

To Be or Not to Be Unique? The Effect of Social Exclusion on Consumer Choice

ECHO WEN WAN
JING XU
YING DING

This research proposes that after an experience of being excluded, consumers may strategically choose products to differentiate themselves from the majority of others as a result of their appraisal of the exclusion situation. Experiments 1 and 2 show that when excluded individuals perceive that the cause of social exclusion is stable (vs. unstable), they exhibit greater preference for distinctive products than do included individuals. Experiment 3 documents that excluded individuals prefer distinctive products when their self-view is enhanced through self-affirmation. Moreover, these effects are driven by a strengthened perception of uniqueness. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Consider the following scenario. Jason is having dinner with a group of people with whom he just got acquainted at work. Someone in his group suggests sharing appetizers. When the waiter comes to take the order, Jason finds that no one wants to share a bowl of queso and chips with him. How will this experience of rejection influence Jason's subsequent choice of a main course? Specifically, will he be more likely to choose a main course that is similar to or different from that of his fellow diners? In this scenario, Jason experiences social exclusion, a state defined as being alone, isolated, or ostracized by other individuals or social groups (Baumeister et al. 2005; Williams 2007). The current research examines the effect of social exclusion on consumer choice and its underlying process.

Experiences of social exclusion are an unpleasant yet

common part of life. Being deprived of social acceptance can have significant impact on one's psychological and physiological well-being (Baumeister et al. 2005; Williams 2007). Prior research has shown that social exclusion increases people's tendency to conform to others because doing so is expected to provide the opportunity for regaining social acceptance (DeWall, Maner, and Rouby 2009; Mead et al. 2011; Williams, Cheung, and Choi 2000). However, other studies document that social exclusion can lead to aggression and decreased helping, a behavior pattern seemingly the opposite of conformity (Baumeister et al. 2007; Twenge et al. 2001). These findings suggest that socially excluded individuals may engage in behaviors that deviate from conforming.

The current research investigates when and why individuals choose to diverge from the majority of others in response to social exclusion. We propose that individuals' cognitive inferences about their chances of achieving successful reaffiliation influence the way they respond to social exclusion. When socially excluded individuals infer that the chance for successful reaffiliation is low, from the state of exclusion they will perceive their unique self. Consequently, they will seek to differentiate themselves from the majority of others in subsequent product choices. On the contrary, when excluded individuals perceive a high chance of successful reaffiliation, they will be less likely to differentiate their choices from others' choices. In addition, we posit that individuals' current state of self will affect their response to social exclusion. Having a strengthened self-view will buffer the threat from social exclusion and encourage ex-

Echo Wen Wan (ewan@business.hku.hk) is associate professor of marketing at the Faculty of Business and Economics, the University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong. Jing Xu (jingx@gsm.pku.edu.cn) is associate professor of marketing at the Guanghua School of Management, Peking University, Beijing, China. Ying Ding (dingying@rbs.org.cn) is assistant professor of marketing at the School of Business, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China. The first two authors contributed equally, and the order of authorship is alphabetically determined. For correspondence, please contact Ying Ding. This research was supported by a Hong Kong SAR RGC research grant (HKU 755511) awarded to the first author, and the National Natural Science Foundation of China research grant (71222205) awarded to the second author.

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cluded individuals to perceive their uniqueness and thus prefer distinctive products.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND ITS BEHAVIORAL CONSEQUENCES

Maintaining stable social relationships is critical to human survival and safety (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Smith, Murphy, and Coats 1999). Being socially excluded can lead to adverse physiological responses, such as increased blood pressure (Zadro 2004) and activation of the brain region associated with pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams 2003), and can negatively affect psychological well-being by producing such feelings as distress and hurt (Leary et al. 1995; Williams et al. 2000). Clearly, individuals who experience social rejection are generally motivated to engage in behaviors to reduce the resulting negative impacts.

What is less clear is how individuals handle the negative impact of social exclusion. Extant research has documented seemingly inconsistent findings on behavioral response to social exclusion (Maner et al. 2007; Pickett and Gardner 2005; see Williams [2007] for a review). The theory of social monitoring system suggests social exclusion thwarts belongingness and motivates individuals to attend to social cues to achieve reinclusion (Pickett and Gardner 2005). Consistent with this view, some research suggests that socially excluded participants, compared with socially included participants (who feel accepted and included by other individuals or social groups), are more interested in building social bonds with new sources of relationships (Maner et al. 2007), more sensitive to gaining social acceptance (DeWall et al. 2009), more likely to conform to others' opinions (Williams et al. 2000), more likely to spend money on products symbolizing group membership (e.g., spirit bands), and more likely to match spending activities of the group (Mead et al. 2011).

On the contrary, other work has found that social exclusion can increase antisocial behavior, a behavioral consequence seemingly the opposite of seeking conformity. For example, Twenge et al. (2001) found that socially excluded participants were more aggressive than included participants, such that they provided more negative job evaluations and directed more aversive noises toward other people. In another investigation, Twenge and colleagues (2007) showed that social exclusion decreases helping, such that excluded participants donated less money and cooperated less with others than the included participants in a mixed-motive game.

Even though the extant findings suggest that individuals may exhibit either conformity or deviation in response to social exclusion, they have not clearly explained when and why these different effects occur. In particular, the reason that socially excluded individuals would choose to differentiate themselves from other is unclear. The current research draws from the social exclusion literature and the need-for-uniqueness theory (Snyder and Fromkin 1980) to reveal how individuals use the differentiation approach to cope with social exclusion.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND UNIQUENESS SEEKING

Being rejected or ignored often suggests dissimilarity or disagreement between the individuals being excluded and the social entity from which they are excluded. When excluded individuals consider settling the dissimilarity, they may resort to two possibilities. One is to ensure that there is no dissimilarity or disagreement by behaving in the same way as others (i.e., conformity). Another possibility is to view their experience as an indication of their uniqueness (e.g., "I'm excluded. Thus, I seem to be different from others"). As supported by Brewer (1991) and Snyder and Fromkin (1977, 1980), human beings seek to be moderately unique and different from others. Moreover, the excluded individual's motivation to showcase their uniqueness will be high when doing so is perceived as socially profitable (Berger and Heath 2007; Maslach, Stapp, and Santee 1985; Snyder and Fromkin 1980).

