When a Brand is a Sincere Friend: Compensatory Response to Social Exclusion

by

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Business Administration
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Business Administration in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

How do consumers respond when they experience threats to interpersonal relationships, or social exclusion? This research suggests that consumers will seek brands that are characterized by a specific personality trait dimension. In particular, consumers will seek sincere brands as a means to fulfill the need to belong. I argue that this sincerity orientation effect occurs because the sincerity dimension is positively associated with relationship growth and strength. Several studies demonstrate that when excluded, consumers become biased in their impressions of and preferences for sincere brands; they also feel stronger self-brand connections to sincere brands. Further, two studies demonstrate the moderating roles of identity-relevant affirmation and self-esteem in the relationship between exclusion and sincerity orientation towards brands.

Dedication

To my mentors and friends at Duke University, New York University, and Syracuse

University.

Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

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1. Introduction

Imagine that it is a weekday morning and you just found out that your friends had a casual dinner together at one of their houses last night. Although your friends simply did not ask you to join them in this mundane activity, you feel rejected. Now, imagine that after this experience, you go shopping and have a choice between two pairs of brand name jeans: Levi's® (a sincere brand) and H&M® (an exciting brand). Which brand will you choose in response to the social exclusion you experienced earlier? This research suggests that you will choose the sincere brand, Levi's, because it can serve as a significant other that increases your feelings of belonging.

Research shows that people use consumption to repair threats to various aspects of the *self* (e.g., Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). For example, when an important self-identity is threatened, people compensate for this threat to the self by consuming a product that is symbolic of that identity. In this research, I am interested in how people repair threats to *interpersonal relationships*, or exclusion by socially relevant others. Research indicates that most people seek other people when they experience threats to interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baumeister and Leary 1995; Lakin, Chartrand, and Arkin 2008). People engage in various perceptions and behaviors to reestablish relationships directly with other people. But there is research showing a more indirect approach where people attempt to bond with non-social targets, including products,

after experiencing social exclusion. Research demonstrates that people generally perceive human attributes in non-human objects and invent humanlike agents in their environment to serve as potential sources of connection (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2008). In the current research, I go beyond the idea that people are *generally* biased to perceive humanlike characteristics in non-human objects when they are excluded; instead I examine whether and when people are biased with respect to *specific* brand traits (i.e., sincerity traits).

This dissertation examines the idea that people may use brands with a specific personality trait dimension, or the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker 1997) as a means to indirectly repair threats to social belongingness, providing insights into consumers' impressions, preferences, and self-brand connections. In particular, I hypothesized that brands that are high on the *sincerity* dimension (e.g., caring, genuine) (versus the other four trait dimensions, including excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness) (Aaker 1997) serve to repair threatened feelings of belonging. I hypothesized that this sincerity orientation effect would occur because the sincerity dimension is positively associated with relationship growth (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993) and strength (Buss 1991; Robins, Avshalom, and Moffitt 2000). Across a series of studies, I find that when excluded, consumers become biased in their impressions of and preferences for brands that are high on the *sincerity* dimension; they also feel stronger self-brand connections to such brands. I refer

to this phenomenon as sincerity orientation. Specifically, I find that people are more prone to perceive their own preferred brands and pretested sincere brands to be higher on sincerity (versus the other four personality dimensions) (study 1). I also find that under exclusion, people have stronger connections to brands that are characterized by sincerity (versus excitement) (study 2). In a third study, I find that consumers prefer sincere versus exciting brands following social exclusion and that this preference increases downstream feelings of belonging. In a fourth study, I examine whether affirming one's identity may protect people from the negative effects of social exclusion. I find that having an opportunity write about one's identity prior to being socially excluded reduces sensitivity toward brand traits potentially because the act of identity-relevant affirmation reduced the threat from exclusion. Finally, in study 5, I find that self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, and Downs 1995; Rosenberg 1965) moderates the relationship between social exclusion and sincerity orientation toward brands. I focused on self-esteem because this individual difference has previously been shown to be correlated with the extent to which people engage in direct, social reconnection (e.g., Leary et al. 1995). Specifically, under social exclusion, low self-esteem individuals showed the sincerity orientation to a greater extent compared to high self-esteem individuals. This study provides some understanding of who is more likely to respond to exclusion indirectly (e.g., using consumption) by identifying the role of an important individual difference variable. For an overview of all five studies, see figure 1.

15
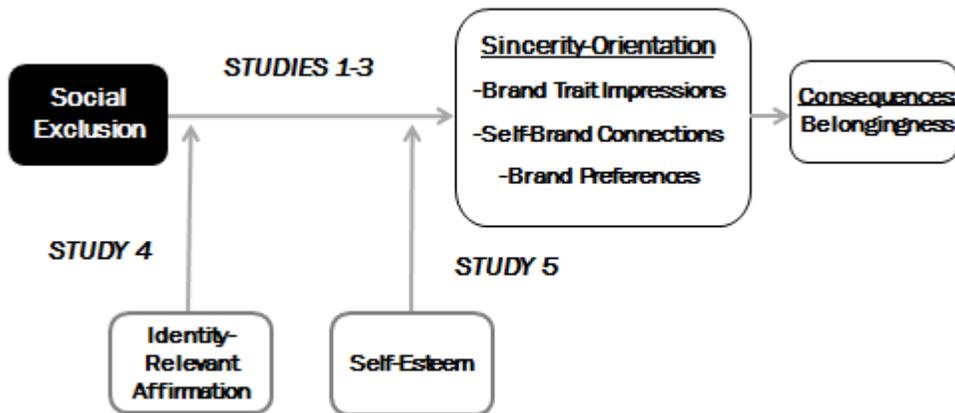
Figure 1. Overview of studies

In sum, this research is driven by the insight that consumers compensate for social exclusion by becoming sensitive towards brands' trait dimensions. It specifically demonstrates that social exclusion is a critical determinant of how consumers become biased with respect to specific brand traits (i.e., sincerity traits). In doing so, it provides a novel framework for understanding an indirect compensation system wherein consumers do not just attribute humanlike traits to products in general, but instead seek specific brand traits.

In what follows, I first review evidence to suggest that people use consumption to repair threats to various aspects of the self. Next, I discuss how people seek other people when they experience threats to interpersonal relationships. I then discuss how people may use consumption in response to social exclusion. In the following section, I

review evidence related to brand personality traits to suggest that specific traits of brands can compensate for social exclusion. I then present three studies to demonstrate that social exclusion influences consumers' impressions, preferences, and self-brand connections. In study 3, I also show evidence for downstream consequences of consumers' brand trait preferences. I then present a fourth study to examine the effect of identity-relevant affirmation as a buffer against the effect of exclusion on sensitivity towards brand traits. Finally, I present study 5, which examines the role of trait self-esteem in understanding the process underlying the observed effects.

Responding to Threats to the Self using Consumption. Research supports the idea that when people experience threats to various aspects of the self (e.g., self-identity; self-concept; self-view), they generally respond with consumption of certain products. People respond to self-threats with consumption of products that are symbolic of the specific dimension on which the self is threatened (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). For instance, when an important self-identity is threatened, people indirectly compensate for this threat by consuming a product that is symbolic of that identity (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). Identity symbols are valuable means to compensate for threats to a desired identity (Braun and Wicklund 1989). Similarly, when a confidently held self-view (self-concept; e.g., "I am an exciting person") is threatened, consumers are motivated to choose products that bolster their original self-view (e.g., choosing brands with exciting brand personalities; Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009). Furthermore,

17

consumers compensate for threats to psychological states that are important to them. For instance, a state of low power leads consumers to pay more for status products or products that serve to restore or gain pain (Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Moreover, self-threats related to physical personal freedom leads consumers to compensate through increased variety-seeking (Levav and Zhu 2009). Thus, it appears that consumers readily use consumption (including brand personality) in response to threats to self-identity, self-view, self-concept, psychological states, and spatial personal freedom. While it is important to understand how people cope with threats to various aspects of the self, it is also important to understand how people cope with threats to interpersonal relationships (i.e., social exclusion).

Social Reconnection: Responding to Threats to Interpersonal Relationships (Social Exclusion). Research suggests that people respond to self-threats using threat-specific consumption. In the present research, I examine how people cope with threats to interpersonal relationships. Research indicates that when excluded or lonely, there are profound negative consequences that in turn lead people desire social connection. Numerous psychologists have proposed that humans are fundamentally social, possess powerful belongingness needs, and have a pervasive drive to create and sustain meaningful interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baumeister and Leary 1995; James 1890). Psychologists recognized the strong need for interpersonal contact (Maslow 1968; Sullivan 1953). Maslow (1968) placed "love and belongingness" needs in the middle of

his motivational hierarchy; though basic needs such as food, hunger, and safety have to be fulfilled before belongingness needs emerge, they are a priority over self-esteem and self-actualization needs. James (1890) speculated that the worst punishment imaginable would be exclusion from close others. Put differently, the social self would be nonexistent without such others.

Fortunately, most people have psychological defense systems that help make sure that they belong to social relationships that are important to them (Leary et al. 1995). That is, when excluded, most people desire to create social bonds (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Lakin, Chartrand, and Arkin 2008; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, and Schaller 2007; Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, and Vohs 2011; Pickett and Gardner 2005; Williams, Cheung, and Choi 2000) and engage in perception and behavior to alleviate the pain of exclusion. For instance, people actively seek social connection and desire to play and work with others (Maner et al. 2007). They are more prone to perceive others with a rose-colored lens, and rate others as especially friendly, welcoming, sociable and attractive, which are attributes valued in social partners (Maner et al. 2007). Perceiving others in this positive light facilitates the social relationship and is evidence of a desire for increased social connection after exclusion. Further, exclusion leads people to imagine important social relationships (Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister 2003) and have increased attention to social cues in the environment (Gardner, Pickett, Jeffries, and Knowles 2005). Responding in this way to social exclusion occurs automatically (Lakin,

Chartrand, and Arkin 2008). When rejected, individuals automatically engage in behavior that facilitates affiliation with another social target who is an in group member (but not outgroup member). People also engage in greater behavioral mimicry (Chartrand and Bargh 1999), an automatic, low-risk, low-cost behavioral pattern of imitating others that promotes affiliation and interpersonal rapport (Chartrand, Maddux, and Lakin, 2005).

