corridor of my former workplace wearing a brand new, lengthy pullover that was fashionable at that time – I had attempted to fit into the aesthetic requirements of consumer culture (Entwistle 2000). A female colleague crossed over and said “Anu, you look even shorter in that kind of pullover.” My docile consuming body obeyed and I never wore it again. Furthermore, women’s magazines offer an abundant set of guidelines stating that by wearing high heels, by avoiding large patterns and lengthy jackets, and by favoring unitary colors in ensembles my short body could appear taller. Let us take a look at the following extract from the reader’s column of a family magazine (Peltonen 2002):

Question: *Why can't I get clothes?* I am a short, slim woman with a short upper body. Why can't I find clothes of this size?  
 Answer: Unfortunately, the clothing industry is not able to cater for all problem bodies.

The quote exemplifies well the hegemony of bodily normality that rules the lives of contemporary consumers. People who deviate from it are recurrently told, in a concrete manner, that they are problems. The recommendations strengthen the widespread idea that the body is a project to be modified in accordance with normative standards (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), and they also effectively stigmatize short bodies (Goffman 1963). It also exemplifies how the market commonly serves the bodies of average size; the deviant ones are left to cope with the assortment provided by specialized stores. In Finland, for instance, there is one shop specialized in serving short-sized female bodies. Thereby consumer agency – in the sense of having an opportunity to make consumption choices and to construct desired identity – is restricted by the height of the body.

In the contemporary service economy, various kinds of service encounters (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990) are a frequent part of consumers’ everyday life. They also are crucial moments in which height-based consumer agency is expressed. When visiting museums or exhibitions or when using public transportation, I am often sold a

children's ticket. When buying liquor I am often asked to show my ID. When I go shopping for clothes or shoes and ask for small sizes, the typical answer is, "Well, you should look in the children's section." Yet, at my age, I would rather buy clothes and shoes other than those emblazoned with Barbie, Pocahontas, or Winnie the Pooh. I went to eat pasta in my hometown at a restaurant that is famous for its plentiful servings. When I had finished eating, the male waiter said, "Such a small girl and you still ate it all!"

These moments of truth are also moments of embarrassment (Goffman 1967; Billig 2001). When cultural norms of the interactive situations are violated, embarrassment emerges (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990, 79). To relieve the tension, emotional coping strategies are often enacted so as to repair the social faux pas. For instance, if a service worker at a liquor shop asks my age, and once she/he realizes that I am a major she/he often makes some kind of joke, such as "well, you are well preserved" accompanied with a smile of embarrassment to siphon off unwanted tension. I might respond to it by saying "I'll take that as a compliment," or alternatively not to respond to it and thereby display that I am bored to hear that phrase, once again.

There are also many occasions in which the other participant does not necessarily notice, or display, the embarrassment involved in the situation – as the dispersed practices are enacted as a "normal" part of social life. This is particularly common in sayings that are ones that *comment* on the height of my body. These comments are commonly uttered in the presence of other people, unashamedly, in varied social and institutional arenas. During my earlier school years, teachers recurrently remarked on my body as the "little one" in front of all others. A couple of years ago I gave a course on qualitative methodology for doctoral students. In the beginning of the course, one female student from the back row asked, "Are all qualitative researchers so short?" (see Katila and Meriläinen 2002). In other types of social gatherings, such as parties or coffee breaks at work, I often hear the question "How tall are you?" very soon after the obligatory "how are you doing?" And a not so rare follow-up question is "Is your husband short, too?" I recently went to a hospital for a cardiograph. As soon as I entered the treatment room, a leading Finnish surgeon said, a gentle smile on his face, "Now, there we have such a petite woman."

The routinized practice to openly comment on body height seems to concern those bodies that do not conform to normalized height standards. In the media data, one short woman tells that "sometimes complete strangers stop to comment on my height" (Pulliainen 2002), whereas the tallest man in Finland, featuring 218 cm (7 ft 2 in.), says that "people ask about my height many times a day" (Kirssi 2009). Rather than being a mark of curiosity, this daily social practice represents a powerful way to mark some bodies as deviant.