Hence, we argue whether excluded individuals choose to conform or deviate depends on the assessment of the situation. Specifically, we propose that individuals' cognitive assessment of their chances for successful reaffiliation after experiencing social exclusion will influence their perception of uniqueness and consequently their tendency to diverge in subsequent product choice. When excluded individuals infer that reaffiliation is unlikely to be successful, they will have low motivation to seek reconnection. Instead, they will be more likely to attribute the exclusion to their unique self and seek uniqueness to strengthen this belief. Because seeking reconnection becomes an unattractive means of reconciling the dissimilarity, highlighting their unique self helps provide a reasonable explanation for the occurrence of social exclusion. Next, we draw on the attribution theory (Weiner 1985) and the research on social exclusion (Sommer and Rubin 2005; Williams 2007) to support this proposition.

People can interpret the experience of social exclusion in different ways (see Williams [2007] for a review). In the earlier example of rejection over sharing an appetizer, Jason might think that others rejected him because of his ethnic and cultural profile. Alternatively, Jason might figure out that the exclusion occurred because his fellow diners dislike his habit of double-dipping. These two reasons for social exclusion differ in terms of their stability. Because it is more difficult to change traits such as race and culture than to change habits, the cause of exclusion is more stable in the former case than in the latter case.

According to the attribution theory (Weiner 1985), perceived stability of cause influences the judgment of expected success and guides motivational behavior such that people are more likely to move away from prior pursuits when they ascribe their failure to stable (vs. unstable) causes. For example, Anderson (1983) found that rejection attributed to a stable cause (e.g., inability to persuade others to donate blood) resulted in less solicitation persistence than rejection ascribed to an unstable cause (e.g., poor strategy for soliciting donors). In the context of social exclusion, suppose a

consumer desires to join the community of a brand club (e.g., Harley Rider Community or Iphone Users Community), but his or her application was rejected. The cause of exclusion is perceived as stable if the excluder (i.e., the brand club) is unlikely to change the requirement for membership (e.g., a fixed policy), and the cause is perceived as unstable if the excluder's requirement is flexible and can be revised. We expect that when socially excluded individuals view the cause is stable, they will believe seeking reaffiliation is unlikely to be successful. Consequently, they will perceive themselves as unique and engage in behaviors to affirm their uniqueness. Conversely, when excluded individuals believe the cause is unstable, they will believe seeking reaffiliation is likely to be successful and be less likely to seek uniqueness.

We thus expect that social exclusion will interact with perceived stability of the cause to affect consumers' product preference. Because people view possessions as extensions of the self and use them to express their identity (Belk 1987), distinctive products or products that a minority of people prefers can signal uniqueness (Ames and Iyengar 2005; Berger and Heath 2007; Lynn and Harris 1997; Maslach et al. 1985; Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001). As a result, consumers are likely to choose distinctive options when they are motivated to strengthen or affirm their uniqueness (Xu, Shen, and Wyer 2012). We predict that excluded individuals (vs. included individuals) will be more likely to prefer distinctive products when they perceive the cause of exclusion as stable and less likely to prefer distinctive products when they perceive the cause of exclusion as unstable. We conjecture these effects are driven by variations in individuals' inferences about their own uniqueness. We formally hypothesize the following:

- H1:** Compared with socially included consumers, socially excluded consumers will be more likely to choose distinctive products when they perceive the cause of exclusion as stable and will be less likely to choose distinctive products when they perceive the cause of exclusion as unstable.
- H2a:** Compared with socially included consumers, socially excluded consumers will be more likely to perceive themselves as having a unique self when they view the cause of exclusion as stable.
- H2b:** Perceived uniqueness will mediate the interaction effect of social exclusion and perceived stability of the cause of exclusion on product choice.

Three experiments were conducted to test the research propositions. The first two experiments test hypotheses 1 and 2. The basic procedure consisted of manipulating participants' state of social exclusion or inclusion and then having them indicate their product preferences. Experiment 1 manipulated the perceived stability of the cause of exclusion when the cause has an internal locus (Weiner 1985), that is, whether the exclusion state can be changed or not depends

on the person being excluded. Experiment 2 manipulated the perceived stability of the cause of exclusion when the cause has an external locus (Weiner 1985), that is, whether the exclusion state can be changed largely depends on the excluder. To examine the underlying process, we measured participants' perceived uniqueness either before or after the choice task and examined it in mediation analyses. Moreover, we also tested the hypotheses when the choice context was manipulated to be private versus public. The last experiment examined the effect of self-affirmation on consumers' preference for distinctive products when they experience social exclusion. This study is to test that, in addition to the inference about the chance for successful reaffiliation, individuals' current state of self can also moderate the effect of social exclusion on consumer choice.

EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 examines how perceived stability of the cause of exclusion affects consumers' product preference when they experience social exclusion (hypothesis 1). Based on the finding that social exclusion can occur in cyberspace (Williams et al. 2000), and based on the popularity of social networking sites (NfpSynergy 2009), we developed a manipulation task for social exclusion in an online social networking context. Notably, the cause of exclusion was situated with an internal locus in this experiment. Specifically, we manipulated the cause of exclusion as related to participants' personal traits. Research on attribution suggests that people perceive a cause with an internal locus as relatively stable if it is about personal traits that are very difficult to change, and perceive the cause as relatively unstable if it is about some changeable traits (Weiner 1985). Therefore, in this study we varied participants' (i.e., the persons being excluded) belief of whether they were able to change their traits by presenting them with a revised version of the entity versus incremental theory about personal traits. Building on the implicit theory (Dweck and Leggett 1988), when participants are primed with an entity theory about personal traits, they will think they cannot change the basic aspects about themselves, and thus the cause of exclusion is relatively stable. In contrast, when participants are primed with an incremental theory about personal traits, they will think they can change these traits through some effort and thus the cause of exclusion is unstable.

