Four studies revealed that excluded consumers prefer more visually dense patterns than those who do not feel socially excluded. This effect is mediated by a feeling of emptiness. That is, visually denser images can metaphorically alleviate the feeling of emptiness perceived among excluded consumers.

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Viewing Social Exclusion with a Broader Scope: Contemporary Consequences of Social Exclusion

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Paper #2: The Impact of Social Exclusion on Consumers’ Attitudes Toward Probabilistic Selling
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Paper #3: The Broken Bargain: Social Exclusion Reduces Willingness to Incur Personal Costs for the Sake of Society
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Paper #4: Is it Still Important to be a Moral Person When You are Lonely?
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SESSION OVERVIEW

This special session highlights recent research about social exclusion and consumer behavior in four diverse and impactful contexts: visual marketing, probabilistic selling, environmental behavior, and moral identity. Social exclusion (being alone, isolated, or ostracized) and loneliness are common experiences that shape consumer behavior (Duclos, Wan, and Jiang 2013; Lee and Shrum 2012; Mead et al. 2011; Wan, Xu, and Ding 2014; Wang, Zhu, and Shiv 2012). Although the existing research has greatly advanced our knowledge, some critical and important questions have yet to be answered. In particular, the research highlighted in this session answers questions about the effects of social exclusion on critical marketing activities and substantive problems facing society. For the former, how does feeling excluded influence judgment and decision making about visual marketing elements (e.g., density of a design pattern) and sales promotion practices (probabilistic selling)? For the latter, how does social exclusion influence pro-environmental behaviors like sustainable consumption and moral identity?

The first paper, by Su, Wan and Jiang, examines the relationship between social exclusion and visual density preference. The authors demonstrate that consumers who perceive themselves as socially excluded prefer products with visually-dense patterns more than their peers who do not feel socially excluded, and that the effect is mediated by feelings of emptiness.

The second paper, by Fan and Jiang focuses on studying the relationship between social exclusion and attitudes towards probabilistic selling. Probabilistic selling is when customers are given the opportunity to purchase a product ‘blind’, knowing only broadly what they will receive. For example, an overseas holiday, but without knowing the destination. Social exclusion and probabilistic selling both involve a loss of control. As social exclusion dampens people’s sense of control, and people always have a desire to defend against a loss of control, social exclusion was found to decrease consumers’ favorability for probabilistic selling.

The third paper, by Naderi and Mead examines the influence of social exclusion on pro-environmental behavior. They examined competing mechanisms for the effect: reduced empathy (which has been shown to reduce helping) and willingness to sacrifice for society. They found that excluded people become reluctant to engage in pro-environmental behaviors because they are not willing to incur costs for the benefit of society, thereby shedding new light on the mechanisms through which social exclusion may impair other-oriented behavior.

Finally, the last paper, by Jiao and Wang investigates the impacts of loneliness in the context of moral behaviors. It reveals that, when participants are lonely, those with high (vs. low) empathy had higher moral identity. The paper has implications for moral consumption and draws further attention to the role of loneliness, an increasing phenomenon, on consumer behavior.

Taken together, these four papers shed light on how social exclusion and loneliness may influence and inform important marketing practices and timely societal problems. Given that the experience of social exclusion and loneliness is becoming increasingly prevalent, the session will be of interest to a broad audience at the Association for Consumer Research conference 2017.

How The Experience of Social Exclusion Influences Visual Density Preference

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The experience of social exclusion is a painful but common part of our daily life. People often feel rejected, ignored, or left alone by individuals or social groups (Baumeister et al. 2005; Williams 2007). As social interaction is one of the most universal and fundamental human needs, social exclusion significantly impacts people’s psychological and physiological functioning (DeWall and Baumeister 2006; Twenge et al. 2001; Williams 2007). The current research looks at a novel impact of social exclusion on consumer behavior: a preference for visual density involved in product aesthetic design.

