

Research Article

# Speaking to the heart: Social exclusion and reliance on feelings versus reasons in persuasion

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## Abstract

The authors of this study identify an alternative frame of communication for persuading people who feel socially excluded to behave in ways that benefit individual and social wellbeing, regardless of future connection possibilities. The authors suggest that socially excluded (included) consumers tend to rely on affect (cognition) in processing information, and to consequently prefer persuasive messages based on feelings (reasons). The effect occurs because people tend to ruminate about exclusionary events, which depletes self-regulatory resources. Thus, distraction that interferes with rumination can mitigate the social exclusion effect on affective processing. The authors present findings from five studies across various paradigms promoting personal and social wellbeing (i.e., donating blood, recycling, and consuming healthful foods) and discuss the theoretical and policy implications.

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## Introduction

Imagine that a close friend hosts a party, invites all your friends, but leaves you out. Or imagine that your friends agree to come to your party, but as the day grows closer, they say they will not be there. Both situations would make you feel rejected, ignored, and socially excluded.

Social exclusion, a common experience in face-to-face and online interactions, is known to have negative physical and psychological consequences (Cacioppo, Hawkey, & Berntson, 2003) and to cause interpersonal and intrapersonal antisocial and self-defeating behavior (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002), which further hinders social interactions and acceptance. Moreover, socially excluded people are less willing to spend mental resources on thought and self-regulation (Baumeister, DeWall,

Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002). Although social exclusion depletes cognitive and self-regulatory resources, socially excluded people can be motivated to respond prosocially, to better self-regulate (DeWall, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2008), and to prefer products that enhance social affiliation (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011), when they anticipate opportunities to reconnect (Lee & Shrum, 2012; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007).

The need-based theory of persuasion (Williams, Chen, & Wegener, 2010) suggests that people are susceptible to persuasive attempts related to core social motives (e.g., belongingness, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence). Thus, when needs to belong are threatened, socially excluded people are more persuaded by persuasive appeals that offer opportunities for social bonds. Although previous research has identified a socially-situated approach to persuade socially excluded people, few studies have gone beyond identifying appeals to explicit or implicit motivations to connect, except for a study showing socially excluded people's undifferentiated

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responses to messages of high versus low argument quality (Pfundmair, Aydin, & Frey, 2017).

Situations determine whether affective or cognitive paths are most persuasive (Pham & Avnet, 2004). Social exclusion impairs cognitive thinking (Baumeister et al., 2002) and information processing (Pfundmair et al., 2017); when mental resources are limited, people make choices based on feelings (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). However, social exclusion can also cause emotional insensitivity (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007). Those disparate findings have generated competing predictions about whether emotional or rational appeals will be more effective for persuading the socially excluded. To address this research gap, we directly examine how state of social exclusion causes reliance on affect rather than cognition in processing persuasive messages. Across diverse programs promoting blood donation, recycling, and healthful eating, we demonstrate that social exclusion leads to more reliance on feelings. Thus, messages that appeal to emotion (rationality) are better for persuading the socially excluded (included). Furthermore, distraction intervention can reduce rumination about an exclusionary event and thus mitigate reliance on emotion in subsequent information processing.

In the next sections, we review relevant literature in social exclusion and dual mode of information processing and develop our theory. We present five studies that test our predictions. We conclude by discussing theoretical and practical implications.

## Theoretical background

Social exclusion is a multidimensional, multifaceted construct. Although rejection, ostracism, social isolation, and discrimination are different experiences, they constitute social exclusion and threats to social belonging. We adopt a broad definition of social exclusion representing the physical or emotional social isolation individuals experience when they are ignored or rejected (Riva & Eck, 2016).

### *Reactions to social exclusion*

Humans are social animals (Aronson, 1972) motivated by fundamental needs to belong and to develop and maintain social bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A lack of belongingness can deteriorate physical, psychological, and behavioral wellbeing through anxiety, depression, somatic problems, and general unhappiness (e.g., DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988; Leary, 1990). Indeed, social exclusion has many antisocial behavioral consequences: socially excluded people are likely to be aggressive (Twenge et al., 2001), take irrational self-defeating risks, make unhealthy choices, procrastinate (Twenge et al., 2002), avoid donating to charities, and eschew volunteering for altruistic causes (Twenge et al., 2007). In addition, social exclusion impairs self-regulation regarding food consumption, persistence, and attention (Baumeister et al., 2005). Self-regulation is so costly and

effortful that socially excluded people who can self-regulate may be unwilling to exert the effort (Baumeister et al., 2005).

Socially excluded people, however, may choose to be more socially adaptive when their actions might foster affiliation and restore belongingness. For example, individuals who are explicitly rejected rather than implicitly ignored tend to be motivated to increase their interpersonal attractiveness and answer relational needs by helping others and donating to charitable causes (Lee & Shrum, 2012). They also tend to pay more attention to socially related information (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004) and to be more effective at managing others' emotions (Cheung & Gardner, 2015). In the consumption domain, social exclusion leads to preference for products symbolizing group membership or peer favor (Mead et al., 2011).

Resource conservation theory may account for such behavioral inconsistencies (Cheung & Gardner, 2015; Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006): social exclusion depletes cognitive and self-regulatory resources (Baumeister et al., 2002, 2005), but socially excluded people may selectively allocate their limited mental resources to behavior that offers chances to reconnect. Consequently, they engage in self-regulatory acts that bring social benefits (DeWall et al., 2008) and avoid acts that do not (Baumeister et al., 2005). This argument aligns with earlier findings suggesting that excluded people may be unwilling to tolerate costs and sacrifices associated with self-regulation when they fail to detect social acceptance rewards (Baumeister et al., 2005).

Rather than using social versus nonsocial framing, we identify affect as an alternative way to persuade socially excluded people to pursue socially desirable activities. Specifically, we propose that socially excluded individuals will rely on affect rather than cognition in processing persuasive messages.

### *Social exclusion and affective information processing*

Consumers use two modes of information processing (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj, & Heier, 1996; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999; Zajonc, 1980): affective, feelings-based processes tend to be faster (Pham, Cohen, Pracejus, & Hughes, 2001) and more automatic (Zajonc, 1980); cognitive, reason-based processes tend to be slower (Pham et al., 2001), more deliberate (Kahneman & Frederick, 2002), and consume more cognitive resources (Baddeley, 2012; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Therefore, when consumers have limited processing resources, they are more likely to rely on affect rather than cognition.

Social exclusion impairs self-regulatory functioning, cognitive reasoning, and intelligence (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007; Baumeister et al., 2005). In one study, participants were given feedback indicating that they were likely to spend their life alone. As a result, they showed decreased effortful logical thinking and reasoning in complex cognitive tasks (Baumeister et al., 2002). The effect was specific to social exclusion: participants who received feedback

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