We also measured participants' perceived uniqueness and examined its mediating role in the proposed effect (hypotheses 2a and 2b). Moreover, we examined a set of alternative explanations. Social exclusion might influence preferences for the distinctive products because excluded participants sought control, power, or status, or because of the changes in their mood. Thus we measured and examined these constructs in this study.

Methods and Procedure

One hundred and eighteen undergraduate students from Peking University participated in this experiment in return

for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (state of social exclusion: exclusion vs. inclusion) \times 2 (perceived stability of the cause of exclusion: stable vs. unstable) between-subjects design.

Manipulation of Social Exclusion. The state of social exclusion versus inclusion was manipulated in the context of online social networking. Participants were asked to read a story about making friends in cyberspace. Importantly, participants were instructed to put themselves in the role of the person in the story by thinking and feeling as if they were actually experiencing the situation. The story depicted the following scenario: They (i.e., the participants) found three attractive persons when browsing an online social networking site. They then submitted a description about themselves and sent friend requests. A few days later, they received feedback. In the “social exclusion condition,” their requests were rejected by all three persons. In the “social inclusion condition,” their requests were accepted by all three persons. After completing the reading of the story, participants were asked to describe their feelings in detail as if they were experiencing the incident in the story, a procedure adapted from past research (Rucker, Dubois, and Galinsky 2011) to strengthen the manipulation. Next, participants responded to the manipulation check questions that asked how excluded/ignored they felt during the experience depicted in the story (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; Williams et al. 2000) and indicated their mood on the item of “feeling pleasant” (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Manipulation of Perceived Stability of the Cause of Exclusion. Next, participants moved to a reading comprehension task adapted from Kray and Haselhuhn (2007) that manipulated the perceived stability of the cause of exclusion with an internal locus: whether the excluded person could change his or her traits. In the “stable cause condition,” participants read an essay that stated that people possess fixed personal traits that are very difficult to change through personal efforts, and provided research findings to support this assertion. Conversely, participants in the “unstable cause condition” read an essay that stated that personal traits are dynamic and can be cultivated and developed through personal efforts over a lifetime, and provided evidence to support this assertion. We asked participants to write down an example consistent with the core idea of the essay. Then participants completed the manipulation check by rating the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree): (1) “I believe my personal traits can be changed”; (2) “I think I can change my personality through some efforts”; and (3) “It is impossible for me to change my personality” (reverse coded).

Process Measure. After participants finished the manipulation of stability of the cause of exclusion but before they worked on the choice task, they were asked to report their perceived uniqueness on three items adopted from the self-attributed need-for-uniqueness scale (Lynn and Harris 1997): “Being distinctive is important to me” (1 = not at all, 9 =

extremely); “I intentionally do things to make myself different from those around me” (1 = never, 9 = always); “I have a need for uniqueness” (1 = weak, 9 = very strong).

Choice Task and Additional Measures. In the final section of the experiment, participants were asked to complete a survey about vacation spots. Participants were told a travel agency was promoting two vacation spots—Bali and Phuket—and was interested in their opinions. They read brief descriptions of the two islands and were told that a recent survey among participating students from the same university showed that 19% of them preferred Phuket (distinctive option) and 81% preferred Bali. Then participants indicated their choice between the two options. A pretest among 55 participants from the same pool rated Bali and Phuket as equally attractive on a 7-point scale ($M_{\text{Bali}} = 5.40$ vs. $M_{\text{Phuket}} = 5.18$; $t(54) = 1.30$, $p > .10$).

After indicating their choices, participants were asked to rate five items adopted from the desirability-of-control scale (Burger and Cooper 1979; sample item: “I enjoy having control over my own destiny”), four items about whether choosing a unique option can bring power (sample item: “Choosing distinctive products can make me feel powerful”), and two items about status seeking (sample item: “I believe that choosing distinctive products can help me gain social reconnection by enhancing my status”). All of these items were anchored on scales of 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). Finally, participants were debriefed, paid, and thanked.

Results and Discussion

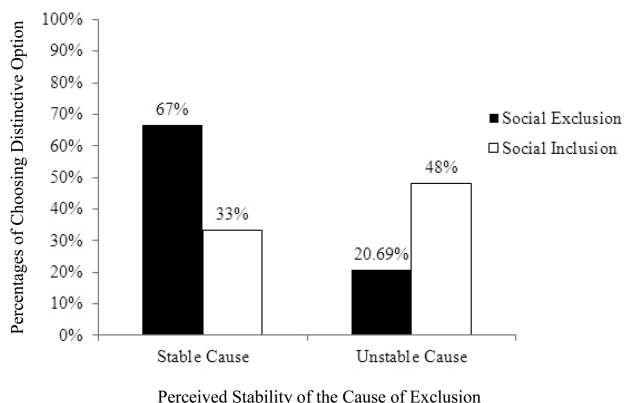
Manipulation Check. We first took an average of the two manipulation check questions for social exclusion to form a manipulation check score ($\alpha = .83$). A 2 \times 2 ANOVA indicated only a main effect of social exclusion: Participants who received the rejection message felt more excluded and ignored ($M = 4.59$) than those who received the acceptance message ($M = 1.90$; $F(1, 114) = 160.92$, $p < .001$), confirming the success of the social exclusion manipulation.