We first propose that social exclusion will result in a feeling of emptiness – a sense of an inner void caused by perceived self-incompletion or a missing part of the self (Austin 1989; Bronstein 2014; Hazell 1984). Social exclusion effects two aspects of the self-concept; the personal self (aspects that differentiate one’s self), and the relational self (aspects that reflect assimilation to others or significant social groups) (Sedikides and Brewer 2001). First, based on prior literature (Williams 2007), social exclusion threatens individual’s values and sense of meaningful existence, which are basic elements of the personal self (Schulenberg et al. 2010). Secondly, social exclusion deprives individuals of their social interactions (Warburton and Williams 2005) dampens their sense of belongingness (Mead et al. 2011; Williams 2007), which constitute the relational self (Aron and Aron 1986).

Across the personal and relational selves, social exclusion leads to a loss in meaningful existence, belongingness, and connectedness. This triggers the feeling part of self-identity is missing, which is felt as emptiness. Emptiness is a psychological state of inner void, with the opposite state being a psychological perception of fillingness (Hazell 1984). Emptiness is unpleasant and painful; hence people
are motivated to suppress or remove the unappealing feeling of emptiness by metaphorically “filling in” their inner void.

Visual density refers to the number of visual elements or units contained in a unit area of a visual image (Geissler, Zinkhan, and Watson 2006; Morrison and Dainoff 1972; Rosenholtz, Li, and Nakano 2007). Embodied cognition states sensory input or bodily sensations—such as visual density—are metaphorically linked to cognitive or abstract thoughts (Landau, Meier, and Keefee 2010; Krishna and Schwarz 2014). We posit that visually-dense patterns provide a visual sense of fillingness, which metaphorically compensates for the psychological need for filling psychological emptiness among socially excluded people. Stated formally,

Hypothesis 1: Socially excluded consumers have higher preference toward visually-dense patterned products than socially included consumers.

Hypothesis 2: Socially excluded consumers will have stronger feelings of emptiness than socially included consumers, which will mediate the effect of social exclusion on attitude for visually-dense patterned products.

Four experiments were conducted to test these possibilities. First we tested the proposed effect by examining participants’ real behavior. Participants (N = 154) were first randomly assigned to one of three conditions (exclusion, inclusion, and neutral) to prime social exclusion with a recall task (Mead et al. 2011). Next, the participants were requested to design a visual pattern for a smartphone case for themselves with a stamp. We measured the number of stamps each participant put on their smartphone case and found that social exclusion led participants to put a larger number of visual stamps on their smartphone cases (i.e., denser visual designs), than their counterparts in the socially included or neutral conditions.

Experiment 2 tested the proposed underlying mechanism of the feeling of emptiness by directly testing its mediational role. A 2 (exclusion vs. inclusion) × 2 (dense-patterned vs. sparse-patterned product) between-subjects design was used (N=158). We first manipulated social exclusion versus inclusion with the Cyberball game (Williams et al. 2000). Participants then rated their feeling of inner emptiness on three items (e.g., “I feel empty inside”; “I feel as though part of me is missing”; Poreh et al. 2006). They also reported their mood (Williams et al. 2000). Finally, participants were presented with and requested to rate either a dense-patterned or sparse-patterned T-shirt. The socially excluded consumers had a higher attitude towards the dense-patterned products than the socially included ones. No difference was found regarding sparse-patterned products. More importantly, the results from PROCESS 14 revealed that feelings of emptiness, not mood, mediated the evaluation of dense-patterned products.

In experiment 3, we further tested the filling-in-the-inner-emptiness mechanism by introducing a physical filling action as the moderator. A 2 (exclusion vs. inclusion) × 2 (filling vs. emptying action) between-subjects design was used (N=165). After manipulating social exclusion versus inclusion and measuring feeling empty, we had participants either fill or empty a water bottle. Afterwards, all participants evaluated a dense-patterned painting composed of various elements clustered in the center. While the effect of social exclusion was replicated in the emptying condition, we found that filling in the water bottle weakened the effect as it at least partially fulfilled the excluded participants’ need for filling in their sense of emptiness.

