

Research Report

The role of cultural communication norms in social exclusion effects

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that when social exclusion is communicated in an explicit manner, consumers express preferences for helping, whereas when it is communicated in an implicit manner, they express preferences for conspicuous consumption. However, this may not always hold true. In the present research, we put forward a theoretical framework explaining that exclusion effects depend on the extent to which exclusion is communicated in a culturally normative or counter-normative manner, rather than whether it is communicated in an explicit or implicit manner. We show that exclusion communicated in a cultural norm-congruent manner produces preferences for helping, whereas exclusion communicated in a cultural norm-incongruent manner produces preferences for conspicuous consumption. We further show that the differential needs—self-esteem and power threatened by normative and counter-normative exclusion explain these distinct preferences.

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People may encounter various consumption situations in which they feel excluded. For example, people may be turned down for a car loan, ignored by salespeople at luxury retailers, or denied access to exclusive airline lounges. In such situations, some types of exclusion are communicated with explicit signals such as direct words, whereas others are communicated with implicit signals such as silence. Research suggests that these different types of exclusion determine motivational and behavioral outcomes. Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, and Knowles (2009) demonstrated that being rejected as an explicit form and being ignored as an implicit form activated different motivations concerned with prevention-focus and promotion-focus, respectively. Central to

the present research that focuses on consumer contexts, Lee and Shrum (2012) showed that when rejected, participants engaged in helping as a means to compensate for self-esteem threats, but when ignored, they engaged in conspicuous consumption as a means to compensate for power threats.

However, there is reason to believe that these responses to explicit and implicit exclusion may differ across cultures. Cultures provide broad guidelines about others' or society's expectations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and influence communication norms (Briley, Wyer, & Li, 2014; Hall, 1976). For example, North Americans emphasize social recognition and communicate in an explicit, direct manner because the thoughts of individuals are considered unknowable unless they are explicitly expressed (Würtl, 2005). Conversely, East Asians emphasize social harmony and communicate in an implicit, indirect manner because assertive self-expression is considered immature (Kim & Sherman, 2007). Cultures also influence how people respond to social exclusion. For example, when excluded, people with independent self-concepts perceive

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exclusion as more threatening (Pfundmair, Aydin, et al., 2015) and exhibit more antisocial responses (Pfundmair, Graupmann, Frey, & Aydin, 2015) than those with interdependent self-concepts.

In the present research, we put forward a theoretical framework explaining that compensatory responses to explicit and implicit types of exclusion differ across cultures and that a cultural factor driving this difference is the manner in which exclusion is communicated. Specifically, we predict that exclusion communicated in a normative manner results in relationship-enhancing responses (e.g., helping), whereas exclusion communicated in a counter-normative manner results in attention-getting responses (e.g., conspicuous consumption).

To support our prediction, we integrate Hall's (1976) notion of cultural differences in communication norms. In some cultures (e.g., the U.S., Germany, Switzerland), the normative way of communication occurs predominantly through verbally explicit, direct statements, and is relatively context-free. Accordingly, they are referred to as low-context cultures. People in low-context cultures place a premium on the expression of personal rights over relational communication constraints (Bresnahan et al., 2002) and tend to express themselves in ways that are direct and consistent with their feelings and interests (Hall, 1976). Even criticism is communicated directly and recorded formally in low-context cultures (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998), and being silent on issues that are in disagreement contradicts communication norms in low-context cultures (Gudykunst et al., 1996). For example, Americans view verbal communication as desirable and rewarding, and view the avoidance of communication or a lack of verbal assertiveness as a social deficiency (Kim, Kim, Aune, Kim, & Hunter, 2001). Thus, explicit communication (e.g., being rejected) should be congruent with the norms of low-context cultures, whereas implicit communication (e.g., being ignored) should be counter-normative in low-context cultures.

In other cultures (e.g., Korea, Japan, China), however, the normative way of communication occurs predominantly through implicit, nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body postures, and silence, and people often draw true meaning from social contexts. Accordingly, they are referred to as high-context cultures. People in high-context cultures strive to avoid direct confrontation, and repress self-feelings and interests to maintain social relations (Kim et al., 1998). They often express themselves in an ambiguous way to conceal true intentions (Gudykunst et al., 1996), especially on issues that are in disagreement. For example, Koreans tend to avoid confrontation in conflict resolution (Kim et al., 1998). Similarly, the Japanese often present silence, usually accompanied by facial expressions, to indicate anger or disagreement (Lebra, 1987) because saying negative words directly to others causes a loss of face (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987). Thus, implicit communication (e.g., being ignored) should be congruent with the norms of high-context cultures, whereas explicit communication (e.g., being rejected) should be counter-normative in high-context cultures.

These cultural differences in communication norms have implications for how people respond to the manner in which exclusion is communicated. When exclusion is communicated in a culturally normative manner, people are likely to perceive

such a manner as socially approved and accept the information as evidence that they have failed to gain social acceptance, which makes them feel a lack of fondness and attachment (communal qualities; Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). Feeling low in communal qualities is a characteristic of low self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995), and low self-esteem is linked to behavior that increases interconnection (Murray et al., 2009). Thus, normative exclusion should make individuals highly sensitive to their perceived exclusionary status and primarily threaten self-esteem, which in turn should result in relationship-enhancing responses (e.g., helping).

Conversely, when exclusion is communicated in a counter-normative manner, people are likely to perceive such a manner as socially unacceptable and inappropriate, which makes them feel a lack of respect and status (agentic qualities; Wojciszke et al., 2009). Feeling low in agentic qualities is a characteristic of low power over others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007), and a low sense of power is linked to behavior that increases conspicuousness (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009). Thus, counter-normative exclusion should make individuals highly sensitive to their perceived unfair treatment and primarily threaten psychological power, which in turn should result in attention-getting responses (e.g., conspicuous consumption).

In three experiments, we provide evidence that responses to social exclusion depend on whether exclusion is communicated in a normative or counter-normative manner (Fig. 1). We operationalize communication norms using both cross-cultural samples (Experiment 1) and priming manipulations (Experiment 2) and show the differential effects of normative and counter-normative exclusion on preferences for helping and conspicuous consumption. We further show that these distinct effects on preferences are attributed to the differential needs threatened by normative and counter-normative exclusion (Experiment 3).

Experiment 1

The purpose of Experiment 1 is to investigate the differences in compensatory responses to normative versus counter-normative exclusion between low- and high-context cultures. To accomplish this, we contrast responses to explicit (being rejected) versus implicit (being ignored) exclusion between Americans and Koreans. We predict that Americans and Koreans will exhibit opposite responses to being rejected and ignored. For Americans, whose communication norms are explicit, being rejected will produce preferences for helping, whereas being ignored will produce preferences for conspicuous consumption. However, for Koreans, whose communication norms are implicit, being ignored will produce preferences for helping, whereas being rejected will produce preferences for conspicuous consumption.

Method

Participants were 81 students ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.55$, $SD = 3.13$) from a large American university and 101 students ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.64$, $SD = 2.92$) from a large Korean university. We removed

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