Social Exclusion Online: A Literature Review and suggestions for Future Research

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ABSTRACT

Because the belonging need is fundamental, an exclusion experience thwarts this need and causes cognitive, behavioral, and affective consequences for human functioning. This paper aims to integrate the enumerated effects of social exclusion in a real-world setting. Also, as the boundary between the real world and cyberspace is blurred, it became crucial to understand the dynamics of social relationships in an online environment. Thus, this paper also intends to review the influences of social exclusion in the online environment. Based on a review of previous findings, this study provides several suggestions for future research. There are interesting research opportunities to investigate how ostracized people react to being excluded, especially in cyberspace.

Keywords

Social exclusion, rejection, ostracism, cyberostracism, consequences, literature review.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a situation in which no one wants to conduct group work with you during class, or imagine a chat room where no one acknowledges your existence, and the participants instead chat among themselves. In either situation, exclusion can be a devastating experience for the victim. Recent studies have investigated the link between exclusion experiences and destructive consequences, such as school bullying and school shootings (Leary et al. 2003; Twenge et al. 2001b). The suicide of Megan Meier also illustrated that ostracism, even in a cyberspace context such as Myspace, can cause the victim extreme distress (Karlen et al. 2011).

Such incidents are examples of the negative consequences of social exclusion. It has been found that one's social status has a powerful and extensive impact. Stated differently, the human need for belonging is fundamental (Baumeister et al. 1995; Williams 2001; Williams 2007b), and this need has an evolutionary basis. By being part of a social group, people have a better chance of surviving and passing their genes on to their descendants than those who exist alone. For this reason, social structure is considered to be one of the most powerful evolutionary adaptations, and the need for belonging has persisted as an internalized instinct.

However, an exclusion experience threatens this fundamental need and provokes various reactions to the experience. During the last decade, research efforts have delineated the extensive impact of social exclusion on individuals. Researchers have found that a thwarted need for belonging causes physiological, cognitive, behavioral, and affective consequences for human functioning.

Based on the volume of previous findings, the proposed paper aims to achieve three purposes. First, it intends to integrate the consequences of social exclusion that occurs in a real-world setting. Second, it reviews which symptoms the rejected people show in a virtual setting. Thus, instead of investigating the effects of the online ostracism experience, this paper intends to focus on how people react to ostracism in cyberspace. Third, by comparing the consequences of social exclusion in each setting—that is, in the real and virtual worlds—the final goal of this study is to develop several proposals for future studies. To accomplish these goals, this paper reviews 28 (27 in real-world setting and 1 in virtual world setting) *empirical* studies

that include "social exclusion" as an independent variable (or its related concepts such as "social rejection," "ostracism," and "cyberostracism".

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Social exclusion, social rejection, or ostracism can thwart the basic human need for belonging. The term social exclusion can be defined as being excluded or isolated with rather explicit negative signs (Twenge et al. 2001b). Rejection is defined as a "declaration that other people do not want to interact any longer" (Williams 2007a), and ostracism is defined as being ignored or excluded, not necessarily with explicit negative signs (Williams 2007a). Despite the attempt to distinguish these terms, results have revealed no significant difference among the three terms (Leary 2005). The terms social exclusion, rejection, and ostracism all indicate a situation that threatens humans' fundamental need belong, and previous studies use these terms interchangeably (Leary 2005).

In previous literature, Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that every human has a powerful and pervasive "need to belong" and that social exclusion thwarts this need. By reviewing a large volume of research from a wide range of academic fields, Baumeister and Leary (1995) demonstrated the validity of their argument. The previous research demonstrated the significance of social bonding for people and how social bonding affects human cognition, emotion, and development. Thus, they integrated previous works and interpreted their implication in terms of social exclusion and the thwarted need to belong (Baumeister et al. 1995).

Williams (1997) also noted the evolutionary function of ostracism. The sources of ostracism (the assailants) exploit it to maintain a cohesive group membership and to enhance their chance of survival by excluding the target (the victim). The experience of ostracism devastates the target and lessens his/her chances of survival. For this reason, individuals fear exclusion from groups and tend to conform, comply, and appear favorable to others. Due to the evolutionary value of social groups, exclusion from the group threatens four basic needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Williams 1997). Later, Williams (2000) introduced the term "cyberostracism," which refers to ostracism in cyberspace.

