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## **Coping With My Loneliness: the Effects of Social Exclusion on Consumer Choice of Unique Products**

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This research examines the diverging effects of social exclusion on consumer choice. We propose that the experience of social exclusion can either increase or decrease consumers' likelihood of choosing unique products depending on whether regaining social acceptance is perceived as desirable means to cope with the state of being socially excluded.

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# Coping with My Loneliness: The Effects of Social Exclusion on Consumer Choice of Unique Products

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The experience of being rejected, excluded, or isolated is quite pervasive in people's social life. Prior literature contends that social exclusion can impair individual's psychological as well as physiological well-beings (Williams 2007), and that people have the motivation to reduce the negative experiences of social exclusion. However, diverging findings has been reported on the behavioral consequences following the experience of social exclusion (Williams 2007). On the one hand, results from some research indicated that social exclusion can lead to prosocial behaviors as an attempt to rebuild social connections (DeWall, Maner and Rouby 2009; Maner et al. 2007). However, other studies suggested a link between social exclusion and antisocial behaviors such as aggression and decreased motivation to help (Twenge et al. 2001; Twenge et al. 2007).

In the current research, we identify dual coping mechanisms toward social exclusion in the domain of consumer choice. Based on the literature of social exclusion (Williams 2007) and need for uniqueness theory (Snyder and Fromkin 1980), we propose that consumers' response to social exclusion depends on how they interpret the experience of being excluded and that consumers may strategically choose to differentiate or assimilate to others as a means to cope with deprivation of social relationships. Two factors are considered which may influence the perception of whether or not it is desirable to regain social acceptance. To begin with, prior work has linked self-affirmation with greater perceived control and personal resources (Schmeichel and Vohs 2009). We expect that excluded individuals with self-affirmation or greater resources are less likely to perceive rebuilding social connection as a way to cope with the exclusion, as they can easily resort to other ways of remedy. For instance, Zhou, Vohs and Baumeister (2009) demonstrated that handling money can reduce distress over social exclusion. Hence, it is plausible that excluded individuals with self-affirmation have a more readily accessible need for uniqueness and in turn tend to choose more unique products. Accordingly, we propose that following the experience of social exclusion, consumers with self-affirmation (or rich resource) are more likely to choose distinctive products, as compared to those without self-affirmation (poor resource).

The second factor is individual's belief about whether things can be changed or fixed. Previous literature differentiated two types of implicit theories people hold about the world around us. Entity theory contends that everything is fixed and can not be changed, whereas incremental theory emphasizes on malleable traits and can be changed (Dweck and Leggett 1988). Hence, following the experience of social exclusion, individuals who hold a belief in incremental theory would consider regaining social acceptance is infeasible and be motivated to seek conformity through choosing less unique options. Conversely, excluded individuals who believe in entity theory would consider rebuilding social relationship to be infeasible. They will be more likely to regard themselves as unique individuals and tend to choose unique options to express their distinctiveness.

Across three experiments, we tested the propositions by using different manipulations of social exclusion and got consistent results. Specifically, experiment 1 documented the moderating role of self-affirmation. We employed a 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. inclusion) x 2 (self-affirmation: yes vs. no) between-subjects factorial design and we manipulated social exclusion by Cyberball task. Fol-

lowing the social exclusion and self-affirmation manipulation, participants made a choice between two vacation spots, with one of the options preferred by majority (common option) based on previous survey and another one preferred by minority (unique option). Possessions are extensions of self and prior literatures indicate that distinctive products preferred by a minority of people can signal one's individuality whereas those preferred by majority others convey a sense of belongingness (Ames and Iyengar 2005; Tian, Bearden and Hunter 2001). The results implied that socially excluded participants were more likely to choose the unique option after self-affirmation compared to those without self-affirmation. Based on the mediated moderation analysis, we found the moderation effect of self-affirmation and social exclusion on the choice of unique products was mediated by individuals' need for uniqueness. Furthermore, we showed in experiment 1 that the negative feeling of being socially excluded can be reduced significantly after product choice.

We tested how resource influences the effect of social exclusion on product choice in experiment 2 that employed a 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. inclusion) x 2 (resource availability: poor resource vs. rich resource) between-subjects design. After recalling an experience of being socially excluded or included, participants received the scenarios which used to manipulate resource perception. Then participants made choices to donate for one of two endangered animals, one supported by majority (common option) and the other supported by minority (unique option). The results revealed that excluded participants with rich resource chose more unique option than those with poor resource.

In experiment 3, we incorporated a marketing relevant manipulation of social exclusion and tested whether social exclusion interacts with the belief in changeability in affecting product choice. This experiment followed a 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. inclusion) x 2 (changeability: entity theory vs. incremental theory) between-subjects design. We found that, following the experience of social exclusion, participants who believe in entity theory would be more likely to choose the unique option than those who believe in incremental theory. In addition, our results indicated that the interaction effect of social exclusion and changeability on the choice of unique products was mediated by consumers' need for uniqueness.

To summarize, our findings suggest that consumers' response to social exclusion depends on the interpretation of whether it is desirable to regaining social connection (self-affirmation and resource) and whether they believe it is possible to change the state of being socially excluded (changeability). As a result, excluded consumers may tend to choose more unique or common products as a strategy to cope with social exclusion.

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