The more intense emotional embarrassment is often evoked in social situations classified as sticky ones (Billig 2001). They are situations that commonly include laughing at and embarrassing the customer, and demonstrating an unwillingness to assist the customer (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990, 79). The following quote from my journal is a case in point:

I'm walking idly along the streets of Helsinki in the summer. I notice that there are bikes for sale in front of a sporting goods store. Pleasantly surprised, I see exactly the kind of bike my husband is planning on buying. However, there's no price tag on the bike. Excited about my discovery, I step into the store and say, "I'd like to take a look at those bikes outside, there is..." A middle-aged, middle-sized salesman interrupts me by saying, "Why, you sure ain't tall enough to ride any of our bikes."

The saying of the salesman discredits my performance as a customer and thereby effectuates a loss of social esteem of me as a customer. The incident foregrounds how discriminatory service practices may be directed to the height of the customer – along side with age, race, class, weight, etc. (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990, 79) – and create emotional embarrassment.

What is embarrassing is potentially humorous (Billig 2001). When we are dealing with humor and fun, we are dealing with laughter, which is, always, the laughter of a group (Bergson 1998). The laughter commonly relates to the incongruous. If someone performs a socially incongruous action showing social deficiency, others present in the situation commonly find it comical and laugh at it. The incongruous very often relates to the body: comical bodies are bodies that lose their control or are somehow extraordinary, too fat, too short, or too tall. This cultural character of the laughable is widely appropriated in media and advertising (e.g. Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000).

Scholars studying ethnicities, for their part, have brought to the fore that jokes, funny stories, and humorous remarks told on a daily basis play an important role in the process of situating the self within a particular social world (Davies 1990). A whole range of human corporeal qualities, including height, might be singled out for jokes. A colleague of mine, a “too” tall man by our cultural standards, says that he is bored of hearing the “funny” question “What is the weather like up there?” that is posed to him in a variety of social situations. One example from my journal.

I'm on vacation in Europe with my friends. We stroll around a city, visit cafés, and enjoy life. We decide to go to a museum. There are long lines at the ticket booth, so we split in two separate lines – the others join one line and I join another. When we get in, the others lament the high entrance fee. I check the price on my own ticket; it is half of theirs. I return to look at the prices in more detail. They have sold me a children's ticket. My friends laugh their heads off and so do I. Jokes are made on the event all day long, during the entire way back home, and always when the vacation trip is mentioned. Whenever I think about that trip I hear that laughter, nothing but that laughter.

This excerpt is indicative of the way in which the normative consuming body is discursively represented and constituted through laughter directed at bodies regarded as deviant. By laughing at bodies that fail to meet the norm, the norm is expressed and its naturalness reinforced (Davies 1990). While Goffman claimed that actors will often collaborate in embarrassing situations to save the face of someone who is embarrassed, it appears, as Billig (2001) points out, that it is a too benevolent reading of social actors' conduct. Co-consumers and service workers are not necessarily sympathetic repairers of social breakdowns; they may simply enjoy the embarrassment of others. And, as ethnic scholars well know, laughter is a powerful form of hate speech (Davies 1990).

There is a difference, though, between laughing *at* and laughing *with* somebody. As studies indicate (Billig 2001), laughter and the practice of telling jokes and funny stories also represent a way to reinforce social identities within social groups, fostering a sense of “we-ness.” For instance, when short women meet, it is a common practice to make humorous remarks such as “the tall and the beautiful meet again,” or to crack jokes about situations “we” have to deal with on a daily basis. When self-deprecating humor comes from the inside, it easily takes the form of self-parody. For instance, in a Finnish Facebook group “I can't reach anything!” short-sized female group members discuss shortness in a humorous tone. One particular humorous practice is to sign messages by making detailed references to height, for instance, “BR 155 cm, plus an extra

0.5 cm!” or “BR Mrs. 156 cm with a hat on.” The vital social role of humor as a bonding mechanism that enables consumer groups to withstand social difficulties is also well expressed in a newspaper article dealing with shortness (Kaaria 2006): short-sized consumers are advised to think of the “pros” of being short and hence to cope with potentially embarrassing situations by taking it humorously.