In experiment 4, we extended our results by providing a different opportunity to fill the inner emptiness. A 2 (social relationship: exclusion vs. inclusion) × 2 (temporal density: busy vs. control) between-subjects factorial design was used. After manipulating social exclusion versus inclusion, the participants’ sense of temporal density was too manipulated using a survey about life (Kim et al. 2015). Afterwards, all the participants evaluated a dense-patterned curtain. While social exclusion effect was replicated in the control condition, we found the social exclusion effect weakened if participants perceived themselves having a lot of tasks packed into a busy schedule.

Our research findings offer novel insights into how and why social exclusion leads to a preference for visually-dense patterned products. They add to the repertoire of behavioral consequences of social exclusion, and identify emptiness as a new psychological consequence of exclusion. This research also contributes to the product aesthetics design literature by focusing on the under-researched area of visual density. Finally, this work enriches the understanding of emptiness, which has hitherto been investigated by clinical psychologists.

The Impact of Social Exclusion on Consumers’ Attitudes toward Probabilistic Selling

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Probabilistic selling refers to the marketing practice in which a seller offers buyers a purchase choice involving a probability of obtaining a subset of the whole set of distinct products or services offered by a company (Fay and Xie 2008, 2010, 2015). Facilitated by its managerial advantages, an increasing number of companies have started to use this innovative marketing strategy, such as the fukubukuro (i.e., grab bags) from Apple, mystery flights/hotels services from KAYAK, and blind vacation bookings from SrpRs. me. From a consumer psychology perspective, the current research examines the impact of social exclusion on consumers’ attitudes toward probabilistic selling.

Establishing and maintaining stable social relationships is essential for human survival (Baumeister and Leary 1995), yet social exclusion continues to be a characteristic of human society. Social exclusion refers to the situation in which an individual is ignored, rejected, or isolated (e.g., Baumeister et al. 2005). Recently, consumer researchers have demonstrated the impact of social inclusion and exclusion on various consumer behavior domains, such as affiliation-related consumption (Mead et al. 2011), financial risk-taking (Duclos, Wan, and Jiang 2013), uniqueness-seeking (Wang, Zhu, and Shiv 2012), and consumer switching behavior (Su et al. 2017).

One important consequence of social exclusion is that it deprives people of their sense of personal control; hence, excluded individuals usually exhibit high vigilance to additional threats to their sense of control (e.g., Williams 2001, 2007). Probabilistic selling is also likely to be considered a threat to one’s sense of personal control because in a probabilistic selling context consumers cannot observe directly how the final outcome of their purchasing behavior (i.e., the product or service) is determined by their input (Alloy, Clements, and Koenig 1993). Therefore, we hypothesize that social exclusion decreases consumers’ favorability toward probabilistic selling, driven by the defensive system they use to guard against further loss of personal control (e.g., Kay et al. 2008; Kay, Moscovitch, and Laurin 2010). We further predict that the effect is weakened when the lack of personal control is compensated for in other ways, or when vivid information about the probabilistic offer is provided.
In experiment 1, we first manipulated participants’ feeling of social relationship through an imagination task (Pfundmair et al. 2015). Specially, college students (N = 105) were asked to put themselves into the role of the person in an either exclusion or inclusion scenario. After the participants finished imagining the scenario, an experimenter told them that they could choose either a fixed reward option (a local restaurant coupon) or a probabilistic reward option (a mystery stationery bag containing various random stationery items) of similar monetary value. As expected, excluded participants were significantly less likely to choose the probabilistic reward than those in the inclusion condition.

