The Effect of Social Exclusion on Consumers' Sensitivity to Construal Levels

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Results of four experiments found that relatively speaking, socially excluded consumers will be more influenced by low-level construals (specific, how-oriented thinking), whereas socially included consumers will be more influenced by high-level construals (abstract, why-oriented thinking). These effects were observed in different decision domains and using different methods to induce social exclusion.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Lonely are the Brave: Effects of Social Exclusion on Consumer Risk-Taking”
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Social exclusion, i.e., feeling ignored or rejected, is common in life (Baumeister et al. 2005; Williams 2007). Receiving a cold treatment from coworkers, being “dumped” by a significant other, getting evicted from a social organization are just a few examples of such unfortunate fate. The current research examines the impact of social exclusion on consumers’ risk-taking in financial decision-making.

Previous research finds that experiencing social exclusion leads to feelings of hurt, pain, and loneliness (Somer et al. 2001). In turn, these feelings increase one’s motivation to forge new social bonds (Maner et al. 2007). But how can one rebuild social connections after being rejected? According to Zhou, Vohs, and Baumeister (2009), ostracized individuals can use money to regain access to their social world and derive benefits from it once again. Building on this work, we predicted that consumers would respond to social exclusion by engaging in riskier but more lucrative investment opportunities.

To test this proposition, we invited participants in study 1 to play Cyberball (Williams et al. 2000), an online ball-tossing game intended to manipulate one’s state of social inclusion versus exclusion. Next, in a seemingly unrelated study, subjects indicated their preference between two hypothetical gambles of equal expected utility (i.e., 20% chance of winning $800 vs. 80% chance of winning $200). As predicted, socially-excluded participants favored the riskier option more strongly than their included counterparts.

Though encouraging, study 1 leaves several questions unanswered. For instance, what is the directional impact of social exclusion on financial decision-making? I.e., does exclusion lead to riskier behavior (as theorized earlier), or does inclusion lead to preferring safer options? Furthermore, could affect (rather than social exclusion itself) be the real driving force behind our effect? After all, it is conceivable indeed that interpersonal rejection also leads to negative mood.

To answer these questions, we invited participants in study 2 to elaborate on one of four personal experiences. Per our theorizing, subjects in the first two conditions recalled a social experience where they felt either included or excluded (Pickett et al. 2004). To assess the directional impact of social exclusion, we added a control condition where participants recalled everything they ate and drank in the last 48 hours. Lastly, to rule out affect as an alternative mechanism for our effect.

We predicted that consumers would respond to social exclusion by engaging in riskier but more lucrative investment opportunities.

“Does A Broken Heart Lead to an Empty Wallet? Exclusion Increases Willingness to Pay for Unappealing and Illegal Products”
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Humans are a hyper-social species and have a fundamental need for positive social relationships. Consequently, people experience social exclusion as deeply aversive. How does social exclusion influence personal spending? Prior research suggests several possibilities, such as mimicking others’ choices, impulse spending, and buying lovely gifts to relieve the sting of rejection and self-soothe. However, accumulating research suggests that the need to belong conforms to a specific pattern: when it is thwarted, people become motivated to affiliate with others. We therefore hypothesized that socially excluded people would use personal spending as a way to build social bonds. Specifically, in two experiments we tested whether social exclusion would increase willingness to consume products that were (1) expressly unappealing and (2) illegal and potentially harmful to the self when doing so could help commence or cement a social relationship.

In experiment 1, we tested whether social exclusion would increase participants’ willingness to spend on an unfamiliar and visually unappetizing food item: chicken feet. To manipulate social exclusion, participants completed a personality test and received false feedback concerning how their personality would impact future social connections. Participants assigned to the exclusion condition were led to believe they could anticipate a life devoid of social connections whereas participant assigned to the acceptance condition were led to believe they could anticipate a life full of strong social connections.

After the manipulation, participants ostensibly shared information with their partner about their food preferences in preparation for the food-tasting task. In reality, participants received a sheet filled out by a same-sex confederate, which indicated that his or her favorite food was chicken feet. After viewing this information, participants were shown a slide show of four different foods from
around the world (chicken feet, borscht, black pudding, and herring). They were asked to indicate their willingness to pay for each item, ostensibly because it would be used to determine which food item they would sample at the conclusion of the experiment.