- + you fit in any bed, there is no tent too small for you, and in case of an emergency you can even sleep in a car
- + you can stand straight inside any boat
- + tiptoeing is good exercise for calf muscles
- + you never stand in other people’s way
- + you don’t hit your head in the door frame, no need to duck for lamps

The ubiquitous practice of joking and laughing is hence deeply implicated in the way my body is rendered short. Curiously, even the very idea of writing about shortness invokes laughter and a comment “wow, it is such a funny story!” When I was drafting the first version of this study, I wrote it in a light and humorous style. I needed an outsider to say that I was reproducing a key marginalizing practice through my own practice of writing (see Meriläinen et al. 2008). Yet, as the above quote indicates, a focus on social interactions is not enough if we are to understand how a height-based consumer agency unfolds in everyday life. Materiality must be involved.

### **Material practices**

While consumer researchers commonly ponder what do consumers do with material (and symbolic) objects and environments, this section ponders what do material objects and environments do to us? How do they act upon a short-sized female body? How do they constrain certain forms of action and facilitate other ones? Let us take a look at the following excerpt.

I prepare myself for work in the morning. I take a shower and get dressed. I haven’t shortened my pants and hope that nobody will notice. I start blow-drying my hair. I stand on my toes to reach the wall outlet. I keep standing on my toes throughout the drying procedure because otherwise I cannot see myself in the mirror. Still tiptoeing, I put on my make-up. I get on the bus and choose a seat with a raised floor above the rear tire so that I can reach the floor with my feet. Later in the day I give a presentation in the auditorium. I go there early to make sure that I can be seen and that the microphones are adjustable.

The quote not only highlights the grooming rituals in which contemporary female consumers daily engage, but it foregrounds how the consuming body lives with the immediate co-presence of a range of material objects and arrangements. And that consumers use material artifacts in a corporeal way: they carry them, walk with them, touch them, reach them, and wear them, and live and move within a thoroughly material environment (Löfgren 1997, 103). This material world may set out to *resist* people. This is precisely the case here. In trying to fulfill the routine demands of social life, my body is obliged to move in a material world that is not designed for a body of my size.

I found it uncomfortable to sit in the desk in school, my backpack causes pain, tiptoeing is troublesome, reaching for things causes problems, and driving a car is distressful when you do not see properly. In shops, I have to ask people to help me to get goods from the shelves. A quote from Facebook: “Today I got really angry in S-market [local

grocery store chain] trying to reach for something on the upper shelf. I was lucky and got it, but then at least ten other packets fell on the floor . . . they don't always have these stools in every place." These material practices convey the message of childhood, of a period of life when it is normal that you cannot reach things, nor find a fit with the material world. In the words of a Facebook commentator: "It's nice to dangle your feet in the air while sitting on a chair; it makes you feel so girlish."

Hence, when a body of my height navigates through a variety of material consumption environments, such as grocery stores or restaurants, and uses material consumption artifacts, such as backpacks or bookshelves, it encounters a world that seems to strike back because it is designed for bodies of a different height. As Sennett reminds us (1994), the material world is designed in accordance with the "master image of the body," the term denoting the body form which, out of a diversity of human bodies, is conceived to be ideal. In the case at hand, it seems to be the average height that is the ideal. This master image implicitly but efficiently guides the design processes of surrounding material consumption environments – from malls to restaurants and public spaces – denying the needs of the bodies that do not fit in it. As a result, a considerable number of bodies feel uncomfortable in the material environment with which they interact (Molz 2006; Veijola and Valtonen 2007). Deviant bodies are left to create a range of body techniques (Mauss 1973), such as squatting or stretching out, so as to adapt to the material world. For example, the tallest man in Finland says, "The only place big enough for me on an airplane is the one next to an emergency exit" (Kirssi 2009).

The power of the average height is based on the practice of statistically measuring the height of the bodies of the consumer citizens. Under the "scientific neutrality" of the medical lexicon, the measurement serves as a normalizing practice: by showing the average heights, they determine what is normal and what is deviant. For every child, the expected height is calculated, and based on this prediction, a decision is made whether hormonal treatment is "needed" or not (Koskenniemi 2002, 42–3). Such treatment seems to concern especially those who are *not* expected to reach the average height: "Nowadays they are used mostly for small-sized children, since tallness is an asset in today's market," says a professor of pediatrics on a web page dealing with height (Kajoniemi 2002). Obviously, this is all gendered: "Boys are freely allowed to grow as tall as they do," the web page continues. Hence, these media accounts reinforce that contemporary consumers are offered an expectation to modify their bodies in accordance to height norms.

