

Research Article

The effect of social exclusion on consumer preference for anthropomorphized brands ☆

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Abstract

Prior research has mainly examined the effect of social exclusion on individuals' interactions with other people or on their product choices as an instrument to facilitate interpersonal connection. The current research takes a novel perspective by proposing that socially excluded consumers would be more motivated to establish a relationship with a brand (rather than using the brand to socially connect with other people) when the brand exhibits human-like features. Based on this premise, we predict and find support in three studies that socially excluded consumers, compared with non-excluded consumers, exhibit greater preference for anthropomorphized brands (studies 1–3). This effect is mediated by consumers' need for social affiliation and is moderated by the opportunity for social connection with other people (study 2). Furthermore, socially excluded consumers differ in the types of relationships they would like to build with anthropomorphized brands, depending on their attributions about the exclusion. Specifically, consumers who blame themselves (others) for being socially excluded show greater preference for anthropomorphized partner (fling) brands (study 3).

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Social exclusion is a pervasive experience in consumers' lives. People often experience incidents of being rejected or excluded in their relationships with family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Williams, 2007). Because social exclusion thwarts the fundamental human need to belong, it can have significant psychological and behavioral consequences (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, &

Schaller, 2007; Williams, 2007). Scholarly work has largely examined how socially excluded individuals might behave in interpersonal relationships, such as being more friendly or aggressive toward other people (Maner et al., 2007; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Recently, consumer researchers have begun to investigate the impact of social exclusion on consumers' judgments and choice of products and brands. This line of research mainly focuses on how socially excluded individuals choose products so as to signal their intention and interest in building social connections with desired persons or groups (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011; Wan, Xu, & Ding, 2014).

However, sometimes products can serve as more than just an instrument or medium for bonding with other people. Research on branding has suggested that products themselves can be the targets

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for relationship building, and that consumers can establish relationships with products or brands in similar ways to which they form interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998). Despite the large body of research that examines the behavioral consequences of social exclusion in the interpersonal domain, and the recent work in the consumption domain, it remains unclear how social exclusion might systematically influence consumers' brand preferences as a function of their motivation to affiliate directly with brands, rather than using brands as a tool to affiliate with other people. The current research attempts to address this issue.

Specifically, we examine how the experience of social exclusion influences consumer preference for brands that are anthropomorphized. Anthropomorphism, defined as imbuing the behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007), is often used in marketing communications that encourage consumers to see human characteristics in brands (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Landwehr, McGill, & Herrmann, 2011). For example, a brand may have a human-like mascot (e.g., the M&M's guy), human-like cues within the logo (e.g., Pepsi's revamped logo similar to a smiling face), or be depicted in first person language and/or with human-like motion (e.g., I am coming to you). Because anthropomorphism allows consumers to see human-like characteristics in non-human objects, presenting products in an anthropomorphic manner can increase the chance of this product being viewed as a possible social affiliation partner. Therefore, we propose that socially excluded consumers, relative to non-excluded consumers, will prefer an anthropomorphized brand and that this effect is driven by consumers' need for social affiliation. To advance our understanding of socially excluded consumers' relationship building with anthropomorphized brands, we draw on attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) and suggest that excluded consumers differ in their preference for anthropomorphized brands with different brand roles in the relationship, depending on consumers' attribution of the social exclusion experience. Next we review the theoretical background, develop the hypotheses, and report three experiments that test our propositions.

Theoretical background and current studies

Behavioral consequences of social exclusion

Psychology research shows that individuals seek alternative means to satisfy a particular need when they feel that a specific need is deprived (Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005). The experience of social exclusion signals that one's need to belong is not satisfied and thus motivates the person to attend to social cues suggesting opportunities for social reconnection and relationship building (Gardner et al., 2005). Consistent with this view, prior research has found that excluded individuals, compared with included individuals, paid greater attention to smiling faces (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009), were more interested in making new friends, had greater desire to work with others, assigned greater rewards to new interaction partners (Maner et al., 2007), and

were more likely to conform to others' opinions (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Recent work in marketing shows that consumers may adjust their spending patterns and product choices for the purpose of affiliating with others after experiencing social exclusion. For example, Mead et al. (2011) showed that socially excluded participants, in relation to non-excluded participants, were willing to spend more money on products that were symbolic of group membership, and were more likely to tailor their consumption preference to be consistent with those of their interaction partners.

Existing research on social exclusion has primarily examined how exclusion influences individuals' behaviors when they are given an opportunity for establishing affiliation with other people. One could affiliate through social interaction (e.g., showing increased interest in meeting new partners), or through consumption activities (e.g., conforming to a potential partner's product choices). However, consumers can also seek to establish relationships with brands in similar ways to relationship-building with people (Fournier, 1998). In the current research we propose that experiencing social exclusion would motivate consumers to seek affiliation directly with brands when the brands are presented in an anthropomorphic manner.

Anthropomorphism in marketing communications

Marketers often imbue brands with human-like characteristics (Epley et al., 2007) in marketing communications and seem to believe such a strategy should generally enhance positive responses to their brands. However, recent research suggests that how consumers respond to anthropomorphized brands may be more complex and dynamic than is typically assumed, and that consumers' responses may depend on their chronic or momentary motivations (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). For example, previous research suggests that one major motivation for people to anthropomorphize is the desire for social affiliation (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008). They may even wish to affiliate with non-human agents, such as pets, as if they were interacting with other human beings. Owning a pet has been found to help buffer the elderly from stressful life events, in a similar fashion to receiving social support from other people or groups (Siegel, 1990). In the current research, we examine how consumers' motives for social affiliation influence their responses to anthropomorphized brands. As discussed earlier, experiencing social exclusion increases individuals' motivation to pursue social reconnection and increases their sensitivity to cues that imply opportunities for acquiring new social relationships (DeWall et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2000). In a consumption context, brands presented in an anthropomorphized form can potentially become a target with which consumers can build social relationships. As a consequence, social exclusion is expected to increase consumers' preference for anthropomorphized brands, because these brands can help fulfill socially excluded consumers' needs for social affiliation. Formally, we put forth the following hypotheses:

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