However, before indicating willingness to pay, we varied whether preferences would be visible to the partner and whether participants had an opportunity to affiliate with the partner. This was done to ensure that increased willingness to spend on the chicken feet was a function of desire to affiliate rather than passive mimicry or conformity. In the public/interaction condition, participants were led to believe their spending intentions would be public and that they would sample the food item with their partner. In the private/interaction condition, spending intentions were not visible but the joint tasting would take place. In the public/no interaction condition, spending intentions were visible but no joint tasting would take place. As predicted, exclusion only increased willingness to spend on the chicken feet when both spending intentions were made public and they had the opportunity to meet their partner, indicating that socially excluded people were not simply mimicking or conforming to their partner’s preferences.

In experiment 2, we sought to extend the finding of experiment 1 to willingness to consume an illicit substance. First, participants were randomly assigned to a scenario in which they felt socially accepted, socially excluded, or when they were ill (negative non-social control). After the social exclusion manipulation, participants received one of two scenarios. Participants in the private condition imagined that one night, when they were home alone, they found some cocaine that had been left behind by a new friend. Participants in the public condition were asked to imagine that a new friend asked them to do cocaine with him or her when they were out at a party. All participants were asked to indicate how willing they were to try the drug. Results showed that, as compared to socially accepted and non-social control participants, socially excluded participants reported a higher willingness to use the cocaine, but only in the public condition. In the private condition, there was no difference in willingness or desire to use the cocaine as a function of the social exclusion condition. Additional analyses indicated that mood did not mediate the effect of social exclusion on increased desire to try the cocaine.

In sum, results from two experiments provide support for our hypothesis that socially excluded people use spending as a way to build new social bonds. The present studies suggest that the social motivation of affiliation has direct implications for consumption that are both theoretically and practically meaningful.

“'If I Ignore You, You Spend; If I Reject You, You Help: Different Types of Social Exclusion Threaten Different Needs and Produce Different Outcomes’”
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Previous research suggests that social exclusion can produce two seemingly contradictory responses: antisocial responses such as aggression and prosocial responses such as conformity. One possible explanation for these contradictory outcomes is that different types of exclusion threaten different social needs. Exclusion can threaten social needs such as belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence, and reactions to restore threatened needs may drive either prosocial or antisocial responses. Individuals with relational needs (belonging and self-esteem) may behave prosocially because relational needs motivate them to be adaptive, whereas individuals with efficacy needs (control and meaningful existence) may behave antisocially because efficacy needs motivate them to increase visibility (Williams 2007). Research also suggests a distinction between being rejected (explicit) and being ignored (implicit). Being rejected increases threats to relational needs such as self-esteem, whereas being ignored increases threats to efficacy needs such as meaningful existence (Molden et al. 2009). Taken together, the consequences of being rejected may be prosocial to be affiliative, but the consequences of being ignored may be antisocial to achieve immediate recognition. Moreover, some indirect antisocial behaviors may include the symbolic superiority over others (Baumeister et al. 1996), which may be achieved through consumption. Conspicuous consumption is a showy behavior intended to gain attention, and may provide the easiest and surest way of gaining immediate recognition, thereby satisfying efficacy needs. Thus, being ignored should increase conspicuous consumption (but not helping behavior). In contrast, being rejected should pose threats to relational needs, which should motivate individuals to engage in prosocial behaviors such as helping (but not conspicuous consumption).

Four experiments tested these propositions. Participants either wrote about (exp. 1-3) or imagined (exp. 4) an instance of either being rejected or being ignored or going grocery shopping, and then indicated their preferences for products with conspicuous vs. non-conspicuous brand logos and their helping intentions (operationalizations were varied). As expected, ignored conditions increased conspicuous consumption preferences but not helping intentions, whereas rejected conditions increased helping intentions but not conspicuous consumption preferences (exp. 1-4). Moreover, both sets of effects were greater for high than for low materialists (exp. 2). Materialistic values may be driven by both the needs to bolster self-esteem and bolster meaningful existence (Richins and Dawson 1992). Thus, materialism is a useful trait measure to serve as a proxy for need to bolster two different needs. However, when the underlying needs that are differentially threatened by being ignored versus being rejected were boosted prior to providing consumption and helping judgments, both social exclusion effects were eliminated. Specifically, under no-boost conditions, the effects of being ignored and being rejected were replicated. However, a self-esteem boost (exp. 3, 4) eliminated the effects of being rejected on helping intentions, but a power or meaningful existence boost did not, whereas a power (exp. 3) or meaningful existence (exp. 4) boost eliminated the effects of being ignored on conspicuous consumption preferences, but a self-esteem boost did not.