Research also suggests that people strategically use consumption to foster social reconnection when they are excluded. For instance, people who were excluded spent money and consumed products as signals to communicate a desire to socially connect with others (Mead et al. 2011). Money and products were used as a means to fit in, rather than be distinct, with the social environment, and this makes sense given the broader idea that similarity and conformity promote acceptance while decreasing the possibility of rejection and ostracism (Brewer 1991). Other research suggests that when the need to socially belong becomes relevant, people prefer nostalgic products that strengthen social reconnection with people from the past (Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010). Interestingly, this effect was shown when the need to belong was activated through a threat to belongingness (e.g., excluded) as well as when the need to belong was activated in a nonthreatening manner (e.g., primed with interdependence). Further, people turn to favored nostalgic or contemporary television programs (Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg 2008), which helps restore belonging through increased

20

connectedness with familiar and well-liked characters (Russell, Norman, and Heckler 2004).

Responding to Social Exclusion with Consumption. The previous section reviews evidence that when excluded, people engage in a variety of perceptions and behaviors to reestablish relationships directly with other people (i.e., social reconnection). But there is research showing a more indirect approach where people attempt to connect with non-social targets (including products) after exclusion. When lonely, people have the tendency to generally perceive human attributes in non-human objects and invent humanlike agents in their environment to serve as potential sources of connection (Epley et al. 2008). They do this by ascribing humanlike characteristics as well as life (i.e., living and conscious) to non-human objects (Gallant 1981). They also have increasing belief in the existence of commonly anthropomorphized agents (such as God; Guthrie 1993). Thus, there is strong support that social exclusion increases need for social connection and predicts more *general* anthropomorphism.

In the present research, I suggest that people respond to exclusion by seeking *specific* traits in brands. With respect to social exclusion, brands that are high on the sincerity dimension are relevant because this dimension is positively associated with fostering relationships. Brands that are high on the sincerity dimension are more warm, caring, down-to-earth, and considerate relative to their competitor brands. Importantly, traits of warmth, family-orientation, and traditionalism, which are positively associated

21

with relationship strength (Buss 1991; Robins, Avshalom, and Moffitt 2000), are indicative of the sincerity trait domain. Sincerity can also lead to inferences of partner trustworthiness and dependability (Aaker 1999), which promotes relationship growth (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993). Although other trait dimensions can be examined in relevance to different need threats, I focus on the impact of the threat to belonging (i.e., social exclusion) on sincere brands. I hypothesized that because sincere brands are characterized by positive relationship-related traits (e.g., genuine, trustworthy), consumers' impressions and preferences for sincere brands will be enhanced when excluded; consumers' will also draw closer to (have stronger self-brand connections to) sincere brands when excluded. This sincerity orientation should thus enhance feelings of belonging, allowing consumers to compensate for exclusion. In what follows, I discuss research related to brand trait dimensions to provide a rationale for why consumers may respond to specific threats with specific brand traits.

Why do Brand Trait Dimensions Matter? Research indicates that consumers easily and readily perceive and attribute specific personality traits to brands. These brand traits have been demonstrated to be a key element of a brand's image, often differentiating a brand from competitors (Aaker 1997; Gilmore 1919). Attribution of traits is one context in which people see human in non-human forms and events, or anthropomorphize (Gilmore 1919; Guthrie 1993). Most relevant to the consumption context is people's tendency to attribute to brands one or a combination of five

personality trait dimensions: sincerity (e.g., honest, down-to-earth), excitement (e.g.,

trendy, cool), competence (e.g., smart, successful), sophistication (e.g., good looking,

glamorous), and ruggedness (e.g., tough, masculine; Aaker 1997). The first two

dimensions capture most of the variance of brand personality, indicating the

prominence of these two trait dimensions in brand image. Further, these two

dimensions compose two of the three partner ideals in intimate personal relations

(Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles 1999). Thus, the sincerity and excitement

dimensions are fundamental to ratings of brand personality, which is robust across

individuals, product categories, and cultural contexts (Aaker, Benet-Martinex, and

Garolera 2001).

Why might brand personality be important to consumers? A distinct brand

personality is appealing to consumers because it allows them to express, affirm, or

enhance their sense of self, both publicly and privately (Belk 1988; Berger and Heath

2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Richins 1994). In particular,

consumers often purchase brands to build their self-identity, and in doing so, form self-

brand connections (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Consumers' self-brand connections are

enhanced when brand associations are used to build and communicate self-identity to

other people. One source of brand associations is the extent to which the brand is used

by reference groups with certain images (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Furthermore,

distinct personalities help brands come to life as if they were human characters (Keller

2002; Plummer 1985), which importantly legitimatizes the brand as an active, contributing partner of the relationship dyad (and not as a passive object of marketing actions), in turn, encouraging consumer-brand relationships similar to interpersonal relationships (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004; Fournier 1998). Fournier (1998) developed a framework for better understanding these consumer-brand relationships, and by using a qualitative interview methodology, identified brands as different types of partners, such as a best friend, a casual friend, a committed partner, and a fling. Consistent with this idea, other research has shown that consumers have feelings of love for brands and experience strong emotional attachment to certain brands (Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence 2008; Caroll and Ahuvia 2006; Whang, Allen, Sahoury, and Zhang 2004).

Through using the brand personality construct, there is an increasing understanding of the effects of general brand trait attributions (i.e., brands fostering relationships). That is, brand traits generally facilitate consumer-brand relationships. However, the manner in which they specifically interact with threats to interpersonal needs such as social exclusion to impact consumers' impressions and preferences of brands as well as self-brand connections is not well understood. It is important to answer this question given the findings that anthropomorphism (i.e., a *general* tendency to see human in non-human forms) is increased when people experience feelings of

loneliness (Epley et al. 2008). What I argue is that *specific* brand trait dimensions play a critical role in coping with specific threats to interpersonal needs.

2. Overview of Studies

The present research examines the notion that people may use brands with a specific personality trait dimension (sincerity) to compensate for threats to social belonging (i.e., social exclusion). In study 1, I find that people tend to perceive their own preferred brands and pretested sincere brands to be higher on sincerity (versus the other four personality dimensions: excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness). In study 2, I find that people show stronger connections to brands that are characterized by sincerity (versus excitement) after experiencing exclusion. Thus, the first two studies demonstrate evidence for the sincerity orientation under exclusion. The next study sought to investigate the downstream consequences of the sincerity-orientation. In a third study, I first find further evidence for the sincerity-orientation; people prefer sincere versus exciting brands following social exclusion. More interestingly, I find that this preference enhances feelings of belonging. The next two studies sought to investigate the processes underlying this basic relationship between exclusion and sincerity-orientation. In study 4, I examined when this relationship might be attenuated. I tested the effect of affirming one's identity before exclusion on sincerity orientation towards brand traits. I find that providing an opportunity for identity-relevant

25

affirmation before exclusion protects consumers from the negative effects of exclusion as evidenced by similar self-brand connections to sincere brands as in a neutral condition. Finally, in a fifth study, I examined to whom this sincerity-orientation might be more relevant. I tested the idea that self-esteem moderates the relationship between social exclusion and sincerity orientation toward brands. I find that when excluded, low self-esteem individuals feel closer to sincere brands compared to high self-esteem individuals. This analysis might help distinguish which types of people use brands versus other people as compensation for social exclusion.

3. Pretests

Two pretests were conducted to identify brands to be used in the studies. The first pretest was conducted to identify brands that are moderate in the sincerity and excitement dimensions to be used in studies 1 and 3. The second pretest was conducted to identify brands that vary on level of sincerity for studies 2, 4, and 5.

3.1 Pretest 1

Twelve brands were tested for level of sincerity and excitement. The purpose of this pretest was to identify brands that are moderately sincere and moderately exciting to be used in study 1 for rating brands characterized by these dimensions and to be used in study 3 for choosing brands that are characterized by these dimensions. Twenty-five students from a pool similar to the experimental pools participated in this study.

Participants were presented with twelve brands (see appendix A) in random order and were asked to rate each brand on the sincerity and excitement dimensions. To assess sincerity, three traits were selected from Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale: *sincere, trustworthy,* and *family-oriented*.[1] To assess excitement, three traits were selected from the same scale: *exciting, energetic,* and *young*.[2] Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the following (trait) words describe each brand on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so).

For the analysis, I computed a composite score for sincerity using the ratings for each of the three sincerity traits for each of the twelve brands. I also computed a composite score for excitement using the ratings for each of the three excitement traits for each of the twelve brands. From the sincerity composite scores, I selected two brands that had scores similar to the mean on the sincerity dimension: Gap® and Levi's® (*Ms* = 3.77, 3.78, respectively). I also selected two brands that had scores similar to the mean on the excitement dimension: Zara® and H&M® (*Ms* = 3.79, 3.67, respectively). The three sincerity traits have relatively high internal consistency for the selected sincere brands,

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[1] Two of the sincerity traits, *sincere* and *family-oriented*, were selected from Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale which indicated that these traits represented the sincerity dimension with mean sincerity ratings higher than the average. The remaining sincerity trait, *trustworthy* was selected because previous research (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993) suggests that this trait promotes relationship growth.