One milder – and more easily available – option for consumers to adapt their short bodies to the prevalent height norms is to use high heels, or platforms, depending on the gender. High heels arguably represent one of the most fetishlike symbols of femininity. Yet, from a material perspective, a different interpretation emerges. High heels are not necessarily used to convey femininity, nor to appear taller, but to *be* taller. Hence, they enable short-sized female consumers to produce a better fit with the material world and with other bodies (Molz 2006), and thereby to avoid embarrassing situations. Thus, the added inches high heels provide enable a short-sized female body to live a more normal life in the contemporary world of consumption: to take things from the upper selves in shops, or to have proper eye contact with other consumers or service employees. In this sense, they are a substitute for a ladder.

All in all, the above discussion illustrates the way the height-based consumer agency unfolds – and practicing height takes place – in the co-presence of material entities of various sorts (Schatzki 2005, 472). Material arrangements, understood as

a culturally conditioned way to organize material entities, play a significant part in stabilizing and regularizing height-related understandings by way of enabling and constraining consumers' possible courses of actions. Material arrangements hence actively contribute to the perpetuation of practices (Schatzki 2005, 478) – what can be done – and thereby provide an efficient way of exerting power (Miller 2005, 13). Put differently, a particular height-based consumer agency is already assumed and prescribed in the material world that is commonly made for bodies of average height (of the nation).

### *Sensory practices*

Senses are necessarily involved in the way the consuming body interacts with the material and social world. In line with the culturalist frame of the study, the senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell – and the sensory experiences they bring about are thought to be invested with cultural values and meanings (Howes 2006). The senses are collectively patterned by cultural ideology and understanding, which makes them important tools for structuring social roles, interactions, and subsequent hierarchies. Let us first consider the sense of touch, often described as the most intimate sense. It consists of tactile elements as well as inner bodily elements such as pain, bodily balance, and kinesthetic movements. The following excerpt is from my journal:

I am at an official academic event as an invited guest with another female professor. We are having dinner, in a distinguished environment, with a strict dress code. The time comes when the hosts of the event express their gratitude to us. The two male hosts stand up to give a speech, and then give us gifts and a hug. One of them first hugs me, and then lifts me up, in front of all the guests.

This and a number of other incidents in my data indicate that the size of my female body in a way authorizes – or even encourages – others to touch it, and to do it in a particular way. It is as if the short female body were there just waiting to be lifted and bounced, just like the body of a child. The above quote represents a form of an embarrassing situation in which one is the center of attention. It is a comedy to all, except the central character (Billig 2001). The excerpt describes a particular form of social occasion – a festivity – that involves a wide range of consumption arrangements (clothing, hair dressing, catering, etc.) and social rules of conduct. That particular performative act of lifting me up in front of all the guests discredits my position as an invited guest.

Let us take a further example. Some years ago I attended an academic conference. After the official dinner, a group of people, including me, went on to a bar, and finally we found ourselves in a night club, and yes, we were intoxicated. Not surprisingly, we ended up on the dance floor. Suddenly, I noticed my body turning into a beach ball – my body lifted and thrown from one man to another. The same practice is visible in media accounts. A small-sized young woman tells, “A good friend of mine kept lifting me up all the time. It’s a bit embarrassing when a guy over 180 cm (5 ft. 11 in.) lifts you up all time in a bar, for instance. With girls it’s more like fun but with guys, it makes you feel weird” (Pulliainen 2002).

The common rules of conduct designate how two bodies can be in contact in a public sphere (e.g. Goffman 1967). Shaking hands and hugging are bodily gestures that, in a public social situation, indicate an equal relation between two people; touching the torso and bouncing the body around are not. Nor is the gesture of patting the

head. A colleague of mine, a short-sized woman, after reading an earlier version of this paper, told that her head had been patted twice during the week before – by a female professor. In the media data, a short-sized woman tells, “As if also the hair of short people belonged to others. It is ruffled because it is so cute” (Pulliainen 2002). Such bodily gestures taking place in a public place break the rules of intimacy and respect, conveying the message of inferiority. The inappropriate touching is also found to be one element in making service encounters dissatisfactory (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990).