These studies provide evidence of social exclusion effects on consumption behavior, a topic that is relatively new to consumer behavior. In addition, the results provide a tentative explanation for inconsistent findings on the effects of social exclusion on prosocial and anti-social behavior. Finally, the results provide important information regarding the motivations underlying both conspicuous consumption and helping behavior such as volunteering and charitable contributions.

“The Effect of Social Exclusion on Consumers’ Sensitivity to Construal Levels”
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Being excluded has been shown to have adverse effects on people’s psychological and physical well-being, such as anxiety and depression, aggressive behavior, feeling cold and painful (e.g., Baumeister and Tice 1990). However, little research has examined whether social exclusion can impact people’s sensitivity to differential mental representations, which in turn, may influence their decisions in subsequently encountered, seemingly unrelated tasks. The current research examines such a possibility. We hypothesize that relatively speaking, socially excluded people will be more sensitive to low-level construals (concrete, superordinate repre-
sentations) and adopt a concrete, how-oriented thinking, whereas socially included people will be more sensitive to high-level construals (abstract, subordinate representations) and adopt an abstract, why-oriented thinking.

We draw our predictions on some interesting parallels observed between social exclusion and construal level. Specifically, prior research finds that people will focus more on proximal (distal) temporal distance when a low- (high-level) construal is induced or social exclusion (inclusion) is made salient; people’s ability to exert self-control will be impaired (enhanced) when a low- (high-level) construal or a social exclusion (inclusion) is manipulated. Based on these lines of research, we propose an association between exclusion and a low-level construal, and inclusion and a high level construal. We tested our predictions in four experiments.

Experiment 1 used a product classification task. We propose that those who construe information at a high level would be more inclusive and use fewer categories to classify products than those who construe information at a low level. We first manipulated social exclusion using a method developed by Twenge et al. (2001). Specifically, participants were asked to fill out a personality questionnaire, and they received one of the three versions of bogus feedback concerning their future: they will be alone (exclusion), socially accepted (inclusion) or prone to accident (negative control). Then they were asked to perform two classification tasks. In each task, they placed a number of products into groups by writing down the items that belong together. As expected, the results showed that participants in future alone condition used more categories to classify both tasks than those in future belonging and accident prone conditions. The differences between the latter two conditions, however, were small and insignificant, indicating that negativity could not be an alternative explanation of the results.

Experiment 2 tested our prediction on consumers’ evaluations of ads. It had a 2 (social: inclusion vs. exclusion) x 2 (product version: positive values associated with high-level construals, but negative associated with low level construals vs. positive values associated with low-level construals, but negative associated with high level construals) between subject design. We used a different method to manipulate social exclusion (Twenge et al. 2001). Specifically, participants were asked to form groups and were either be accepted or rejected by the confederate. Then in an unrelated task that followed, participants were asked to evaluate two ads of new products—a lotion and a drama—adopted from Kim et al. (2008). Significant interactions were found on both ads. As expected, socially rejected participants, as compared to socially included participants, reported a lower evaluation of the product which had positive high-level features, but a higher evaluation of the product which had positive low-level features.

Experiment 3 further tested our prediction on participants’ chronic tendencies. We measured participants’ chronic tendency to social exclusion (Russell 1996) and their chronic tendency to high/low construals (Vallacher and Wegner 1989). The results provide additional support for our hypothesis, showing that those who were lonelier tended to construe events at a lower level.

Finally, in the on-going experiment 4, we induced social exclusion by a brand scenario. Participants were asked to apply for a membership in a brand community club, and were informed later that their application was either accepted or rejected. The preliminary results showed that participants, who were excluded by the brand club, adopted a more single-minded thinking strategy in a later task. They were more successful in identifying details missing within a coherent visual whole than their counterparts who were included in the brand club. Collectively, these experiments provided converging evidence to our predictions in different decision domains, using different methods to operationalize social exclusion and construal levels.

SELECTED REFERENCES
Kim, Kyeongheui, Meng Zhang, and Xiuping Li (2008), “Effects of Temporal and Social Distance on Consumer Evaluations,” Journal of Consumer Research, 35 (December), 706-713.