Experiment 2 demonstrates that the observed effect was due to feelings of social exclusion decreasing the probability of consumers favoring probabilistic offerings, but not increasing consumers’ evaluations of the fixed offering option. To do so, college students (N = 194) were randomly assigned to the four conditions of a 2 (exclusion vs. inclusion) × 2 (fixed offering vs. probabilistic offering) between subject design. First, participants’ feeling of social inclusion/exclusion was manipulated with a recall task (e.g., Duclos, Wan, and Jiang 2013). Then, as an ostensibly unrelated task, participants were asked to imagine they have ordered a laptop online and evaluated a delivery plan offering either an undetermined date or a fixed date (the undetermined date would be 4-8 days earlier than the fixed date). Consistent with our expectation, the excluded participants exhibited a more negative attitude toward the undetermined but earlier delivery offering than those in the inclusion condition. However, for the fixed offering condition, there was no significant difference between the preferences toward the delivery option by the two groups. This suggests that social exclusion does not enhance willingness to choose fixed options.

Experiment 3 provides direct process evidence by showing the mediating role of control deprivation and the moderating role of control restoration. We employed a 2 (exclusion vs. inclusion) × 2 (control restoration vs. no restoration) between subject design. After participants (N = 226) finished the same recall task we used in experiment 2, we manipulated their sense of control through a reading comprehension task. The participants in the control restoration condition read and summarized an article about the controllability of people’s health while the participants in the no-restoration condition read and summarized an article about the visual abilities of monkeys (Cutright and Samper 2014). Next, the participants responded to the three questions measuring their feeling of control (Cutright 2011). Finally, all participants imagined that they were given a mystery bag filled with random products—as a free gift. We found that the feeling of personal control mediated the effect of social relationship on probabilistic marketing offerings evaluation. And the previously observed effect of social exclusion disappeared when the feeling of control was restored via an external source.

Experiment 4 reveals a possible way to overcome consumers’ negative attitudes by demonstrating the moderating role of information vividness through a 2 (exclusion vs. inclusion) × 2 (high vividness vs. low vividness) between subject design. We first asked college students (N = 105) to complete the same imagination task used in experiment 1. Then, participants imagined that they were scheduled to take individual trips and evaluated a mystery hotel booking services. Information vividness was manipulated by either providing participants with pictures of the outcome of the probabilistic service, or not. As expected, when vivid product information was provided, the negative effect of social exclusion disappeared.

Taken together, the current research is the first to systematically examine the psychological mechanism under which consumers react to probabilistic selling. In addition, this research extends our understanding of social relationship and personal control in the marketing context. Further, our research offers rich practical implication for marketers in terms of how to increase the acceptance and effectiveness of probabilistic strategies.

The Broken Bargain: Social Exclusion Reduces Willingness to Incur Personal Costs for the Sake of Society

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People are lonelier than ever before (e.g., Klinenberg 2013). At the same time, the earth’s natural resources may be in greater danger than ever before. Is there a relationship between the two?

Previous research suggests the answer may be yes. People who were socially excluded (vs. included) displayed less prosocial behavior (e.g., helping, cooperation) and that effect was explained by reduced empathic processing (i.e., lack of sensitivity for others’ feelings; Twenge et al. 2007). If one assumes that pro-environmental consumption is an instance of prosocial behavior, then one would predict that social exclusion reduces sustainable consumption through reduced empathy.

It is possible, however, that prosocial and pro-environmental behaviors rely on different psychological processes. While empathy may be critical for motivating helping and cooperation toward specific group members (Batson 1991), it may not be so important for motivating behaviors that benefit the broader social group. Instead, behaviors that benefit the broad social group may be governed by an implicit bargain between the self and society. That is, people are willing to make sacrifices as long as they think the costs of those behaviors are offset by the rewards that come from belonging to a social group (Baumeister et al. 2005). If sustainable consumption is governed by an implicit bargain between the self and society, then exclusion from the social group should reduce sustainable consumption because it makes people unwilling to make sacrifices for the sake of society.

In four studies, we tested the theory that trait and state deficiencies in the need to belong are associated with reduced engagement in pro-environmental behavior. In addition, we tested the competing mechanisms for that effect — reduced empathy or a breakdown in the implicit bargain.

Study 1 was a basic test of the hypothesis that deficiencies in belonging are associated with reduced engagement in pro-environmental behaviors. One-hundred and fifty American MTurkers completed the 10-item UCLA loneliness scale (Russell 1996). Then they reported their engagement in a variety of environmentally-friendly behaviors (e.g., frequency of recycling; Karp 1996). As predicted, loneliness was negatively related to conservation behaviors, over and above the previously established demographic predictors of gender and income.