During the past decade, researchers have identified extensive consequences of social exclusion on individuals. Numerous studies have testified that social rejection has negative physiological, behavioral, cognitive, and affective effects. Furthermore, even the experience of ostracism in cyberspace—cyberostracism—has detrimental effects on people equal to those experienced as a result of exclusion in the real world (Williams 2001; Williams et al. 2000; Williams et al. 2002).

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON SOCIAL EXCLUSION

This section provides an overview of the reactions to social exclusion in a real-world environment. Figure 1 displays the various effects of an exclusion experience. To develop this figure, this study conducts a literature review. Relevant studies for this literature review are selected through the keyword search on reliable journal database PsycArticles and JSTOR. The search keywords include social exclusion, social rejection, and ostracism. Among more than 1000 papers searched, this study limits the target of review only to those that empirically verifies the influence of social exclusion as an independent variable. Consequently, 27 empirical studies are selected to investigate the causal relationships of social exclusion.
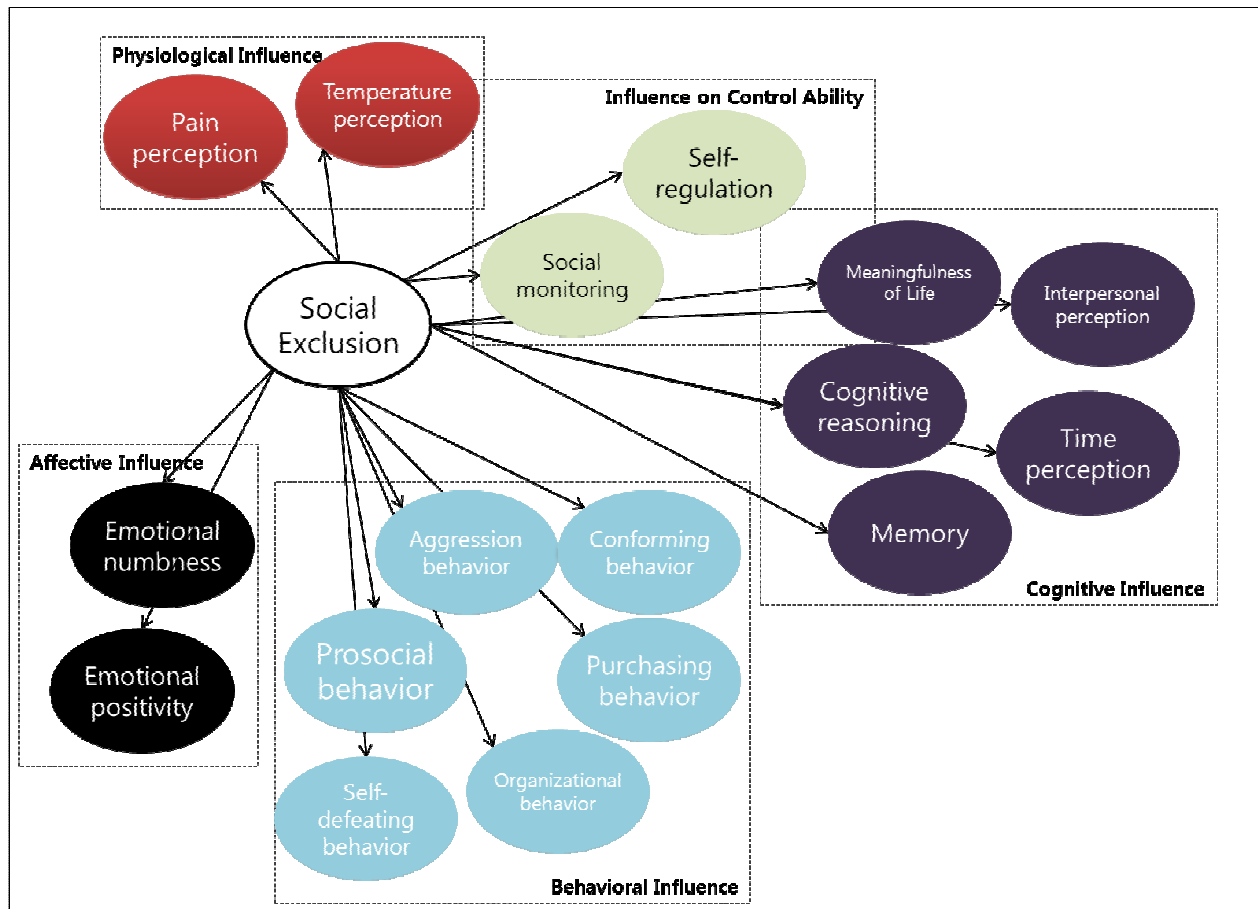
Figure 1 Effects of social exclusion in a real-world setting