[2] Two of the excitement traits, *exciting* and *young*, were selected from Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale which indicated that these traits represented the excitement dimension with mean excitement ratings higher than the average. The remaining excitement trait, *energetic*, was selected because Aaker (1997) states that excitement connotes the notion of energy, similar to the human trait dimension, extroversion.

Gap (α = .77) and Levi's (α = .76). Similarly, the three excitement traits have relatively high internal consistency for the selected exciting brands, Zara (α = .95) and H&M (α = .95).

3.2 Pretest 2

A pretest was conducted on forty-four brands to determine brands varying on the sincerity dimension. The purpose of this pretest was to identify brands that are low, moderate, and high on sincerity to be used in studies 2, 4, and 5 for assessing self-brand connections to brands characterized by the different levels of sincerity. Thirty-six students from a pool similar to the experimental pool participated in this study. Each participant was presented with a random selection of twenty-two of the forty-four brands (see appendix B) and was asked to assess each brand on seven traits on the sincerity dimension, *sincere, trustworthy, family-oriented, down-to-earth, genuine, wholesome,* and *real* by rating the extent to which the following (trait) words describes each brand on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so).[3] In this pretest, seven traits, rather than three traits, were selected for the sincerity dimension to ensure that the selected traits broadly capture the sincerity dimension. Further, participants were asked extensively about the

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[3] Six of the sincerity traits, *sincere, family-oriented, down-to-earth, genuine, wholesome,* and *real,* were selected from Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale which indicated that these traits represented the sincerity dimension with mean sincerity ratings higher than the average. The remaining sincerity trait, *trustworthy,* was selected because this trait promotes relationship growth according to previous research (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993).

28

sincerity dimension using these seven traits because this dimension is the focus of the study. Participants were also asked a series of questions to assess how close they felt to each of the brands (see self-brand connection scale in appendix C; Escalas and Bettman 2003). To make sure that the selected brands varying on sincerity and self-brand connections do not differ on other dimensions, participants were asked about other aspects of each brand. Participants were asked to rate each brand on three traits on the excitement dimension: *exciting, energetic,* and *young*. In addition, they were also asked to rate how *likeable* and *familiar* each brand was to them.

For the analysis, I created a composite score for sincerity using the ratings for each of the seven sincerity traits for each of the 44 brands. From the sincerity composite scores, I selected eight brands that had scores similar to the mean on the sincerity dimension to identify moderate sincere brands: American Express®, Dell®, Ford®, Gap®, Honda®, KFC®, Nestle®, and Target®. The seven sincerity traits have relatively high internal consistency for the selected eight brands (see table 1). Additionally, I created a composite score for self-brand connection using the ratings for the seven questions assessing how close one feels to a brand. From the self-brand connection composite scores, I find that the seven questions have relatively high internal consistency for the selected eight brands (see table 2).

Table 1. Means and alphas for the 7 sincerity trait ratings used to identify 16 brands varying on sincerity (pretest 2).

Low sincere	Means for 7 sincerity trait ratings	Alphas for 7 sincerity trait ratings
Dr. Pepper	M = 2.08	α = .97
Hershey's	M = 2.19	α = .94
H&M	M = 2.09	α = .98
Zara	M = 1.85	α = .97
Moderate sincere		
American Express	M = 3.71	α = .97
Dell	M = 3.38	α = .93
Ford	M = 3.35	α = .93
Gap	M = 3.08	α = .97
Honda	M = 3.61	α = .93
KFC	M = 3.08	α = .93
Nestle	M = 3.07	α = .96
Target	M = 3.40	α = .94
High sincere		
Dove	M = 4.62	α = .95
UPS	M = 4.85	α = .98
Visa	M = 4.59	α = .96
Whole Foods	M = 4.68	α = .98

Table 2. Means and alphas for the 7 self-brand connection ratings used to identify 16 brands varying on sincerity (pretest 2).

Low sincere	Means for 7 self-brand connection ratings	Alphas for 7 self-brand connection ratings
Dr. Pepper	$M = 1.98$	$\alpha = .97$
Hershey's	$M = 2.13$	$\alpha = .93$
H&M	$M = 2.05$	$\alpha = .97$
Zara	$M = 1.78$	$\alpha = .96$
Moderate sincere		
American Express	$M = 3.53$	$\alpha = .94$
Dell	$M = 3.26$	$\alpha = .93$
Ford	$M = 3.12$	$\alpha = .86$
Gap	$M = 3.56$	$\alpha = .94$
Honda	$M = 3.53$	$\alpha = .90$
KFC	$M = 3.55$	$\alpha = .94$
Nestle	$M = 3.67$	$\alpha = .94$
Target	$M = 3.60$	$\alpha = .90$
High sincere		
Dove	$M = 6.59$	$\alpha = .90$
UPS	$M = 5.98$	$\alpha = .88$
Visa	$M = 6.36$	$\alpha = .85$
Whole Foods	$M = 6.78$	$\alpha = .96$

From the sincerity composite scores, I selected four brands that had scores one standard deviation above the mean on the sincerity dimension to identify high sincere brands: Dove®, UPS®, Visa®, and Whole Foods®. The seven sincerity traits have relatively high internal consistency for the selected four brands (see table 1). From the self-brand connection composite scores, I find that the seven questions have relatively

high internal consistency for the selected four brands (see table 2). From the sincerity composite scores, I also selected four brands that had scores one standard deviation below the mean on the sincerity dimension to identify low sincere brands: Dr. Pepper®, Hershey's®, H&M®, and Zara®. The seven sincerity traits have relatively high internal consistency for the selected four brands (table 1). From the self-brand connection composite scores, I find that the seven questions have relatively high internal consistency for the selected four brands (table 2). Further, I computed a composite score for excitement using the ratings for each of the three excitement traits for each of the selected brands (αs > .81 for the selected four low, eight moderate, and four high sincere brands at the three levels of sincerity). The selected brands had scores similar to the mean on the excitement scale, suggesting that the brands do not differ from one another on the excitement dimension, $F < 1$, p = ns. These brands were also equally likeable and familiar, $F < 1$, p = ns.

4. Study 1

4.1 Introduction

The first study tested the effect of social exclusion (versus neutral condition) on trait judgments for brands self-reported to be preferred by the individual, as well as for pretested moderately sincere and moderately exciting brands (generated in pretest 1). When excluded, would people perceive sincerity in their preferred brands and perceive

greater sincerity in pretested sincere brands? I hypothesized that social exclusion would lead to trait judgments reflecting a sincerity orientation through 1) higher ratings on sincerity traits (versus sincerity-unrelated traits) for brands that participants listed as their preferred brands, compared to the neutral condition and 2) higher ratings on sincerity traits for pretested moderately sincere brands (versus moderately exciting brands), compared to the neutral condition. These moderately sincere brands (as opposed to highly sincere brands) were used to observe movement in the trait ratings. It was important to include the measure of trait ratings for the pretested moderately sincere brands because any results found for the preferred brands listed by the participants may be confounded by the possibility that other aspects of the preferred brands being rated will vary across participants.

4.2 Method

Participants. Twenty-two students from a Southeastern university participated in the study for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-Ss conditions.

Procedure. An experimenter, blind to exclusion condition, greeted participants upon their arrival in the lab. The experimenter told them that they would complete two separate experiments. The first was a ball-tossing CyberBall game (Williams, Cheung, and Choi 2000) with what participants believed to be three other students. In actuality,

there were no other players; participants were playing with a preset computer program and were given a cover story to ensure that they believed the other players were real and thus socially relevant. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two game conditions which led them to experience social exclusion or not.

In the second experiment, participants were asked to complete two different tasks involving popular brands. First, participants in the social exclusion condition completed a task where they listed three of their preferred brands and then rated the brands on five trait dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, ruggedness); Participants in the neutral condition rated brands on five trait dimensions as well. However, in the neutral condition, instead of listing three preferred brands, each control participant rated brands which were generated by a participant from the social exclusion condition. That is, control participants were yoked with a social exclusion condition participant for the list of three brand names. In the second task, all participants rated two moderately sincere brands (Gap and Levi's) and two moderately exciting brands (H&M and Zara) on the sincerity dimension and the excitement dimension (three traits for each dimension). Pretest 1 results from a similar student sample confirmed that these brands are perceived to be moderately sincere and moderately exciting respectively. I used moderately sincere and moderately exciting brands so that movement can be observed in the trait ratings. It is possible that highly sincere and exciting brands cannot be perceived as even more sincere and exciting, and

thus a ceiling effect may be observed in the trait ratings. Participants then filled out

demographic items and other final questionnaire items, including manipulation checks

for exclusion ("How many ball throws were thrown to you?" "To what extent were you

included by the other participants during the game?" "To what extent were you rejected

by other participants during the game?"). Finally, participants completed a funnel

debriefing that probed for awareness or suspicion of a connection between the different

tasks of the experiment or indicated that completing one task might have affected

responses on another (Chartrand and Bargh 1996).

The social exclusion task. Participants were told that this study involved the effects

of mental visualization and that to assist them in practicing their skills at mental

visualization they would be playing a ball-tossing game on the computer. They were

told that performance in the game was irrelevant; instead, the game was simply a

method for them to demonstrate their mental visualization skills. They were asked to

visualize the situation, themselves, and the other players. The game depicts four ball-

tossers, the middle-bottom one representing the participant. The game is animated and

shows an icon throwing a ball to one of the other three icons. When the ball was tossed

to a participant, they were instructed to click on one of the other three icons to indicate

their intended recipient, and the ball would move toward that icon. The game was set

for forty total throws (the game lasted approximately six minutes). Once the instructions

were read, the participant continued and the program randomly assigned them to one of

35

the two conditions: social exclusion versus neutral. In the social exclusion condition, participants received the ball four times in the beginning of the game, and for the remaining time, never received the ball again. In the neutral condition, participants received the ball for roughly one-third of the total throws.