We developed a perceived stability score by averaging participants’ responses on the three questions that checked the manipulation of stability of the cause of exclusion ($\alpha = .82$). Validating our manipulation, a 2 \times 2 ANOVA revealed only a main effect of perceived stability: Participants who read the entity-theory essay perceived the cause of exclusion as less changeable ($M = 4.48$) than those who read the incremental-theory essay ($M = 5.62$; $F(1, 114) = 31.96$, $p < .001$).

Choice of Vacation Spot. We coded the choice of vacation spot as one if the participant chose the distinctive option (Phuket) and zero otherwise (Bali). Regressing the choice of vacation spot on social exclusion, stability of the cause of exclusion, and their interaction yielded a significant main effect of social exclusion (Wald $\chi^2 = 4.67$, $p < .05$) and, importantly, a significant interaction effect (Wald $\chi^2 = 10.92$, $p < .01$). The main effect of stability was not sig-

FIGURE 1

CHOICE SHARE FOR SELECTING DISTINCTIVE VACATION SPOT (EXPERIMENT 1)



nificant ($p > .10$). Supporting our hypothesis 1, the pairwise comparison indicated that participants who perceived the cause of social exclusion as stable were more likely to choose the distinctive option when they were excluded than included (67% vs. 33%; Wald $\chi^2 = 6.41, p < .05$; see fig. 1). When participants believed the cause of exclusion was unstable, they were less likely to choose the distinctive option when they were excluded (20.69%) than included (48%; Wald $\chi^2 = 4.67, p < .05$). In addition, socially excluded participants were more likely to choose the distinctive option when they perceived the cause of exclusion as stable than unstable (Wald $\chi^2 = 11.52, p < .01$), whereas the included participants did not differ in their choice whether they perceived the cause as stable or unstable (Wald $\chi^2 = 1.35, p > .20$).

Perceived Uniqueness as a Mediator. We averaged participants' responses on the three items for measuring perceived uniqueness to form a score ($\alpha = .94$). A 2×2 ANOVA on this score revealed only a significant social exclusion \times stability interaction ($F(1, 114) = 25.85, p < .001$). Supporting hypothesis 2a, when perceiving the cause of exclusion as stable, excluded (vs. included) participants scored higher on perceived uniqueness ($M = 6.19$ vs. $M = 4.60$; $F(1, 58) = 12.49, p < .01$). By contrast, when perceiving the cause of exclusion as unstable, excluded (vs. included) participants scored lower on perceived uniqueness ($M = 3.82$ vs. $M = 5.66$; $F(1, 56) = 13.32, p < .01$).

We then conducted a mediated moderation analysis using perceived uniqueness as the mediator (Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt 2005). First, we regressed the choice of vacation spot on social exclusion, stability of the cause of exclusion, and their interaction in a binary logistic regression. This analysis only resulted in a significant interaction effect ($\beta = 2.66, \text{Wald } \chi^2 = 10.92, p < .01$). Second, we regressed perceived uniqueness on social exclusion, stability of the

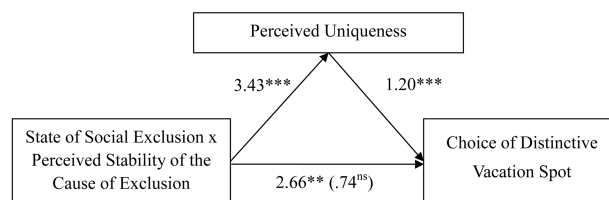
cause of exclusion, and their interaction, which revealed a significant interaction effect ($\beta = 3.43, t(114) = 5.09, p < .001$). Finally, we regressed the choice of vacation spot on social exclusion, stability, social exclusion \times stability, perceived uniqueness about self, and perceived uniqueness \times stability. The results revealed that the main effect of perceived uniqueness remained significant ($\beta = 1.20, \text{Wald } \chi^2 = 14.78, p < .001$). Notably, the social exclusion \times stability interaction was no longer significant ($p > .40$). We then conducted a bootstrapping analysis that generated a sample size of 5,000 (Hayes 2013; Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007). In supporting hypothesis 2b (see fig. 2), a 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect was significant and excluded zero (95% CI: 1.73, 5.60), which provided the evidence of mediation.

Mood, Desire for Control, Power, and Status Seeking. A 2×2 ANOVA showed that excluded participants had a more negative mood ($M = 2.68$) than the included ones ($M = 5.76$; $F(1, 114) = 194.56, p < .001$). However, regressing choice on mood indicated no significant correlation between the two variables ($p > .80$). Regressing choice on social exclusion, stability, social exclusion \times stability, and mood did not reduce the significance level of the interaction term (Wald $\chi^2 = 11.49, p < .01$). These findings suggest that mood is an unlikely driver of our effect. We consistently found similar results about mood, and we will not discuss it further. We used the same method to examine desire for control ($\alpha = .84$), power ($\alpha = .82$), and status seeking ($\alpha = .89$), and did not find that these factors can explain the results in the current study.

Discussion. Experiment 1 provided the initial evidence that consumers strategically engage in differentiation in response to social exclusion when they infer that the cause of exclusion is stable. In support of hypothesis 1, when participants believed they could not change their personal traits (stable cause of exclusion), those who were rejected in on-line social networking were more likely than those accepted to choose the distinctive option. However, when they be-

FIGURE 2

MEDIATION ANALYSIS: PERCEIVED UNIQUENESS AS A MEDIATOR (EXPERIMENT 1)



NOTE.—*Significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level; ***significant at the .001 level.

lieved they could change their traits with their own efforts (unstable cause of exclusion), rejected participants were less likely than accepted participants to choose the distinctive option. Importantly, results in experiment 1 support our proposed mechanism. Participants' perceived uniqueness mediated the interactive effects. But the alternative explanations of mood and desire for control, power, or status were not supported.

EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 has two goals. The first goal is to test the robustness of the results from experiment 1. For this purpose, experiment 2 introduces the following changes in procedure. First, experiment 2 used a different manipulation of social exclusion that pertains to brand community with marketing implications. Second, experiment 2 situated the cause of exclusion with an external locus. That is, the brand community (the excluder) largely determines whether the state of exclusion can be changed. Third, instead of administering the measures of perceived uniqueness before participants worked on the choice task as in experiment 1, experiment 2 measured the perceived uniqueness after participants completed the choice. By doing so, we can provide further evidence to validate the proposed mechanism. Fourth, experiment 2 used nonbinary choice tasks that asked participants to indicate their preference among three options (Berger and Heath 2007) rather than two options as used in experiment 1.

The second goal is to explore whether the effect of social exclusion on consumer choice differs across private and public contexts. We have posited that individuals can use consumption activities to affirm their beliefs about self. When excluded individuals infer that it is difficult to change the exclusion state (i.e., when the cause of exclusion is stable) and the motivation to reconnect is low, they perceive their uniqueness and choose distinctive products to affirm such a belief. This motivation to differentiate themselves from others does not require public visibility. In contrast, when excluded individuals are motivated to regain social acceptance, they tend to choose products that others prefer in order to signal their intention to reconnect (Mead et al. 2011). Here the act to conform might be weakened when the choice is made in a private context (Mead et al. 2011). Hence, we predict the effects of differentiation will occur in both the private and public contexts, and the conforming effect will be mitigated in the private context. Experiment 2 tests the proposed effect in both private and public contexts.

Methods and Procedure

One hundred and one undergraduate students from University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, participated in this study in exchange for monetary compensation. They were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (state of social exclusion: exclusion vs. inclusion) \times 2 (perceived stability of the cause of exclusion: stable vs. unstable) \times 2 (choice context: private vs. public) mixed design, the first two factors as between-subject and the third factor within-subject.

Manipulation of Social Exclusion. The state of social exclusion was manipulated in a scenario about membership application to a brand community. Participants were asked to read a story carefully and, importantly, to put themselves in the role of the hero by thinking and feeling as if they were experiencing the same incident. The story depicted that they (i.e., the participants) were eager to join the IWE Club, a brand community for one premium foreign company that functions like a family for customers; thus, they submitted their applications for membership in the IWE Club. The state of social exclusion versus inclusion was varied in the outcome of their membership application. In the social exclusion condition, the IWE Club informed them a few days later that their applications were rejected. In the social inclusion condition, the IWE Club informed them their applications were accepted. Participants were asked to describe their feelings about this experience in detail after reading the story (Rucker et al. 2011). Next, participants responded to the manipulation check questions about their feelings of being excluded/ignored during the depicted experience (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Manipulation of Stability of the Cause of Exclusion. Next, participants received the manipulation of the stability of the cause of exclusion with an external locus. That is, the rejection was due to reasons associated with the policy of the excluding entity—the IWE Club. Specifically, participants were informed of the reason of the IWE Club's rejection/acceptance decision. In the stable cause condition, excluded participants learned the club rejected their applications because they did not meet a fixed, IWE-imposed requirement about residence (e.g., country). The unchangeable nature of this policy implied that the cause of exclusion was relatively stable and regaining acceptance was unlikely. Conversely, in the unstable cause condition, excluded participants learned that they did not meet the IWE Club's current residential requirement but that the club would expand to their residence regions soon. Here the excluder's policy was changeable, and the cause of rejection was relatively unstable, thereby suggesting excluded participants would have the opportunity to regain acceptance if they resubmitted their applications in the near future. Socially included participants learned the IWE had accepted them as members either because their residence profiles met the club's requirement or because the IWE club would expand to their residence regions soon and thus accepted their applications in advance. Then participants rated how likely the exclusion state could be changed on three items (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree): "I can change the application results through some efforts"; "the application results can be changed easily"; "it's impossible for me to change the application results" (reverse coded).

Choice Task and Process Measure. Next, participants were asked to complete a survey about their choices in a private context and then a public context (Ratner and Kahn 2002). In the "private choice condition," participants were asked to choose one video program that they would watch

at home by themselves among three options available on YouTube. Option B had a much lower click rate (3,067) than options A (82,611) and C (79,335), indicating it was the unique option among the three alternatives. A separate pretest among 28 participants rated the three videos as equally attractive on a 7-point scale ($M_A = 4.21$ vs. $M_B = 3.89$ vs. $M_C = 3.79$; all $p > .10$), and the choice of online video was higher on the private choice index ($\alpha = .81$) than on the public choice index ($\alpha = .75$; $M_{\text{private}} = 4.86$ vs. $M_{\text{public}} = 3.57$; $p < .01$). In the “public choice condition,” participants were asked to design a T-shirt in one online shop that they would wear in the presence of schoolmates (i.e., on the school sport day). Participants were then provided with information about three pattern options (Berger and Heath 2007) and were instructed to indicate their preference: Among all previous consumers of the online shop, 41% selected pattern A, 13% selected pattern B, and 46% selected pattern C. In this choice set, pattern B was clearly a unique option because a much smaller percentage of students favored it compared with patterns A and C. They then responded to the same three items that measured the uniqueness of self in experiment 1 (Lynn and Harris 1997). Importantly, the measurement of perceived uniqueness was administered after the choice task. Finally, participants were debriefed, paid, and thanked.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. Participants’ responses to the two manipulation check questions for social exclusion were averaged to form a manipulation check score ($\alpha = .96$). As expected, participants who were rejected (vs. accepted) by the brand community felt more excluded ($M = 5.09$ vs. $M = 2.59$; $F(1, 97) = 80.97$, $p < .001$), confirming the success of the manipulation of social exclusion. We developed a perceived stability score by averaging participants’ responses on the three questions about the changeability of the exclusion state ($\alpha = .79$). Validating our manipulation, participants who read the stable (vs. unstable) reason perceived the situation as less changeable ($M = 3.09$ vs. $M = 3.93$; $F(1, 97) = 14.86$, $p < .001$).