Furthermore, many consumption situations – such as being at a café, opera, mall, or cinema – entail the materialized and immediate co-presence of other consuming bodies of different height. The mere co-presence of these different bodies may give rise to a range of bodily and mental activities and emotions. One male colleague of mine gave this paper to his wife, who happens to be relatively tall. She had said that she actually hates short women because it is *us* that make her to feel too tall. The issue of height is perhaps at its most striking when two (or more) consuming bodies of dramatically different height meet in order to socially interact. It may be interpreted as being humorous and comical. Moreover, when I discuss with co-consumers taller than I, they often bend down, whereas I try to stretch myself or stand on my toes so as to reduce the mismatch of the bodies. The mismatch relates, in particular, to eye contact. There seems to be a cultural understanding that the eyes of consumers who interact should be approximately at the same level to create a feeling of equal interaction. Otherwise, it might be felt to be comical, embarrassing, or a way to convey authority over others, as our earlier example of Grete illustrated.

Let us further strengthen the point. In a crowded consumption occasion, all I can see is other people’s backs. I went to the opera. I was kindly asked whether I would like to have a cushion, the same they offer for children. I refused. The experience of going to a movie theatre might easily turn into observing the backs of other people’s heads. As sight is the dominant sense in Western thought, and highly celebrated in contemporary consumer culture (Valtonen, Markuksela, and Moisander 2010), many consumption environments are organized in a way that the very point is to *see* things and events, and/or to be seen (Peñaloza 1998). Similarly, consumers’ movements in a space are supposed to be oriented by sight. This reliance on sight is problematic for a short-sized consumer who cannot see properly due to taller bodies surrounding him/her and due to particular material arrangements designed for bodies of a different height.

The examples indicate how sensory practices are crucial vehicles for conveying height-related cultural meanings and sustaining prevalent gendered bodily ideals. Both visual practices, in the very sense of seeing, and tactile practices, in the sense of being physically touched by somebody and moving kinesthetically within social and material spaces, play a part in the construction of a childish agency for my body.

### ***Small and spunky***

A question remains: how is the consuming body of my size expected to act? Shortly put: in a small and spunky way. In Finnish, the saying is “small *but* peppery,” which aptly underlines that smallness represents a lack that may be compensated by being spunky or peppy. The saying is widely used, for example, in newspapers, advertisements, and fairy tales, and is commonly interpreted as praise. In the Finnish context, in particular, the idea of small and spunky is represented through the famous Moomin stories, written by Tove Jansson; a short girl called Little My is “petite but

peppery,” that is, a strong and determined character *despite* her size. What is small and spunky behavior like, then? Let us think about the question I am regularly asked in social situations: “How tall are you?” The proper way to answer that question is to state in a brave and brisk way, “Oh, I’m only 152 cm (5 ft) but that’s enough for me!” This is in line with the idea of “small and spunky.” The “right” answer is rewarded by nods and sounds expressing acceptance – good girl! Furthermore, the “right” answer often generates a sympathetic story of somebody else who is also short, but who, despite this deficiency, has done quite well in life. This way of behaving, obviously, merely reinforces the meanings inscribed in the category referred to as “little woman,” and more generally, traditional attributes associated with femininity.

What is the possibility of contesting this cultural consumer agency that is offered to my body? On the one hand, if we can make visible the general understanding offering us height-related standards and the way in which this understanding is distributed in daily life, we can, perhaps, begin to think critically about the discourse and practices through which height-based agency is produced and sustained. As Schatzki puts it: “it is in practices where meaning, language, and normativity are conserved and also transformations take their start” (2001, 21). On the other hand, as practice scholars stress, the difficulty of contesting the practices lies in their commonplaceness – they appear as the normal and appropriate way to act in a specific situation. Therefore, the very nature of these practices – they are dispersive and mostly non-reflected – renders them powerful in imprinting and sustaining height-related understandings. They just go unnoticed.