Study 2 tested the causal relationship between social exclusion and pro-environmental consumption. Eighty-seven undergraduate students were randomly assigned to write about a time they were either rejected or accepted (Maner et al. 2007). Preference for a “green” car versus a regular car was the dependent measure. As predicted, exclusion (versus acceptance) decreased participants’ preference for the ecologically-friendly car.

In study 3 (N = 87), we aimed to elucidate the explanation for why social exclusion reduces pro-environmental consumption. To manipulate exclusion, participants were given bogus feedback about the future implications of their personality-test results (Twenge et al. 2001). Participants were told that their future would be full of social relationships (social inclusion), devoid of social relationships (social
exclusion), or full of mishaps and misfortune (misfortune-control condition). The latter group was included as a control for negative feedback that was not social in nature.

To measure empathic concern, participants read and responded to an essay that was ostensibly written by another student and which described a recent romantic-relationship breakup; participants indicated their feelings toward the peer (e.g., sympathetic, compassionate; Batson et al. 1995). To measure the breakdown of the implicit contract, completed a willingness to sacrifice for society scale developed by Stern et al. (1999; e.g., I would be willing to accept cuts in my standard of living to benefit the society). Participants then indicated their preference between two backpacks that were of the same brand and price: a regular backpack, which was superior on performance, and a green backpack, which was environmentally superior.

Conceptually replicating study 2, socially-excluded participants reported a lower preference for the green product relative to the socially-included condition. Consistent with the theory that reduced desire to buy the green backpack was due to negative feedback about one’s social connections specifically rather than negative information generally, socially-excluded participants reported a lower preference for the green product than did misfortune-control participants. There was no difference between the misfortune-control and social-inclusion conditions. Process analyses which included empathy and willingness to sacrifice as competing mediators revealed that the indirect effect was significant for willingness to sacrifice but not empathy. Hence, reduced willingness to sacrifice for the sake of society was a better explanation for the effect of social exclusion on green consumption than empathy.

In Study 4, we framed the same green product as conferring social or financial benefits, expecting that social (vs. financial) benefits would restore excluded participants’ willingness to buy pro-environmental products. To test this hypothesis, we presented a green car as a fuel-efficient model whose benefits were social (owners were perceived by others as nice, caring, and altruistic) or economical (saving money). The social exclusion manipulation was the recall task used in Study 2 (Maner et al., 2007). Sure enough, participants who recalled a time they felt socially excluded reported higher intentions to purchase the car when the benefits were social than utilitarian. In contrast, the opposite pattern was found among participants who recalled a time of acceptance.

The current research provides two novel insights into the critical challenge of motivating sustainable consumption. One, the need to belong is key to engagement in sustainable consumption. When people’s need to belong was threatened by social exclusion or by feelings of loneliness, they became unwilling to incur the costs of sustainable consumption. Two, sustainable consumption is not merely another instance of prosocial behavior. Instead, the two outcomes can be explained by different psychological processes.

Is It Still Important To Be A Moral Person When You Are Lonely?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most people feel lonely at some point in their life. It is estimated that about one out of five people feel lonely at any given time (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). The widespread use of screen-based communication in the last two decades has also contributed to social isolation and low attachment to parents and peers (Gross, 2004). Despite the pervasiveness of loneliness, how it affects consumers’ moral behaviors remains to be an underexplored area. In this research, we examine how consumers’ felt loneliness affects their moral identity and moral behaviors.

Loneliness refers to a complex set of feelings that occur when an individual feels socially isolated. Such undesirable subjective feelings of social isolation drive individuals to fulfill their need for social connections (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Loneliness is related to, but different from, social exclusion. Loneliness refers to either a chronic personality (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008) or a temporary state of feelings that arise from a social exclusion incident. By contrast, social exclusion emphasizes a particular behavior or event (e.g., purposely excluding or ignoring someone in a group online game) (Wan et al., 2014), but it does not stipulate how the recipient feels or reacts to the behavior. Depending on the context and the individual personality, a particular social exclusion incident may or may not result in the individual’s felt loneliness. In our research, we examine how loneliness moderates the effect of empathy on moral behaviors, whether the feeling of loneliness comes from chronic personalities or specific exclusion incidents.