4.3 Results and Discussion

Social exclusion manipulation checks. There were two manipulation checks assessing participants' feelings of exclusion. Participants in the exclusion condition reported that they felt significantly less included ($M = 1.36$, $SD = .67$) than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 4.72$, $SD = .65$), $F(1, 20) = 142.60$, $p < .001$. Excluded participants also reported that they felt significantly more rejected ($M = 4.36$, $SD = .81$) than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 1.45$, $SD = .52$), $F(1, 20) = 100.39$, $p < .001$, and that they received the ball less often ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .69$) during the game than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 11.09$, $SD = 2.34$), $F(1, 20) = 107.56$, $p < .001$. This suggests that participants correctly perceived whether they were excluded or not during the game.

Effect of social exclusion on brand trait judgments. I took two different measures of brand trait ratings after the exclusion versus neutral manipulation. First, I measured trait ratings on five dimensions for participants' self-reported preferred brands (under exclusion condition; neutral condition participants were yoked with

exclusion condition participants). I also measured trait ratings on the sincerity and excitement dimensions for two moderately sincere brands and two moderately exciting brands, generated in pretest 1.

Social exclusion and brand trait judgments for preferred brands. First, do people give higher ratings on sincerity traits (versus sincerity-unrelated traits) for their preferred brands after experiencing social exclusion compared to the neutral control condition? I did a 2 (Exclusion: exclusion versus neutral) x 5 (Trait Dimension: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, ruggedness) mixed-model repeated measures ANOVA, with the first factor between-Ss and the second factor within-Ss. I found the predicted Exclusion x Trait Dimension interaction, $F(4, 17) = 5.03$, $p < .001$ (figure 2). Under exclusion, preferred brands were rated higher on the sincerity dimension ($M = 4.3$, SD =.36) (versus excitement ($M = 3.52$, $SD = .47$), sophistication ($M = 3.5$, $SD = .55$), competence ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .48$), and ruggedness ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .92$) dimensions), $F(4, 17) = 8.89$, $p < .001$. The ratings did not significantly differ in the neutral condition, $F < 1$, p = ns. Furthermore, pairwise comparisons indicated that the ratings were significantly higher on the sincerity dimension under exclusion compared to the neutral condition, $F(1, 20) = 52.31$, $p < .001$. Comparisons between the exclusion and neutral conditions for ratings on the other four dimensions were not significantly different, $F < 1$, ps = ns. This finding is important because it demonstrates that exclusion and neutral condition participants perceived the other dimensions similarly even though exclusion

37

participants chose their preferred brands and neutral participants did not choose their

preferred brands.
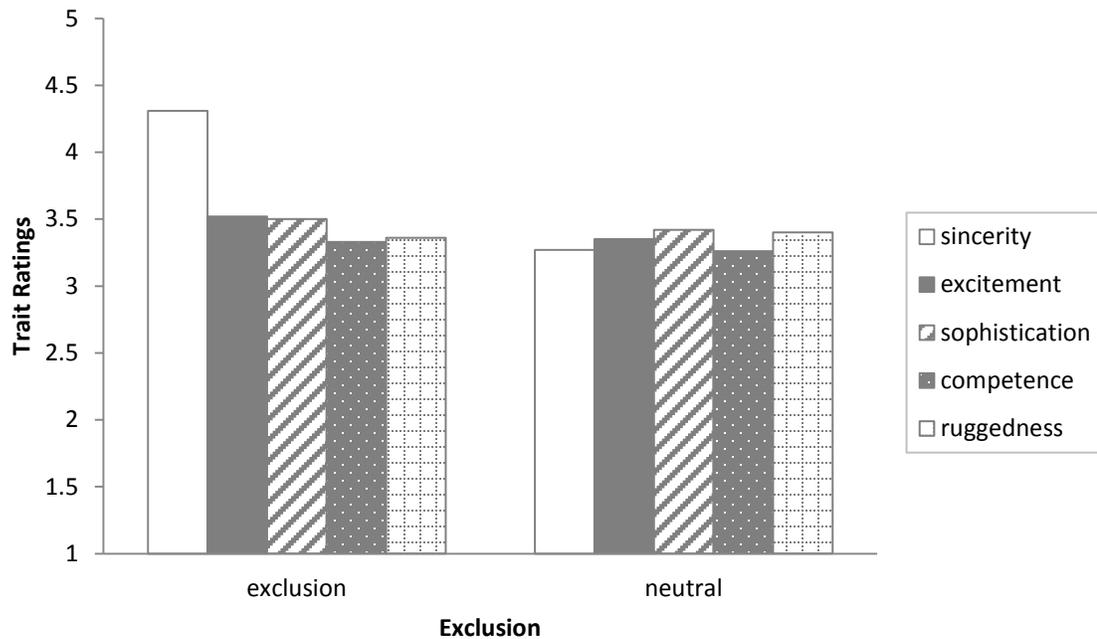
Figure 2. Trait ratings of brands on five dimensions as a function of exclusion (study 1).

Social exclusion and brand trait judgments for sincere and exciting brands. Do people

give higher ratings on the sincerity trait dimension (versus excitement trait dimension)

for moderately sincere brands (versus moderately exciting brands) after experiencing

social exclusion, compared to the neutral condition? I did a 2 (Exclusion: exclusion

versus neutral) x 2 (Trait Dimension: sincerity, excitement) x 2 (Brand Type: moderately

sincere brand, moderately exciting brand) mixed-model repeated measures ANOVA,

with the first factor between-Ss and the last two factors within-Ss. I found the predicted

Exclusion x Trait Dimension x Brand Type 3-way interaction, $F(1, 20) = 9.51$, $p < .01$.

Under exclusion, sincere brands were rated to be significantly higher on the

sincerity dimension ($M = 4.80$, $SD = .32$) than on the excitement dimension ($M = 2.49$, SD

$= .27$), $F(1, 20) = 323.78$, $p < .001$ (see figure 3, panel a). There was also a main effect for

exciting brands, where exciting brands were rated to be significantly higher on the

excitement dimension ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .55$) than on the sincerity dimension ($M = 2.12$, SD

$= .63$), $F(1, 20) = 53.14$, $p < .001$. More critical to my prediction, pairwise comparisons

indicated sincere brands were rated to be significantly higher on the sincerity dimension

than exciting brands under exclusion compared to the neutral condition ($M = 3.74$, $SD =$

$.31$), $F(1, 20) = 61.56$, $p < .001$. Under the neutral condition, I observed a main effect where

sincere brands were rated higher on the sincerity dimension ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .31$) than on

the excitement dimension ($M = 2.68$, $SD = .37$), $F(1, 20) = 67.77$, $p < .001$ (see figure 3,

panel b). There was another main effect where exciting brands were rated significantly

higher on the excitement dimension ($M = 3.80$, $SD = .21$) than on the sincerity dimension

($M = 2.11$, $SD = .61$), $F(1, 20) = 49.54$, $p < .001$.
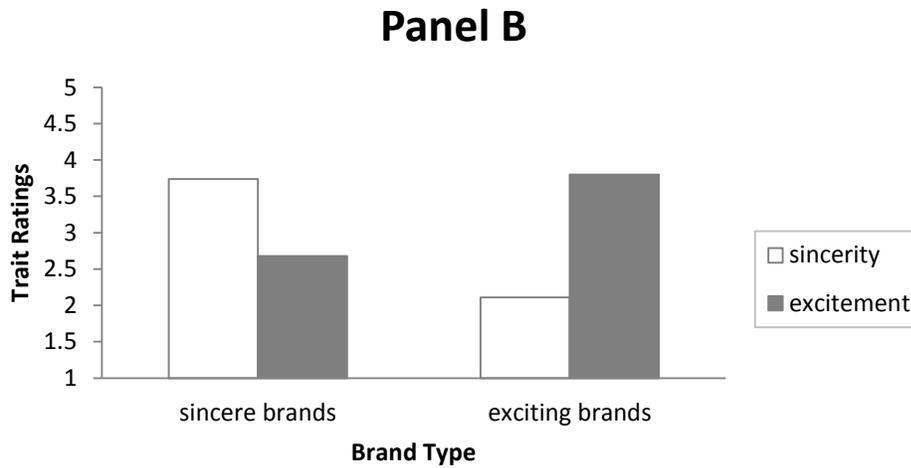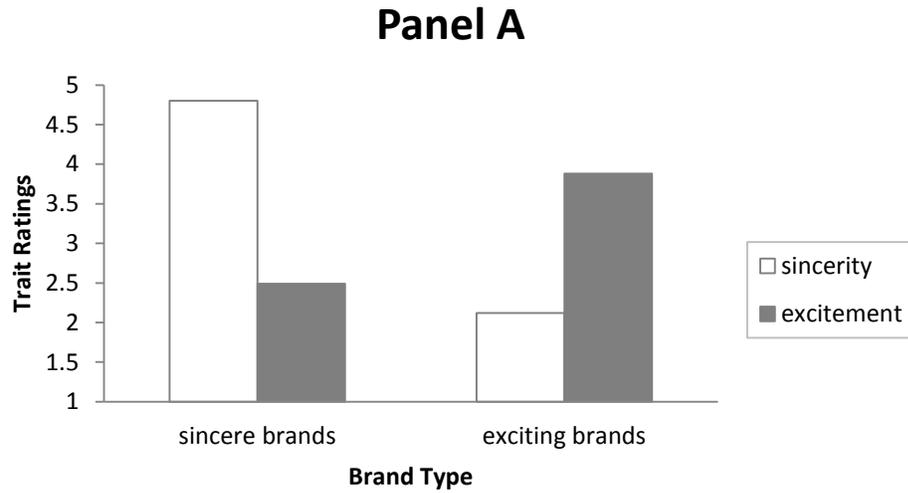
Panel A

Panel B

Figure 3. Trait ratings of sincere versus exciting brands on the sincerity and excitement dimensions under exclusion condition (panel A) and neutral condition (panel B) (study 1).