Perhaps, contesting the prevalent height-based agencies calls for a more radical re-articulation of the symbolic horizon in which body-height subjects are placed (Butler 1993, 23). It implies that the transformation of normative height standards would require no less than a transformation in Western thought, which values – so often without criticism – tallness as well as greatness regardless of whether the question relates to companies, universities, countries, or houses. In this discourse, the very idea of smallness is rendered problematic if not silenced at all. Thomas Samaras provides an insightful counter reading in his article “Short is Beautiful,” published in *The Futurist* in 1995: “Society’s bias against short people may be hurting us in the long run. Shorter people use fewer resources, produce less waste, and may even be better lovers” (Samaras 1995). Though, the trend seems to go in the opposite direction. Newspapers report on the increase of surgical operations in Asian countries in which children’s shanks are lengthened so that they would have better opportunities in both the job and the marriage market (Mykkänen 2002). Shortness, it seems, is not an asset in today’s market.

## Discussion

The preceding analysis has unpacked the prevalent cultural understanding associated with body, height, and gender, and rendered visible normalized practices through which some modes of consuming body-height subjects are banished while others are legitimated. The study thus has demonstrated how height is immersed in wider social and political struggles, and how seemingly innocent height-related practices may bring about a number of social and cultural effects, such as discrimination in employment or downgrading in expertise. By way of pointing to the existence of gendered height-based inequalities and to the way they are produced in the market, the study adds one new angle to the critical consumer scholarship concerned with the production of social differences and hierarchies (Bristol and Fischer 1993; Peñaloza 1994).

Moreover, the focus on the variety, and co-constitutive role, of social, material, and sensory practices enacted in different everyday domains of life allows the consumer scholarship to attain a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which embodied agencies, and attendant bodily ideals, are produced and sustained in consumer culture. This focus benefits the consumer policy debate that is concerned with how strict (and often harmful) bodily ideals are distributed in consumer society, and what should be done for opening up discursive space for a wider range of bodily beings to be conceived as acceptable. The current strategy seems to be to regulate the content and amount of advertising and media imagery, as they are supposed to play a key role in offering an understanding of culturally acceptable bodily shapes (Garde 2008; Smeesters, Mussweiler, and Mandel 2010). While it is true that “advertising imagery constitutes ubiquitous and influential bodily representations in public space, incorporating exercises of power, surveillance, and normativity within consumer spectacle” (Schroeder and Zwick 2004), everyday practices and arrangements make no exception: they also are ubiquitous, influential, and public, and a means to exercise power, surveillance, and normativity.

Therefore, it seems that the mere regulation of images is not enough if bodily ideals are to be challenged and unsettled. Nor is the moral discussion related to specific domains of consumption, such as cosmetic surgery. Rather, the power of the all-pervasive and subtle everyday acts, enacted in various domains, should be acknowledged in the development of body politics. As this study has empirically illustrated, they represent powerful ways to sustain, stabilize, and even reinforce normative bodily standards. This way of analyzing the formation of consumers’ embodied agency facilitates a theoretical and political shift from the tyranny of “beauty” and “the look” (Featherstone 2010) to the tyranny of materiality (Sennett 1994; Molz 2006; Veijola and Valtonen 2007) and, more generally, to the tyranny of consumers’ everyday life.

## **Conclusion**

This practice-based auto-ethnographic study has exemplified how height shapes and structures many forms of consumption and plays a significant role in the formation of consumers’ gender identity and agency. The very effort to address consumer embodiment from the point of view of height adds to the existing research on body, gender, and agency and so does the theoretical effort to move beyond the visual gaze that underlines many of the existing studies (Elliot, Eccles, and Hodgson 1993; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Peñaloza 1998; Stern 2003; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Furthermore, the theoretical and methodological approach taken in the study provides one more alternative to the strand of research that employs the researcher’s self to study the phenomenon of consumption (Gould 1991, 1995; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993), and to the repertoire of critical and reflexive methodologies (Peñaloza 1994; Gould 2008; Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto 2009), and practice-based studies (Warde 2005).

All in all, this paper has presented an invitation for consumer scholars to include critical reflection upon the issue of height when investigating consuming bodies and the formation of consumer agencies. This is because height matters, personally, politically, and theoretically. Obviously, more work is required to situate the issue of height, body, and gender in other cultures and contexts. Future consumer studies could explore other height-based categories, namely tall women, tall men, and short men – not forgetting the average ones.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the editor of the journal, the anonymous reviewers, as well as a number of my colleagues for their insightful comments. I am especially indebted to our feminist reading group "The Wild Ones" for their encouragement, critical comments, and suggestions through out the development of this article.

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