Figure 1 depicts the effects of social exclusion, and the following explanation includes a detailed description of Figure 1.

Physiological Influences

Pain Perception

Years ago, one study noticed a link between social pain and physical pain (MacDonald et al. 2005). Since then, the shared baseline sensitivity between social and physical pain has been demonstrated, suggesting that the more sensitive one is to physical pain, the more vulnerable one is to social distress (Eisenberger et al. 2006). Also, the ostracized people reported higher levels of physical discomfort, suggesting that social distress increases one's sensitivity to physical pain (Eisenberger et al. 2006). However, another study found that social distress causes physical and emotional insensitivity (DeWall et al. 2006). The study also demonstrated that excluded people are less likely to feel empathy toward other people's social and physical pain (DeWall et al. 2006). As Macdonald and Leary (2005) suggested, further research is necessary to integrate these contradictory findings.

Temperature Perception

Social exclusion also influences people's temperature perception. Zhong and Leonardelli (2008) noticed that ostracized people would literally "feel cold" and demonstrated that excluded people assessed the temperature to be lower than other people. This finding provided evidence for the theory of embodied cognition, which argues that cognition is composed of both abstract representation and amodal perceptual contents. Based on this embodied cognition, the paper proposed that literal metaphors are not mere metaphors but the literal reflections of prior perceptual experience (Zhong et al. 2008).

Influences on Control Ability

Self-regulation

Humans, as social beings, sometimes need to restrict their self-interest to be included and accepted in social groups. Consequently, humans developed self-regulation as a tool to navigate between selfish needs and social values. In one study, people who anticipated being lonely demonstrated lower self-regulation—consuming less of the bad-tasting but healthy beverage—than those who anticipated a future state of belonging (Baumeister et al. 2005). Excluded people also ate more unhealthy snacks, showed less persistence on an unsolvable puzzle, and performed worse at dichotic listening tasks than accepted people, all of which suggest that social rejection has a negative impact on one's self-regulation (Baumeister et al. 2005).

Social monitoring

Furthermore, social exclusion affects the way that people process social cues. Social monitoring is an automatic process by which people collect information around them, interpret social cues, and monitor potential threats of social exclusion (Pickett et al. 2005). For ostracized people, it is crucial to detect other rejection signs and to notice acceptance signs from new sources of social connection. One study proved the increased sensitivity to social cues, such as vocal and facial expressions, following a rejection (Pickett et al. 2004). In addition, DeWall et al. (2009) investigated the effect of social exclusion on selective attention to acceptance signs. This study showed that people anticipating a lonely future paid increased attention to positive social stimuli, such as a smiling face. This selective attention is specific to positive social signs and not to negative ones (DeWall et al. 2009). This finding implies that people with an unmet need to belong attune their attention to potential cues of social acceptance, hoping for renewed social connectedness. In another study, rejected people showed an increased ability to distinguish Duchenne smiles from feigned smiles (Bernstein et al. 2008). A Duchenne smile is considered to be real smile (Ekman et al. 1990) and is a valuable sign of acceptance to people.

Cognitive Influences

Meaningfulness of life, Time perception, and Cognitive reasoning, Memory

Baumeister et al. demonstrated reduced functions of cognitive processes in their study (Baumeister et al. 2002). In the study, participants who anticipated loneliness demonstrated a significant drop in intellectual performance, in retrieving information from memory, and in using the information to solve difficult questions (Baumeister et al. 2002). Another study examined the link between social exclusion and selective memory, demonstrating that ostracized people are more likely to selectively recall social events (Gardner et al. 2000).