Study 1 suggests that when people experience exclusion, they are more likely to

form impressions of sincerity towards their own preferred brands than those in a neutral

condition. They are also more likely to see greater sincerity in brands that are prtested to be sincere than are those in a neutral condition. Thus, this study provides initial support that when belongingness is threatened, people are sensitive towards brands that are marked by sincerity rather than the other dimensions, excitement, competence, sophistication, or ruggedness. In study 2, I sought to demonstrate further evidence for the sincerity orientation. I expected that when excluded, people would draw stronger self-brand connections to brands that are greater in sincerity. That is, people should want to feel closer to brands that are at higher levels of sincerity because these brands are positively associated with fostering relationships, and thus can help restore belonging.

5. Study 2

5.1 Introduction

Study 2 tested the effect of exclusion on self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Participants were either in a social exclusion or neutral condition and then were asked to assess how close they feel to a series of brands varying on level of sincerity (low, moderate, high). Research has shown that self-brand connections are enhanced when brand associations are used to build and to communicate self-identity to others. I hypothesized that social exclusion (versus the neutral condition) would lead to stronger self-brand connections brands at higher levels of sincerity. I expected that

consumers would want to draw closer to sincere brands to help fulfill their belonging need.

5.2 Method

Participants. Thirty-six students from a Southeastern university participated in the experiment for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-Ss conditions.

Procedure. An experimenter, blind to exclusion condition, greeted participants upon their arrival in the lab. The experimenter told them that they would complete two separate experiments. The first was the ball-tossing CyberBall game (Williams, Cheung, and Choi 2000) with what they believed to be three other students (as in study 1). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two game conditions, social exclusion versus neutral, and completed the corresponding game, which led them to experience social exclusion or not.

In the second experiment, participants were asked to do a brand preference task on the computer. Participants were presented with a series of brands varying on level of sincerity (low, moderate, high), generated in pretest 2. Level of sincerity for each brand was determined from pretest results conducted on a similar student sample. The task was to answer seven questions to assess how close they feel to each of the brands (Escalas and Bettman 2003; see appendix C). A composite score for self-brand connection

was computed from responses to these seven questions for each of the brands. The alpha

reliabilities were all acceptably high, ranging from .81 to .97. Finally, participants filled

out demographic items and other final questionnaire items, including manipulation

checks for exclusion (as in study 1). Participants also completed a funnel debriefing

(Chartrand and Bargh 1996).

5.2 Results and Discussion

Social exclusion manipulation checks. There were two manipulation checks

assessing participants' feelings of exclusion during the ball-tossing Cyberball game.

Participants in the exclusion condition reported that they felt significantly less included

($M = 1.78$, $SD = .79$) than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .69$; $F(1, 34)$

$= 102.40$, $p < .001$). Excluded participants also reported that they felt significantly more

rejected ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .79$) than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 1.53$, $SD = .62$;

$F(1, 34) = 126.08$, $p < .001$) and reported that they received the ball less often ($M = 3.74$, SD

$= .56$) during the game than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 11.76$, $SD = 2.08$;

$F(1, 34) = 263.03$, $p < .001$). This suggests that participants correctly perceived whether

they were excluded or not during the game.

Effect of social exclusion on self-brand connections. Do people report greater

self-brand connections to brands that are increasingly sincere after experiencing social

exclusion, compared to a neutral condition? A 2 (Exclusion: exclusion versus neutral) x 3

(Sincerity: low, moderate, high) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted, with the first factor between-Ss and second factor within-Ss. I found the predicted Exclusion x Sincerity 2-way interaction, $F(2, 33) = 4.69$, $p < .05$ (see figure 4).
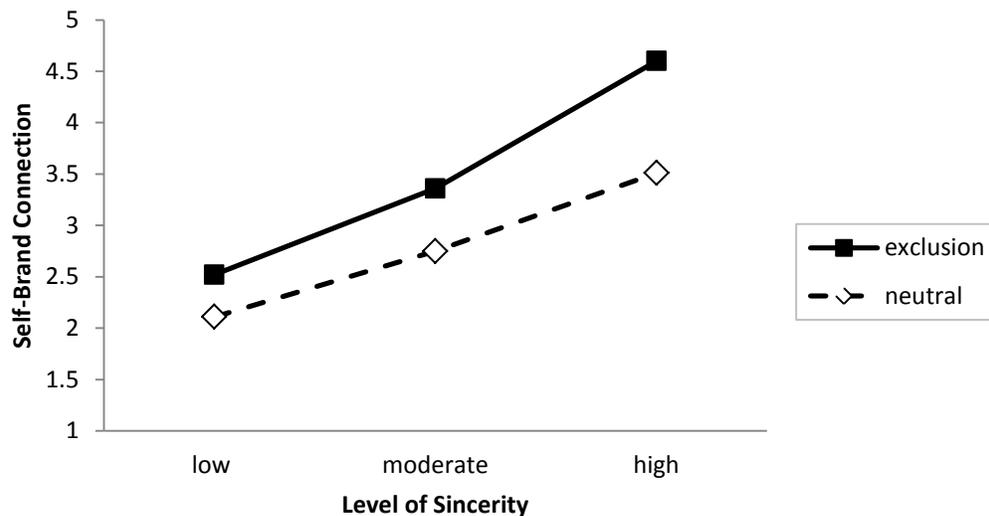
Figure 4. Self-brand connection to brands varying on levels of sincerity as a function of exclusion (study 2).

There was a main effect under exclusion such that participants reported stronger self-brand connections to brands increasing in sincerity. They felt closer to moderate sincere brands ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .80$) than low sincere brands ($M = 2.52$, $SD = .70$), and felt closer to high sincere brands ($M = 4.6$, $SD = .69$) than moderate sincere brands, $F(2, 33) = 88.32$, $p < .001$. There was also a main effect under the neutral condition where participants reported stronger self-brand connections to moderate sincere brands ($M =$

2.75, $SD = .74$) compared to low sincere brands ($M = 2.11$, $SD = .81$), and stronger self-

brand connections to high sincere brands ($Ms = 3.51$, $SDs = 1.02$) compared to moderate

sincere brands, $F (2, 33) = 35.11$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, pairwise comparisons indicated

that self-brand connections were significantly greater for moderate sincere brands under

exclusion compared to the neutral condition, $F(1, 34) = 5.60$, $p < .05$; and significantly

greater for high sincere brands under exclusion compared to the neutral condition, $F(1,$

$34) = 14.47$, $p = .001$. Self-brand connections for low sincere brands were marginally

higher under exclusion compared to the neutral condition, $F(1, 34) = 2.63$, $p = .11$.

More critically, planned comparisons were conducted to explore the increasing

significance of these differences under exclusion versus neutral conditions at each level

of sincerity. First, I examined the most liberal test of my hypothesis that when excluded

(versus not excluded), people should feel closer to brands that are most sincere (i.e., high

sincere brands) than not sincere (i.e., low sincere brands). Are the reported differences in

self-brand connections to high sincere brands under exclusion versus neutral conditions

significantly different from the differences in self-brand connections to low sincere

brands under exclusion versus neutral conditions? A planned comparison indicated that

the difference in self-brand connections to high sincere brands under exclusion versus

the neutral condition is significantly greater than the difference in self-brand connections

to low sincere brands under exclusion versus the neutral condition, $F (1, 34) = 9.31$, $p =$

$.004$. A more conservative test of my hypothesis is that people should feel closer to

45

brands that are moderately sincere than not sincere (i.e., low sincere brands). Are the

differences in self-brand connections to moderate sincere brands under exclusion versus

neutral conditions significantly different from the differences in self-brand connections

to low sincere brands under exclusion versus neutral conditions I was not able to find

support for this conservative hypothesis as planned comparisons indicated that the self-

brand connection differences under exclusion versus neutral conditions were not

significantly different for moderate and low sincere brands, $F (1, 34) = .46$, $p = .50$. It is

unclear why these differences are not significantly different and further experimentation

is needed to clarify this issue of sensitivity towards different levels of sincere brands

under exclusion.

Study 2 demonstrates that when people are excluded, they have stronger self-

brand connections to brands that are highly sincere than those who are in a neutral

condition. Exclusion leads people to draw closer to highly sincere brands that can help

restore belonging. I argue that this sincerity-orientation shown in self-brand

connections, which conceptually replicates the results of study 1, is a means to

compensate for exclusion and actually repair feelings of belonging. In order to provide

support for such downstream consequences of a sincerity orientation, study 3 was

conducted to directly demonstrate that exclusion influences the degree to which people

prefer sincere brands when given the opportunity to choose between a sincere brand

and an exciting brand and that choosing a sincere brand (between two sincere brands as well as between one sincere and one exciting brand) increases feelings of belonging.

6. Study 3

6.1 Introduction

Study 3 tested whether feelings of social belonging would be repaired after experiencing social exclusion by choosing a brand from a set of (one or two) sincere brands but not from a set of (two) exciting brands. Participants were either in a social exclusion or neutral condition. Participants were then given the opportunity to choose their brand of preference from one of three sets that included two brands: 1) two sincere brands; 2) two exciting brands; 3) one sincere brand and one exciting brand. Participants reported their feelings of belonging, which was the focal dependent variable. I included the mixed brands condition (with one sincere brand and one exciting brand) to examine whether having a choice between two different trait types of brands would differentially impact downstream consequences of belonging. Would choosing a sincere brand from the mixed brands set increase belonging more compared to choosing from the sincere brands only set? Research has shown that making a free choice is more satisfying than an externally made choice, and thus I hypothesized that because the mixed brands set allows consumers to make a free choice, they may feel more satisfied in terms of their belonging than those in the sincere brands only set, which does not allow a choice

between two different types of brands. Further, I hypothesized that compared to choosing from two exciting brands, choosing a sincere brand from a set of two sincere brands and a set of one sincere brand and one exciting brand would both lead to greater feelings of belonging after experiencing exclusion (versus the neutral condition). That is, choosing a sincere brand in any form should help repair belonging needs that have been diminished from social exclusion. However, choosing an exciting brand should not repair the dampened feelings of belonging.