Choice of Online Video and T-Shirt Pattern. We first examined participants’ choices of online video to watch on their own (private context). We coded the choice as one if they chose the distinctive video option (option B) and zero if they chose the other options (A or C). Regressing the video choice on social exclusion, stability, and their interaction revealed only a social exclusion \times stability interaction effect (Wald $\chi^2 = 10.47$, $p < .01$). No other effects were significant (all $p > .10$). Pairwise comparisons revealed that when they perceived a stable cause of exclusion, 68% of the excluded participants chose to watch a distinctive video, whereas only 32% of the included participants did so (Wald $\chi^2 = 6.18$, $p < .05$, see fig. 3A). Conversely, participants who perceived an unstable cause of exclusion were less likely to choose the distinctive video when they felt excluded (23.08%) than when they felt included (52%;

Wald $\chi^2 = 4.37$, $p < .05$). In addition, excluded participants were more likely to choose the distinctive video when the cause of exclusion was stable versus unstable (Wald $\chi^2 = 9.57$, $p < .01$), whereas the included participants did not differ in their choice of the distinctive video whether the cause of exclusion was stable or unstable (Wald $\chi^2 = 2.02$, $p > .10$). These results support hypothesis 1.

We conducted a similar analysis for the choice of T-shirt pattern to be printed on a T-shirt that participants would wear in public and found results identical to the results for the online video choice. (Please see fig. 3B for means and statistic testing.)

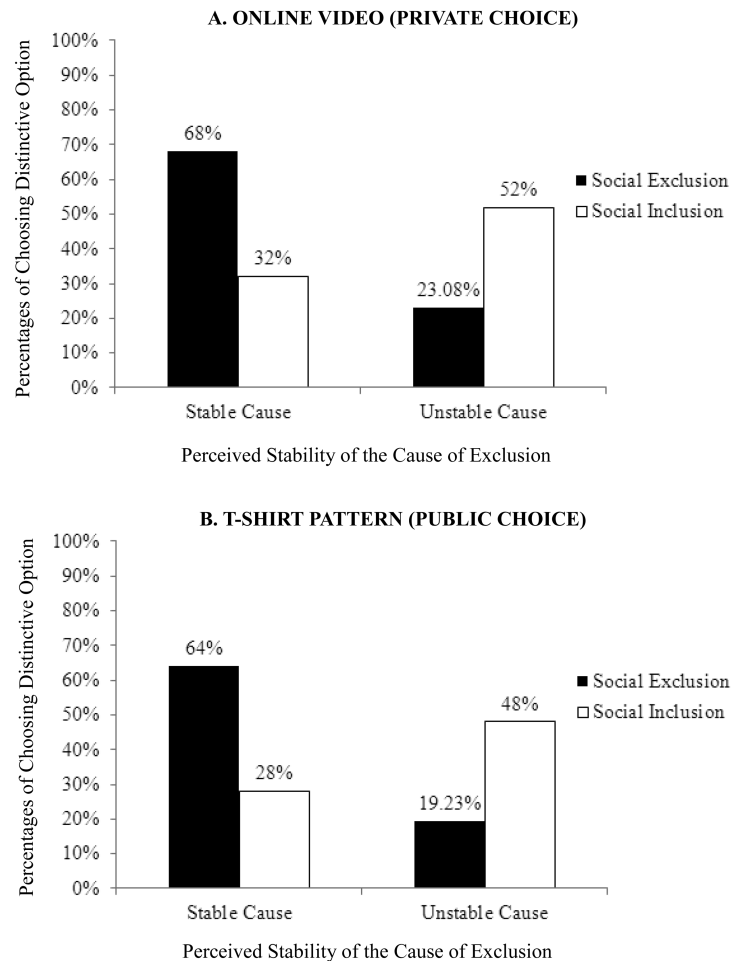
Perceived Uniqueness as a Mediator. Participants’ responses to the three items for measuring perceived uniqueness were averaged to form a score ($\alpha = .87$). A 2×2 ANOVA on this score revealed only a significant social exclusion \times stability interaction ($F(1, 97) = 22.32$, $p < .001$). Supporting hypothesis 2a, when perceiving a stable cause of exclusion, socially excluded (vs. included) participants scored higher on perceived uniqueness ($M = 5.49$ vs. $M = 3.28$; $F(1, 48) = 11.83$, $p < .01$). Conversely, when perceiving an unstable cause of exclusion, excluded (vs. included) participants scored lower on perceived uniqueness ($M = 2.65$ vs. $M = 4.47$; $F(1, 49) = 10.45$, $p < .01$).

We then performed the mediated moderation analysis for the choice of online video and the choice of T-shirt pattern separately (Muller et al. 2005). For the online video, regressing choice of video on social exclusion, stability, and their interaction resulted only in a significant interaction effect ($\beta = 2.79$, Wald $\chi^2 = 10.47$, $p < .01$). Regressing the perceived uniqueness on social exclusion, stability, and their interaction revealed only a significant interaction ($\beta = 4.03$, $t(97) = 4.72$, $p < .001$). Regressing choice of video on social exclusion, stability, social exclusion \times stability, perceived uniqueness, and perceived uniqueness \times stability resulted only in a significant effect of perceived uniqueness ($\beta = .57$, Wald $\chi^2 = 10.90$, $p < .01$). Notably, the social exclusion \times stability interaction was no longer significant ($p > .30$). Validating hypothesis 2b, a 95% confidence interval calculation around the indirect effect (Hayes 2013; Preacher et al. 2007) revealed that this indirect effect was significantly different from zero (95% CI: 1.32, 4.80; see fig. 4A), supporting the mediating role of perceived uniqueness. We conducted similar bootstrapping analyses for the choice of T-shirt pattern. The results confirmed a significant mediating pathway from social exclusion \times cause stability to choice through perceived uniqueness a (95% CI: 3.36, 29.20; see fig. 4B).