Also, one study suggested that participants under the exclusion condition displayed deconstructed cognitive states—disordered time perception, meaninglessness, lethargy, lack of emotion, and lowered self-awareness—which are usually symptoms of depressed people (Twenge et al. 2003). Compared to people in the control group, ostracized people perceived a fixed interval of time to be much longer than it was, viewed their lives less meaningfully, and tended to be more lethargic (Twenge et al. 2003). This result is consistent with Stillman et al. (2009). The study proved that ostracized people are more likely to consider life to be meaningless (Stillman et al. 2009). Williams (2001) proposed that ostracism has an impact on meaningfulness as well as three other fundamental needs, findings that other studies have replicated (Smith et al. 2004; Williams et al. 2002; Zadro et al. 2004).

Interpersonal perception

Carvallo and Pelham (2006) concluded that rejected people perceive personal discrimination and group discrimination in different ways. The study found that excluded people evaluated group discrimination to be higher but perceived personal discrimination to be lower than people under normal conditions (Carvallo et al. 2006). On the other hand, they also found that the accepted people perceive personal discrimination to be higher but group discrimination to be lower than average people (Carvallo et al. 2006). Regarding this opposite pattern, Carvallo and Pelham (2006) reasoned that the judgments regarding personal discrimination and group discrimination are derived from fundamentally opposite motives—one related to a self-serving and positive self-image and the other related to socialization and connectedness.

Furthermore, a recent study focused on the effect of social exclusion on individuals' categorical perception (Sacco et al. 2011). The study found that ostracized people are more acute in perceiving between-category differences. Also, excluded individuals tend to distinguish between racial in-groups and out-groups because the racial in-group can be a possible new

source of affiliation. Thus, the study suggested that the experience of ostracism makes individuals rely more on categorical perceptions (Sacco et al. 2011).

Behavioral Influences

Aggressive behavior

Social exclusion has been found to provoke violent behaviors. In investigating the possible causes of aggressive behaviors such as shooting, bullying, and sexual assault, researchers observed that most of the perpetrators experienced social exclusion. In one study, people who had been rejected responded more aggressively toward those who insulted them (Twenge et al. 2001b). Also, the rejected subjects gave a more negative evaluation of the perpetrator, even though they were aware that their evaluation would influence that person's career path (Twenge et al. 2001b). Furthermore, the critical implication of the study is for the target of the aggression. Rejected people are more aggressive not only toward someone who insults them but also toward neutral third parties (Twenge et al. 2001b). This finding implies that neutral parties can be victims of aggressive behavior caused by social rejection.

Self-defeating behavior

Researchers have maintained that self-defeating behaviors reveal innate self-destructive tendencies (Freud 1964). Self-defeating behaviors can be categorized in two ways: the first type entails negative consequences coupled with positive consequences, such as cigarette smoking. The second type takes counterproductive actions that boomerang, such as consuming alcohol and using drugs (Baumeister et al. 1988). In this sense, procrastination is a representative example of self-defeating behavior in which both categories are combined. One study illustrated that people who anticipate future loneliness tend to engage in self-defeating behaviors (Twenge et al. 2001a). For example, they are more likely to play risky "long shot" lotteries, pursue short-term indulgences such as snacks and cookies, and procrastinate on assigned tasks for temporary pleasures (Twenge et al. 2001a).

Prosocial behavior

Prosocial behavior is understood as an act that benefits others rather than oneself (Twenge et al. 2007a). Thus, to some extent, people perform prosocial acts in exchange for the attachment and belonging that a group can provide. However, one study demonstrated that socially ostracized people are less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors (Twenge et al. 2007b). People confronting a lonely future donate less money than people who anticipate a harmonious future and even misfortunate future (Twenge et al. 2007b). In addition, rejected people showed less willingness to cooperate with others or to help people in need (Twenge et al. 2007b).

Conforming behavior

Previous studies found that excluded people are more likely to conform to other people's behavior (Lakin et al. 2008). Mimicry behavior shows one's conformity to another and evokes several interpersonal benefits, such as affinity, trust, and closeness. In one study, rejected people were more likely to mimic their partner than people integrated into the group. This mimicry included automatic and unconscious behavior, such as foot moving. The study suggested that increased mimicry behavior reflects the individual's desire for a new interaction partner (Twenge et al. 2002).