6.2 Method

Participants. Eighty students from a Southeastern university participated in the experiment for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six between-Ss conditions.

Procedure. An experimenter, blind to exclusion and brand choice set condition, greeted participants upon their arrival in the lab. The experimenter told them that they would complete two separate experiments. The first was the ball-tossing Cyberball game (Williams, Cheung, and Choi 2000) with what they believed to be three other students at their university (same as studies 1 and 2). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, social exclusion versus neutral. They completed the corresponding game, which led them to experience social exclusion or not.

In the second part, participants were randomly assigned to one of three brand choice set conditions: two sincere brands; two exciting brands; one sincere and one exciting brand. Participants were told that the study involved understanding consumers' brand preferences and that they would be asked to indicate their brand preference from a set of two brands. There were three sets of two brand choices. One set included two sincere brands: Gap and Levi's. Another set included two exciting brands: H&M and Zara. Yet another set included one sincere brand and one exciting brand, Gap and H&M. Pretest 1 confirmed that these brands are perceived to be moderately sincere and exciting respectively. Participants were asked to choose the brand they preferred from the set of brands corresponding to their randomly assigned choice set condition. All participants then filled out demographic items and other final questionnaire items, including manipulation checks for exclusion (same as studies 1 and 2) and their feelings of social belonging (feelings of being *valued* and *excluded*). Unless otherwise stated, all questions were rated on 5-point scales (where 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much so*). Finally, participants completed a funnel debriefing (Chartrand and Bargh 1996).

6.3 Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. There were two manipulation checks assessing participants' feelings of exclusion during the ball-tossing game. Participants in the exclusion condition reported that they felt significantly less included ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .62$)

than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .89$; $F(1, 82) = 263.91$, $p < .001$) and that they felt significantly more rejected ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .93$) than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 1.49$, $SD = .79$; $F(1, 82) = 181.72$, $p < .001$). Participants in the exclusion condition also reported that they received the ball less often ($M = 3.6$, $SD = .54$) during the game than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 13.18$, $SD = 3.38$; $F(1, 82) = 352.07$, $p < .001$). This suggests that participants correctly perceived whether they were excluded or not during the game.

Preliminary analyses: Choice from brand sets. An ANOVA revealed a main effect of brand choice task (two sincere brands versus two exciting brands versus one sincere brand and one exciting brand), $F(2, 72) = 86.53$, $p < .001$, and all pairwise comparisons were significant ($ps < .05$). Feelings of belonging, the dependent variable, was measured with two variables: feelings of being *valued* and *excluded.* A score for belonging was computed from a composite of valued and excluded scores given that these two items are significantly correlated ($r = .50$, $p < .01$). Participants reported greater belonging after choosing from two sincere brands ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .45$) than from two exciting brands ($M = 2.07$, $SD = .60$; $t(52) = 9.76$, $p < .001$). Similarly, greater belongingness was reported after choosing a sincere brand from a set including both a sincere brand and an exciting brand ($M = 4.17$, $SD = .66$) compared to choosing from two exciting brands, $t(51) = -11.49$, $p < .001$. Further, as hypothesized, choosing a sincere brand from a

set including both types of brands led to greater belonging than choosing from two sincere brands only, $t(46) = -4.28$, $p < .001$.

Effect of exclusion and brand choice on feelings of belonging. More important for my critical analysis was a 2 (Exclusion: exclusion versus neutral) x 3 (Brand Choice Set: two sincere versus two exciting versus one sincere and one exciting) ANOVA, with both factors between-Ss. The analysis revealed a significant 2-way interaction, $F(2, 76) = 8.65$, $p < .001$ (see figure 5), excluding two participants who did not choose the sincere brand in the mixed brand set condition under exclusion. To explore this interaction further, I examined comparisons between the three brand choice sets.
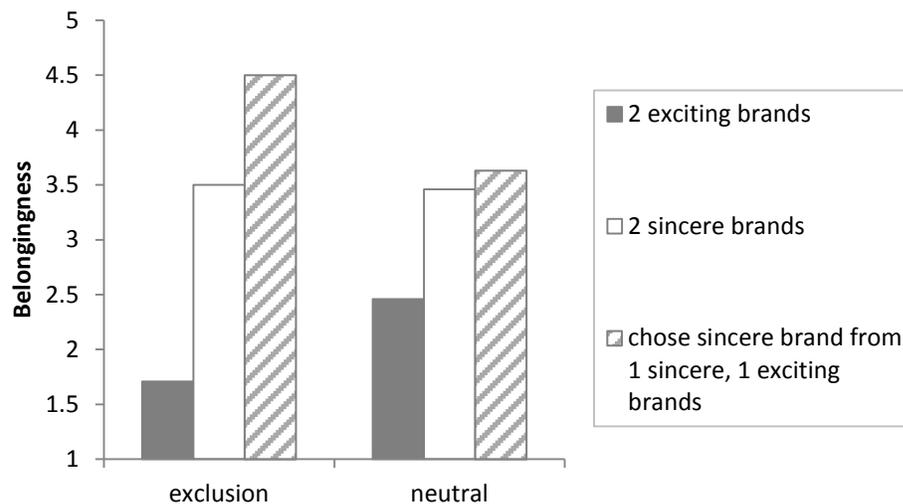
Figure 5. Belonging as a function of exclusion and brand choice set (study 3).

Sincere versus exciting brand choice sets. Do people feel greater belonging after choosing from sincere brands (versus exciting brands) under exclusion? I first examined

the choice sets without the choice set where the participants chose between the sincere and exciting brands. There was a significant main effect of brand choice task under the neutral condition, where belonging was significantly greater after choosing from two sincere brands (M = 3.15, SD = .69) compared to two exciting brands (M = 2.15, SD = .70; p < .01; F(2, 76) = 6.26, p < .05).

The pattern is similar and the comparison in the exclusion condition was significant, F(2, 76) = 45.23, p < .001, indicating that belonging was significantly greater after choosing from two sincere brands (M = 3.57, SD = .65) than two exciting brands (M = 1.43, SD = .51; p < .001). Pairwise comparisons indicated that belonging was similar under exclusion versus neutral conditions after choosing from two sincere brands, F(1, 76) = 1.83, p = .18. This provides suggestive evidence that choosing from sincere brands repairs belonging needs to the baseline, though not above it.

Choosing a sincere brand from sincere brands set versus mixed brands set. First, do people prefer to choose a sincere brand versus exciting brand under exclusion compared to the neutral condition? Under the exclusion condition, participants chose the sincere brand (Gap) more frequently (88.2%) than the exciting brand (H&M; 11.8%). Under the neutral condition, participants chose the sincere brand and exciting brand in less extreme proportions (61.5% and 38.5%, respectively). More critically, do people experience different degrees of belonging after choosing a sincere brand from a set of brands that includes only sincere brands or both a sincere and exciting brand? Pairwise

comparisons indicated that under exclusion, belongingn was marginally enhanced after choosing a sincere brand from a set that includes one sincere brand and one exciting brand (M = 4.13, SD = 1.19) relative to choosing a sincere brand from a set that includes two sincere brands (M = 3.57, SD = .65; p = .06). The two choice sets did not lead to different belonging in the neutral condition (p = .81).

As mentioned earlier, choosing a sincere brand from a set of sincere brands repaired feelings of belonging to baseline but not above it. Feelings of belonging was similar under exclusion and neutral conditions. Interestingly, when participants choose a sincere brand from a set of both sincere and exciting brands, there seems to be a boost in belongingness that is above the baseline. This provides some support for the idea that a consumption context that includes the compensatory choice as well as a non-compensatory choice (or perhaps even opposing choice) provides people with an extra boost in their belonging. Study 3 provides some support that when excluded, sincere brands may restore belonging both to baseline as well as above baseline. The first three studies thus demonstrate evidence for a compensatory hypothesis wherein social exclusion led to a sincerity orientation, manifested in brand trait impressions, self-brand connections, and brand preferences, which actually increases feelings of belongingness. It is interesting to document that threats to interpersonal relationships led people to desire sincere brand partners. A different perspective on this basic story is to consider what might protect consumers against such effects. In the next study, I examine how this

relationship between social exclusion and sincerity orientation towards brands may be moderated by identity-relevant affirmation.

7. Study 4

7.1 Introduction

Research has shown that to shield from self-threats, people can engage in self-affirmation, reinforcing one's self-concept (Steele 1988). In the consumer behavior literature, it has been shown that people can write about a personally important self-view to protect from threats to such self-views (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009). The purpose of study 4 is to examine whether providing consumers with an opportunity to write about a product that reflects their identity (i.e., favorite music album) *before* they experience social exclusion buffers them from the negative effects of social exclusion and thus reduces the compensation effects shown in the earlier studies. In this study consumers were given an opportunity to spend time writing about an identity-relevant product (i.e., favorite music album) before they were socially excluded and then rated self-brand connections to sincere brands. I predicted that consumers who are armed with an opportunity to spend time writing about an identity-relevant product before being socially excluded will not show a sincerity orientation but instead will rate self-brand connections towards sincere brands to a similar extent as in the neutral condition.

7.2 Method

Participants. Thirty-six students from a Southeastern university participated in the experiment for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four between-Ss conditions.