Discussion. Experiment 2 replicated the findings of experiment 1 by manipulating social exclusion in a brand community context and setting the cause of exclusion with an external locus. Supporting our hypotheses, participants who experienced exclusion in their brand-community membership application were more (less) likely to subsequently choose the distinctive option than the included participants

FIGURE 3

CHOICE SHARE FOR SELECTING DISTINCTIVE OPTION (EXPERIMENT 2)



when they perceived a stable (unstable) cause of exclusion. Moreover, participants' perceived uniqueness mediated the interaction effect on choice. Surprisingly, experiment 2 did not find the moderation effect of choice context. In the private context excluded (vs. included) participants still preferred the distinctive option less when they viewed the cause of exclusion as unstable. We will examine it again in the next experiment.

Both experiments 1 and 2 demonstrate that excluded individuals' cognitive inference of the cause of exclusion (stable vs. unstable) affects their choice of distinctive products. We further ask whether the personal state of the excluded individuals could influence how they respond to social exclusion, keeping the situation constant (i.e., the stableness of cause). Based on the findings of Williams (2007) that individuals' state of self can influence their experiences of social exclusion, we conjecture that the strength of individuals' self-view will affect their interpretation of uniqueness upon being socially

excluded in the next study we examine how self-affirmation influences excluded individuals' perception of uniqueness and preference for distinctive products.

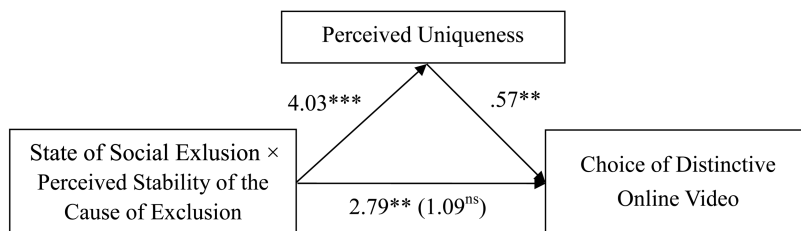
EXPERIMENT 3: SELF-AFFIRMATION MODERATING THE EFFECT

Prior research has documented the moderation effect of self-state on individuals' response to the incident of social exclusion. For example, Nezlek, Kowalski, and Leary (1997) found that although the manipulation of rejection led to distress for all participants, this impact was weaker for participants with high self-esteem than for those with low self-esteem. In another investigation, Sommer and Baumeister (2002) found that a subliminal prime of rejection, compared with an acceptance prime, led to more negative self-descriptions for participants with low self-esteem but more positive self-descriptions for those with high self-es-

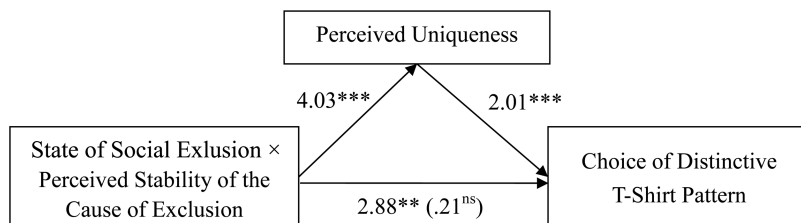
FIGURE 4

MEDIATION ANALYSIS: PERCEIVED UNIQUENESS AS A MEDIATOR (EXPERIMENT 2)

A. ONLINE VIDEO (PRIVATE CHOICE)



B. T-SHIRT PATTERN (PUBLIC CHOICE)



NOTE.—*Significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level; ***significant at the .001 level.

teem. These findings suggest that individuals with a stronger and a more positive self-view are more capable of buffering the threat to self and react differently compared with those with a weaker self or a less positive self-view.

More particularly, past research has shown self-affirmation, the act of bolstering the “perceived integrity of the self, its overall adaptive and moral adequacy” (Steele 1988, 291), can enhance one’s self-view and enable individuals to recognize and counteract the threats to the self. For example, people who have affirmed their core values are able to acknowledge the risks in threatening health messages (Sherman, Nelson, and Steele 2000), to recognize the merits in opposing arguments (Cohen, Aronson, and Steele 2000), and to maintain self-control despite the depletion in self-regulation resources (Schmeichel and Vohs 2009). Based on these prior findings, we suggest that self-affirmation will strengthen individuals’ belief of having a solid and positive self despite the threats from social exclusion. Therefore, these excluded individuals would be less motivated to seek reconnection and more likely to interpret the experience of exclusion as an indicator of their uniqueness, rather than viewing it negatively as others disliking them. Consequently, self-affirmation is expected to increase excluded individuals’

preference for distinctive products that allow them to affirm their belief of having a unique self.

H3: Compared with socially included consumers, socially excluded consumers will be more likely to choose distinctive products when they engage in self-affirmation and will be less likely to choose distinctive products when they do not engage in self-affirmation.

H4a: Compared with socially included consumers, socially excluded consumers will be more likely to perceive themselves as having a unique self when they engage in self-affirmation.

H4b: Perceived uniqueness will mediate the interaction effect of social exclusion and self-affirmation on the choice of distinctive products.