Moral identity refers to the degree to which being moral is important for one’s identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that one important antecedent of moral judgment and behaviors is empathy. For example, empathy motives people to help those who suffer, even at a cost to oneself (Batson, 1991). Empathy can also reduce punishment for others. When participants felt empathetic toward another individual, punishment of a cheater disappeared, even though the cheater clearly intended to cheat and had no remorse in doing so (Condon & DeSteno, 2011).

Extant research has revealed a negative relationship between empathy and loneliness in both younger and older adults (Beadle, Brown, Keady, Tranel, & Paradiso, 2012; Margalit & Ronen, 1993; Marshall, Champagne, Brown, & Miller, 1998). Davis (1983) shows that lonely people have less empathy, which explains their reduced accuracy in perceiving the thoughts and feelings of others, because lonely people lack the ability to accurately detect others’ thoughts and intentions in the social context. The negative correlation between loneliness and empathy (Beadle, et al., 2012; Margalit & Ronen, 1993; Marshall, et al., 1998) suggests that lonely people have lower levels of empathy than non-lonely people. If that were the case, the previously found effect of empathy on moral identity should be moderated by consumers’ felt loneliness. Because socially-connected people already have high levels of empathy, an additional increase in empathy will not lead to higher levels of moral identity any more. On the other hand, a boost in empathy among the lonely consumers could potentially lead to higher moral identity.

Hence we predict that loneliness moderates the effect of empathy on moral identity. Specifically, when lonely people experience a higher level of empathy, they should have increased moral identity and be more likely to engage in moral behaviors. However, such effect of empathy on moral identity and moral behaviors should be much less pronounced for non-lonely people.

We present five studies to test our hypotheses that loneliness moderates the effect of empathy on moral identity. Study 1 (N=167) employed a 2 (loneliness: lonely vs. non-lonely) by empathy (continuous) between-subjects design. Participants in the lonely (non-lonely) condition wrote a story about a time they felt very lonely (connected). They then completed the empathy scale (Davis, 1980) and the moral identity scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002). As predicted, we found a significant interaction between loneliness and empathy (b = .06, p < .01), such that when participants were asked to write a lonely story, they had a higher moral identity when the empathy was high than low (b = .17, p < .001). When participants wrote a non-lonely story, empathy had a much less pronounced (though still significant) effect on moral identity (b = .06, p = .01). In study 2, we manipulated loneliness and empathy independently and replicated
the results of study 1. In study 3, we manipulated loneliness and measured empathy. We also added consumer ethics scale (Muncy & Vitell, 1992) as an additional dependent variable. We show that when participants were temporarily induced to feel lonely, those with high (vs. low) empathy had higher moral identity and were more likely to engage in ethical consumer behaviors. Whereas empathy also increased moral identity among non-lonely participants in this study, it did not affect their ethical consumer behaviors. In study 4, we manipulated loneliness and empathy independently and allowed participants to engage in real immoral behaviors (Amaral and Meyers-Levy, 2013). Again, we replicated the results of previous studies. In study 5, we measured loneliness, manipulated empathy, and gave participants an opportunity to cheat (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). Our results showed that when participants were lonely, those in the high empathy condition cheated less than those in the low empathy condition. However, when participants were not lonely, there was no significant difference between the two empathy conditions.

Results across five studies provide strong and converging evidence that loneliness moderates the effect of empathy on moral behavior. We have demonstrated the same results with different operationalizations of moral identity (e.g., measured moral identity, measured consumer moral ethics, and tasks involving real moral behaviors). Our research integrates three substantial areas of literature and establishes connections among loneliness, empathy, and consumer moral identity.

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