Procedure. Upon arrival to the lab, an experimenter, blind to exclusion condition, welcomed participants to the study. The experimenter told them that they would complete three separate experiments. The first was a consumer preference task, where participants were asked to write about a product they prefer in domains that are seen as symbolic of identity (music) versus not (toothpaste). The second task was the ball-tossing Cyberball game. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two game conditions, social exclusion and neutral, and completed the corresponding game, which led them to experience social exclusion or not. In the final part, participants were asked to do a brand preference task on the computer. Participants were presented with a series of eight moderately sincere brands, generated in pretest 2. The task was to answer seven questions to assess how close they felt to each of the brands (Escalas and Bettman 2003; see appendix C). A composite score for self-brand connection was computed from responses to these seven questions for each of the eight brands. The alpha reliabilities were all acceptably high, ranging from .85 to .97. Finally, participants filled out demographic items and other final questionnaire items, including manipulation checks

for exclusion (as in studies 1-3). Participants also completed a funnel debriefing

(Chartrand and Bargh 1996).

7.3 Results and Discussion

Social exclusion manipulation checks. There were two manipulation checks

assessing participants' feelings of exclusion during the ball-tossing Cyberball game.

Participants in the exclusion condition reported that they felt significantly less included

(M = 1.72, SD = .83) than participants in the neutral condition (M = 4.56, SD = .62). F(1,

34) = 136.05, p < .001. Excluded participants also reported that they felt significantly more

rejected (M = 4.61, SD = .61) than participants in the neutral condition (M = 1.83, SD =

.62), F(1, 34) = 184.78, p < .001, and reported that they received the ball less often (M =

3.17, SD = .79) during the game than participants in the neutral condition (M = 12.06, SD

= 2.73), F(1, 34) = 170.94, p < .001. This suggests that participants correctly perceived

whether they were excluded or not during the game.

Effect of social exclusion and identity-relevant affirmation on self-brand

connections. A 2 (Identity-Affirmation: identity-relevant versus not identity-relevant) x

2 (Exclusion: exclusion versus neutral) ANOVA was conducted, with both factors

between-Ss. I found the predicted Identity-Affirmation x Exclusion 2-way interaction,

F(1, 32) = 8.99, p < .01 (see figure 6). Under the not identity-relevant affirmation

condition, participants reported stronger self-brand connections to sincere brands when

excluded ($M = 4.61$, $SD = .70$) than when not excluded ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .50$), $F(1, 32) =$ 22.91, $p < .001$, replicating study 2 results. More critical to my prediction, pairwise comparisons indicated that under the identity-relevant affirmation condition, participants rated self-brand connections to sincere brands to be similar both when excluded ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .42$) and not excluded ($M = 2.64$, $SD = .36$), $F(1, 32) = .73$, $p = .40$.
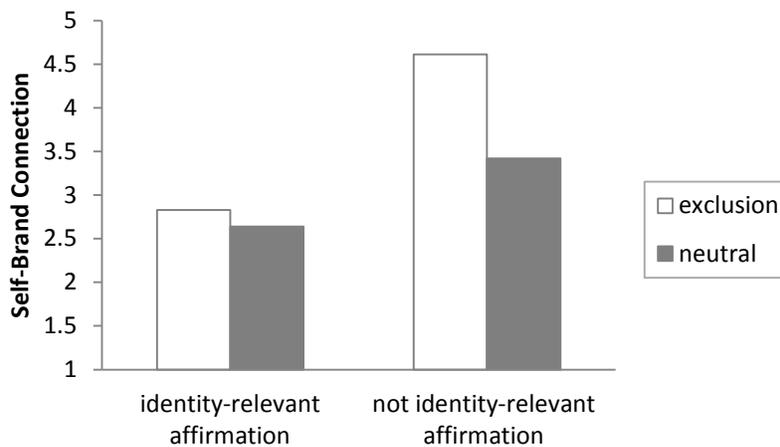
Figure 6. Self-brand connection as a function of exclusion and identity-relevant affirmation versus not identity-relevant affirmation (study 4).

Study 4 demonstrates that when people are provided with an opportunity for identity-relevant affirmation (versus not identity-relevant affirmation), they no longer have the need to have stronger self-brand connections to sincere brands. Thus, there is suggestive evidence that writing about an identity-relevant product before experiencing exclusion serves to shield consumers from its negative effects. However, consumers who have not been given the buffer (i.e., the opportunity to write about an identity-relevant

product) seem to compensate for social exclusion and show stronger self-brand connections to sincere brands (i.e., show the sincerity orientation). Identifying how consumers may protect themselves from social threats using one's identity potentially provides a better understanding of specific consumer-brand relationships. Recent research indicates that consumers proactively engage in consumption before potential threat to the self (Kim and Rucker 2012). The current study contributes further to this existing literature by showing that people can guard against threats to interpersonal relationships (i.e., social exclusion) by simply engaging in identity-relevant affirmation.

8. Study 5

8.1 Introduction

In study 5, I sought to build on the previous studies by identifying a key individual difference that moderates the effect of social exclusion on sincerity orientation towards brands. To whom is the sincere brand partner particularly relevant during times of exclusion? Research suggests that self-esteem is an important individual difference that is highly correlated with the extent to which people seek interpersonal relationships (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, and Downs 1995). Trait self-esteem can be measured with questions such as "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" and "I wish I could have more respect for myself" in the self-esteem scale (Rosenberg 1965). While high self-esteem is correlated with perceptions of being accepted, low self-esteem is

correlated with perceptions of being rejected. When socially threatened (i.e., excluded), people who are low in trait self-esteem tend to avoid social connections (e.g., Leary et al. 1995; Nezlek et al. 1997). Thus, I hypothesized that the individual difference variable of self-esteem (Leary et al. 1995) would moderate the effect of social exclusion and sincerity-orientation, such that people low in self-esteem are more likely to be attuned to sincere brands and use them to recover from threat, compared to those high in self-esteem. That is, since those who are low in self-esteem tend to avoid social connections after being socially excluded (Leary et al. 1995), I expected that these same people would seek brands to compensate for exclusion. In particular, individuals low in self-esteem would show the bias toward sincere brands more than those high in self-esteem.

8.2 Method

Participants. Fifty-three students from a Southeastern university participated in the experiment for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-Ss conditions.

Procedure. Five to seven days before coming into the lab for the study, participants completed the trait self-esteem scale (Rosenberg 1965; see appendix D). When participants came into the lab, an experimenter, blind to exclusion condition, greeted them. The experimenter told them that they would complete two separate experiments. The first was the ball-tossing Cyberball game (Williams, Cheung, and Choi

2000). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two game conditions, social

exclusion and neutral, and completed the corresponding game, which led them to

experience social exclusion or not. In the second part, participants were asked to do a

brand preference task on the computer. Participants were presented with a series of

eight moderately sincere brands, generated in pretest 2, conducted on a similar student

sample. The task was to answer seven questions to assess how close they feel to each of

the brands (Escalas and Bettman 2003; see appendix C). A composite score for self-brand

connection was computed from responses to these seven questions for each of the

brands. The alpha reliabilities were all acceptably high, ranging from .86 to .98. Finally,

participants completed demographic items and other final questionnaire items,

including manipulation checks for exclusion (as in previous studies). Participants also

completed a funnel debriefing (Chartrand and Bargh 1996).

8.3 Results and Discussion

Social exclusion manipulation checks. There were two manipulation checks

assessing participants' feelings of exclusion during the ball-tossing Cyberball game.

Participants in the exclusion condition reported that they felt significantly less included

($M = 2.11$, $SD = .93$) than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.27$; $F(1,

51) = 46.66$, $p < .001$). Excluded participants also reported that they felt significantly more

rejected ($M = 4$, $SD = 1.18$) than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .95$;

$F(1, 51) = 36.07$, $p < .001$) and reported that they received the ball less often ($M = 3.19$, SD = .96) during the game than participants in the neutral condition ($M = 12.04$, $SD = 1.95$; $F(1, 51) = 444.79$, $p < .001$). This suggests that participants correctly perceived whether they were excluded or not during the game.

Effect of social exclusion and self-esteem on self-brand connections. First, I hypothesized that social exclusion (versus no exclusion) would lead to a sincerity orientation, manifested in stronger self-brand connections to moderately sincere brands for both high and low self-esteem individuals given that the sincerity orientation was robustly documented in studies 1-4. More important, I also expected that self-esteem and exclusion would interact, such that low self-esteem individuals would show stronger self-brand connections to moderately sincere brands than high self-esteem individuals under exclusion. A regression was performed on the key dependent variable of self-brand connections to moderately sincere brands. Social exclusion was coded as a dummy variable equal to one if neutral condition and zero if exclusion condition. As expected, there was a significant interaction between exclusion and self-esteem, $\beta = 1.52$, $t = 2.78$, $p < .001$ (see figure 7). There was a significant main effect under the exclusion condition indicating that low self-esteem participants were significantly more likely to draw self-brand connections toward moderately sincere brands compared to high self-esteem participants, $\beta = -.48$, $t = -4.36$, $p < .001$. There was no significant main effect under the neutral condition; low self-esteem participants drew similar self-brand

connections toward sincere brands as high self-esteem participants, $\beta = .04$, $t = .22$, $p = .83$. To explore the nature of the interaction, I conducted a spotlight analysis at ±1 SD from the mean of measured self-esteem following Aiken and West (1991). I hypothesized that the effect of exclusion on sincerity orientation would be magnified for low (versus high) self-esteem individuals such that these individuals would be more likely to be attuned to sincere brands, showing stronger self-brand connections to sincere brands. The analysis indicated that at low levels of self-esteem, exclusion led to greater self-brand connections to moderately sincere brands compared to the neutral condition, $\beta = .78$, $t = 4.99$, $p < .001$. At high levels of self-esteem, this effect was not significant, $\beta = .17$, $t = 1.10$, $p = .27$.