Purchasing and organizational behavior

Despite its prevalence in our life, only recently have researchers focused on the effect of social exclusion on economic and organizational behavior. Recent studies demonstrated that excluded people tend to purchase goods strategically in the way that they pursue affiliations (Mead et al. 2011). They also demonstrate a preference for nostalgic products over contemporary products (Loveland et al. 2010). The threat of social exclusion is likely to deter people from acting uncooperatively, especially in smaller groups (Kerr et al. 2009), and causes people to engage in socially adaptive behaviors (Derfler-Rozin et al. 2010). Individuals who are at risk of social exclusion showed more trust and reciprocity, hoping to reconnect with others (Derfler-Rozin et al. 2010).

Affective Influences

Emotional numbness and Emotional positivity

It is seemingly natural for people to feel emotional distress when they are socially excluded. However, numerous prior works have failed to establish an association between emotion and the effects of exclusion (Baumeister et al. 2005; Baumeister et al. 2002; Twenge et al. 2007a; Twenge et al. 2003). One possible explanation is that the exclusion experience is so significant, puzzling, and threatening to a person that his/her defensive mechanisms prompt emotional numbness to cope with the situation. Thus, rejected people experience an emotional shutdown, which reduces their capacity to feel empathy toward others. This lack of empathy in turn translates into a reduced willingness to help others (Baumeister et al. 2009).

Later, after the numbness fades, rejected people begin to hurt. However, the delayed reaction causes a coping process to begin. Studies found that rejected individuals displayed not emotional distress but enhanced positive emotionality (Baumeister et al. 2007; DeWall et al. 2011). Thus, although a person's immediate reaction to social exclusion is emotional numbness, his/her unconscious processing systems may begin to search for pleasant thoughts in attempting to alleviate the emotional distress that arises once the numbness fades.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON SOCIAL EXCLUSION ONLINE

This section focuses on individuals' online reactions, which arise in an online environment, to the experience of ostracism. Figure 2 shows the effects of ostracism. To generate Figure 2, this study conducts another literature review. The search for relevant studies utilizes PsycArticles and JSTOR journal databse. Keywords cyberostracism, social exclusion, social rejection, ostracism are used. Among more than 1000 papers searched, this study restricts the target of review only to those that empirically verified the influence of ostracism as an independent variable, which appears in online environment. An extensive search yields one empirical study.
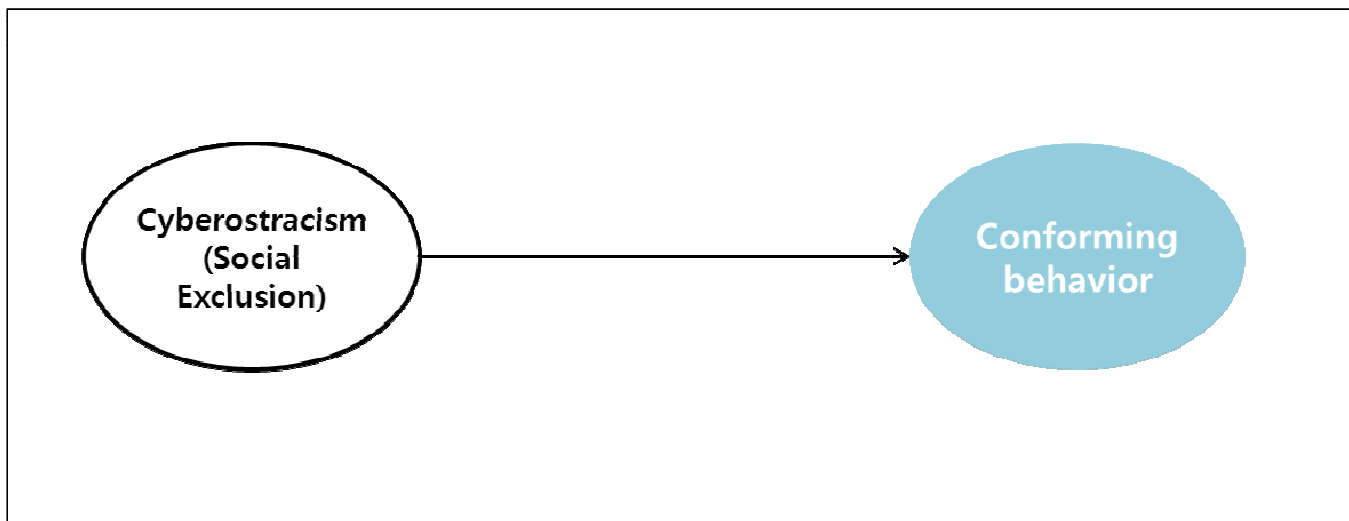