For low self-esteem individuals who tend to avoid other people in instances of social rejection, brands (as opposed to people) may serve as instrumental significant others in response to rejection. In particular, low self-esteem individuals may be even more likely to seek brand partners that possess specific traits that are positively associated with ideal relationship partners, such as sincere, genuine, and trustworthy. By showing that low (versus high) self-esteem individuals show a magnification of the sincerity orientation towards brands, I begin to provide an understanding of how these individuals cope with rejection by other people when they typically have a difficult time reconnecting with people. Identifying trait self-esteem as a moderator potentially shows the importance of the sincerity bias with respect to brands rather than people.
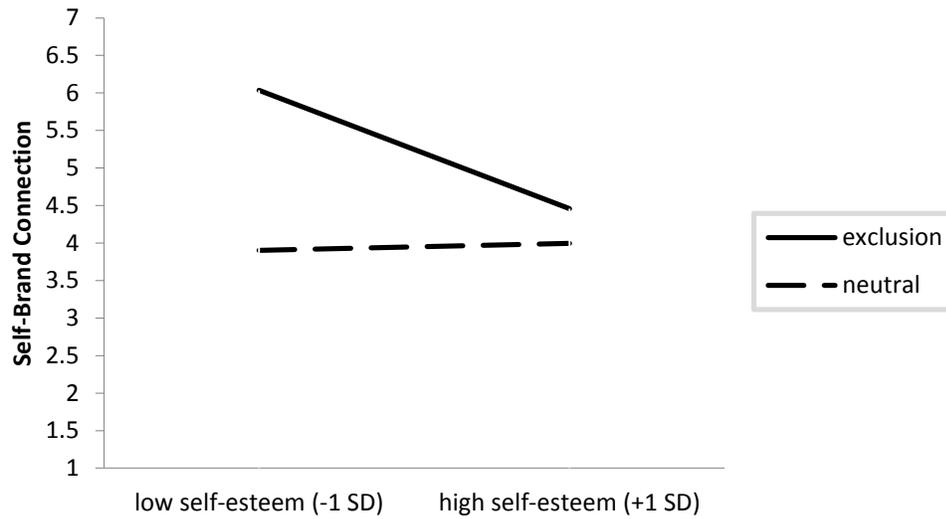
Figure 7. Self-brand connection as a function of exclusion and measured self-esteem (study 5).

9. General Discussion

In this research, I put forth the idea that consumers respond to threats to interpersonal relationships (i.e., social exclusion) by seeking brands characterized by a specific personality trait dimension. I focused on how consumers become attuned to the sincerity dimension in response to interpersonal relationship threats as a means to fulfill their belongingness needs. Theoretically, this compensation effect using specific brand traits should not be limited to the interpersonal relationship threats I have focused on and instead should apply broadly to other threats as well, assuming that a particular personality trait dimension is relevant for the threat. For example, consumers should become sensitive to the competence dimension in response to achievement-related

63

threats they may experience. Overall, the findings provide converging support for the novel proposition that specific trait dimensions can be used to indirectly compensate for threats to consumers' needs.

The studies presented demonstrate that consumers use brands that are relatively high on the sincerity dimension (e.g., down-to-earth, wholesome) to compensate for exclusion. They become biased in their impressions of and preferences for sincere brands (studies 1 and 3); they also feel stronger self-brand connections to sincere brands (study 2). Study 3 demonstrates that consumers not only prefer sincere (versus exciting) brands after experiencing exclusion but that this preference increases downstream feelings of belonging. I also find in study 4 that consumers may protect themselves from the negative effects of exclusion by engaging in a simple act of identity-relevant affirmation (i.e., writing about a product that reflects their identity). Finally, study 5 suggests that this sincerity bias for brands is particularly relevant and enhanced for consumers who are low in trait self-esteem.

Together, these results expand the literature on social belongingness needs, suggesting that consumers indirectly compensate for threats in their lives using consumption, which is consistent with the growing body of research in consumer behavior (e.g., Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman 2005; Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2008; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Further, the results contribute to the literature on consumer-brand relationships by going beyond the idea that consumers are generally biased to attribute

humanlike characteristics to products when they are excluded; instead I show that consumers are biased with respect to specific brand traits (i.e., sincerity traits). Finally, this research identifies boundary conditions to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between social exclusion and sincerity-orientation toward brands.

This research also suggests the importance of understanding consumers' relationships with brands in considering marketing strategies. Consumers often experience social exclusion, as it can occur even through subtle, passive ignoring by others and does not necessarily only occur with outright, explicit kinds of rejection (Williams 2007). Thus, marketers should be aware of consumers' profound need for belonging and consider how brands can satisfy that need when threatened. It would be helpful to start identifying consumers' specific needs. Belongingness needs may be threatened and activated by social situations (e.g., being ignored by colleagues in the office, being rejected by a classmate on e-mail) as well as marketing actions (e.g., non-target marketing, inattentive salesperson). In such situations, insofar as marketers can design their brand offerings to be more human-like, desirable relationship partners, consumers' specific threatened needs should be identified and then met with the appropriate trait dimension.

The results found in this paper also suggest new avenues of research. Modern society allows people to enjoy a wide variety of products at their convenience; would these consumer-brand relationships have a negative effect on social relationships? I find

65

in study 4 that low self-esteem individuals are particularly sensitive to the trait

dimension of brands, suggesting that these individuals may also be more prone to use

this consumption tactic. This reliance on consumption may in turn cause low self-esteem

individuals to seek out interpersonal relationships less, and it may be a vicious cycle

where they become more and more distant from social others. Future research should

examine how and when consumers' relationships with brands impact the extent to

which they seek relationships with other people and value these social relationships.

Questions also remain regarding the various strategies with which consumers

respond to exclusion by using brands. The present studies suggest that when people are

excluded, they are *specifically* biased with respect to certain brand traits, while previous

research has shown that they are more *generally* biased and attribute humanlike traits to

non-human objects (including products). Is it possible that the process of compensating

for social exclusion using products is a stepwise process in which a general bias occurs

first followed by a more specific bias? Future research should more closely examine the

sequential process of these effects.

Research in interpersonal relationships found that individuals' active goals can

bring to mind significant others who are instrumental for the activated goal, heightening

their accessibility relative to non-instrumental others (Fitzsimons and Shah 2008). It

would be interesting in future research to explore whether brands as relationship

partners can be instrumental to varying degrees, and whether this in turn influences

evaluations of brands. This research could demonstrate further support for the idea that brands can serve as helpful relationship partners that can potentially aid consumers in achieving their goals and meeting their needs.

Finally, it would be valuable to examine other ways in which consumers respond to social exclusion beyond the sincerity orientation. For instance, do consumers engage in less variety-seeking and show more loyalty after experiencing exclusion? Would consumers engage in positive word-of-mouth to promote products they want to connect with and derogate alternative options? These behaviors are associated with fostering relationships and relationship growth, and thus would show support for the idea that consumers engage in specific relationship orientation. Future research could answer these questions to better understand how consumers respond to social exclusion using consumption.

10. Conclusion

While evidence of directly coping with exclusion through social reconnection abounds in the literature, support for compensating for exclusion in an indirect way, particularly in the consumption context, is relatively scarce (for exceptions see Epley et al. 2008). This research provides a novel framework for how consumers might respond to social exclusion by using brand trait specificity as an indirect compensation system. Furthermore, this framework is consistent with accumulating evidence in the consumer

behavior literature that consumers indirectly compensate for various threats in their lives using consumption. Considering the role of specificity of brand trait dimensions may potentially provide a promising perspective on how consumers indirectly respond to threatened needs, and thus the many implications of this research in the domains of interpersonal relationships, consumer-brand relationships, and marketing strategies should be explored in future research.

Appendix A

Twelve brands from pretest 1 (used in studies 1 and 3)

BMW®
Coca-Cola®
Diesel®
Gap®
H&M®
Honda®
Levi's®
The Walt Disney Company®
Volkswagen®
Volvo®

Appendix B

Forty-four brands from pretest 2 (used in studies 2, 4, and 5)

Adidas®
Amazon®
American Eagle®
American Express®
Apple®
Campbell's®
Chick-fil-A®
Chipotle®
Coca-Cola®
Colgate®
Dell®
Dove®
Dr. Pepper®
Ebay®
Ford®
Gap®
Google®
H&M®
Hershey's®
Hewlett-Packard®
Honda®
Ikea®
J.Crew®
Johnson & Johnson®
KFC®
Kleenex®
Levi's®
McDonald's®
Microsoft®

MTV®

Nestlé®

Nike®

Old Navy®

Pepsi®

Samsung®

Starbucks®

Target®

UPS®

Visa®

Volkswagen®

Whole Foods®

Zara®

Appendix C

Self-Brand Connection Scale (Escalas and Bettman 2003) (used in pretest 2; studies 3 and 4)

Please answer <u>as precisely as you can</u> to the following statements (about each brand).

1. Brand X reflects who I am.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7

    not at all   *extremely well*

2. I can identify with Brand X.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7

    not at all   *extremely well*

3. I feel a personal connection to Brand X.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7

    not at all   *very much so*

4. I (can) use Brand X to communicate who I am to other people.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7

    not at all   *extremely well*

5. I think Brand X (could) helps me become the type of person I want to be.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7

    not at all   *extremely well*

6. I consider Brand X to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others)

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7

    me   *not me*

7. Brand X suits me well.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7

    not at all   *extremely well*

Appendix D

Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) (used in study 5)

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Using the 8 point scale shown below, please rate your agreement.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
do not agree at all					*agree somewhat*				*agree completely*

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times, I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

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Biography

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