Figure 2 Effects of social exclusion in online setting

Conforming Behavior

Williams et al. (2000) found that ostracized people are likely to conform their opinions to others'. Prior studies have shown that conformity has interpersonal benefits, such as affinity (Chartrand et al. 1999), trust. In the group chat-room setting, excluded individuals displayed increased conformity to other people's responses even when the responses were unanimous and incorrect (See Figure 2). The effect of ostracism is significant regardless of whether the sources of ostracism are in-group members or out-group members. The study proposed that ostracized people intend to regain a sense of belonging by conforming to others (Williams et al. 2000).

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous findings, this section suggests several recommendations for future study.

With the development of the Internet and communication technology, an individual's social life has become rapidly extended to online environment such as virtual communities and social networking sites (SNS) (Jones et al. 2009). Despite its growing importance, little work has investigated online symptoms of the excluded people. Thus, by comparing the results of both literature reviews in previous sections, the current study recommends several research opportunities.

Proposition 1: Researchers should examine the potential link between internet addiction and social exclusion.

Since the advent of the Internet, addiction issues have become the growing problem (Byun et al. 2009). Regarding this problem, the previous studies have investigated the link between self-regulation deficiency and addiction (LaRose et al. 2004). Also, the negative effect of social exclusion on self-regulation has been established (Baumeister et al. 2005). Thus, future research might address whether the rejected people are more likely to show addictive symptoms or addictive behaviors to the Internet use.

Proposition 2: Researchers should investigate any negative influence of ostracism on an individual's social monitoring ability.

Recently, one study attempted to examine the effects of ostracism experience on social monitoring ability (Karlen et al. 2011). Even though this exploratory study failed to empirically demonstrate the effects, the results found the certain patterns - the rejected people tend to interpret positive signs as negative signs. Even in virtual communities, social monitoring is one of the essential skills for individuals to maintain their social relationships. In this line of reasoning, it is necessary to further address how social ostracism affects individuals' social monitoring ability.

Proposition 3: Researchers should empirically examine the possible influence of social exclusion on aggressive behaviors in cyberspace such as cyberbulling and cyberharassment.

Along with the addiction to Internet use, computer crimes such as cyberbullying and cyberharassment have become major concerns (Hinduja et al. 2008; Williams et al. 2009). Meanwhile, the causal relationship between ostracism and aggressive behavior has been examined in a prior study (Twenge et al. 2001b). Considering the growing alert for computer crime, future study should provide insights about why some people act aggressively in the Internet. Thus, it is worthy of investigating whether excluded people are likely to behave aggressively in cyberspace.

Proposition 4: Researchers should examine the negative effects of social rejection on any prosocial behaviors in virtual communities or social networking sites.

The previous study demonstrated that the rejected people acted less prosocial way (Twenge et al., 2007), and were less willing to regulate self-interest (Baumeister et al, 2005). However, the virtue of virtual communities is to share information with members without expecting any rewards. For example, a member of virtual community can voluntarily post book reviews or product information for other member in the same community. Thus, future research might address how ostracism experience influences on an individuals' willingness to behave on behalf of others.

Proposition 5: Researchers should investigate the link between individuals' affective commitment to virtual communities or social networking sites and ostracism experience.

Previous studies have found the importance of affective commitment to virtual community loyalty (Lin 2010) and online citizenship behavior (Joe et al. 2008). Also, the previous findings demonstrated that ostracism experiences influence on individuals' affective status (Baumeister et al. 2007). Thus, future research might address the potential link between the exclusion experience and individuals' affective commitment to virtual communities or social networking sites.

Proposition 6: Future research should investigate the possible tie between users' Internet time and ostracism experience. (Time perception or connection searching process)

Proposition 7: Future research should examine the potential influence of social exclusion on the deviation of an individual's virtual ego from the individual's ego. (Meaningless of life)

Proposition 8: Future research should investigate the influence of ostracism experience on the individual's breakaway from a virtual community. (Self-defeating)

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