Experiment 3 examines the effect of social exclusion on choice of distinctive products under the influence of self-affirmation. One hundred eighty-six undergraduate students from Peking University participated in this study in exchange for monetary compensation. They were randomly assigned

to conditions in a 2 (state of social exclusion: exclusion vs. inclusion) \times 2 (self-affirmation: yes vs. no) \times 2 (choice context: private vs. public) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Manipulation of Social Exclusion. Social exclusion was manipulated using the same online social networking task as used in experiment 1. Specifically, participants put themselves in a scenario in which individuals rejected (exclusion) or accepted (inclusion) their requests to be added as new friends in cyberspace. Then participants reported their feelings of being excluded/ignored during the depicted experience (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Manipulation of Self-Affirmation. Adapting the method used in past research (Cohen et al. 2000; Schmeichel and Vohs 2009), we manipulated self-affirmation in a 6-minute writing task. Specifically, participants in the "self-affirmation condition" were presented with a list of eight values (creativity, sense of humor, adaptability, business skills, physical attractiveness, athletics skill, aesthetics appreciation, and romantic value) and ranked these values in the order of personal importance. They were also asked to write a short essay to explain the importance of the most important value in their ranking and to describe an experience associated with that value. We did not present participants in the "no-affirmation condition" with the value list, and we asked them to write a short essay describing a recent grocery shopping experience.

Public and Private Choice Tasks, and Process Measure. Next, participants were invited to design a T-shirt in one online shop. They were presented with the three T-shirt patterns, as in experiment 2, and were asked to select one pattern to be printed on the T-shirt. The private versus public choice context was manipulated using the method adapted from Ratner and Kahn (2002). In the private choice condition, participants were asked to design a T-shirt that they would wear only in their own dorms where others would not see them. In the public choice condition, participants were asked to design a T-shirt that they would wear in the presence of schoolmates (i.e., on the school sports day). To ensure that participants would seriously consider the choice, we told them they would have the chance to win the T-shirt that they designed. Each participant indicated his/her choice. A pretest among 55 participants from the same pool validated the manipulation of private and public choices (private choice index: $M_{\text{private}} = 4.54$ vs. $M_{\text{public}} = 3.74$; $F(1, 53) = 5.89$, $p < .05$; public choice index: $M_{\text{private}} = 3.64$ vs. $M_{\text{public}} = 4.91$; $F(1, 53) = 16.90$, $p < .001$). Participants also rated the three T-shirt patterns as equally attractive ($M_A = 3.11$ vs. $M_B = 3.15$ vs. $M_C = 3.29$; all $p > .20$). In the main study participants reported the perceived uniqueness on the same three items used in experiments 1 and 2 (Lynn and Harris 1997). Finally, participants were debriefed, paid, and thanked.

Results and Discussion

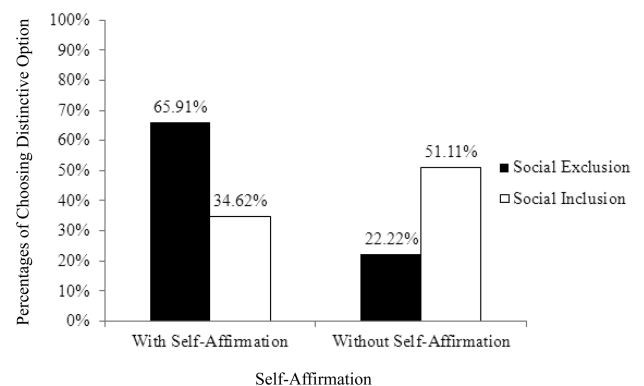
Manipulation Check. Participants' responses to the two manipulation check questions for social exclusion were averaged to form a manipulation check score ($\alpha = .90$). Participants in the social exclusion condition felt more excluded and ignored ($M = 4.65$) than those in the inclusion condition ($M = 1.93$; $F(1, 178) = 210.35$, $p < .001$). No other effects were significant (all $p > .30$). These results confirmed the success of the social exclusion manipulation.

Choice of T-Shirt Pattern. For each participant, we coded the choice of T-shirt pattern as one if he/she chose the distinctive option (pattern B) and as zero if he/she chose the other options (pattern A or pattern C). First, we performed a binary logistic regression by regressing the choice on social exclusion, self-affirmation, context, social exclusion \times self-affirmation, social exclusion \times context, context \times self-affirmation, and the three-way interaction. This analysis resulted in only a significant social exclusion \times self-affirmation interaction (Wald $\chi^2 = 11.26$, $p < .01$). The three-way interaction was not significant (Wald $\chi^2 < 1.0$, $p > .40$), suggesting the social exclusion \times self-affirmation interaction effect was similar across private and public contexts.

By collapsing the data in public and private conditions, the results suggested that when engaging in self-affirmation, a larger proportion of participants chose to print a distinctive pattern on the T-shirt in the social exclusion condition (65.91%) than in the inclusion condition (34.62%; Wald $\chi^2 = 9.01$, $p < .01$; see fig. 5). In contrast, participants without self-affirmation were less likely to choose the distinctive pattern when they felt excluded (22.22%) than when they felt included (51.11%; Wald $\chi^2 = 7.74$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, excluded participants were more likely to choose the distinctive pattern with self-affirmation than without self-affirmation (Wald $\chi^2 = 15.91$, $p < .001$), whereas included

FIGURE 5

CHOICE SHARE FOR SELECTING DISTINCTIVE T-SHIRT PATTERN (EXPERIMENT 3)



participants did not differ in their choice, regardless of self-affirmation (Wald $\chi^2 = 2.66, p > .10$). These results support hypothesis 3.

Perceived Uniqueness as a Mediator. Participants' responses to the three items that measured perceived uniqueness were averaged to form a score ($\alpha = .95$). A 2×2 ANOVA on the score of perceived uniqueness revealed only a significant social exclusion \times self-affirmation interaction effect ($F(1, 178) = 24.71, p < .001$). Thus we combined the data of private and public conditions in the following analysis. Supporting hypothesis 4a, when engaging in self-affirmation, excluded participants perceived themselves as more unique ($M = 5.64$) than did included participants ($M = 4.00; F(1, 94) = 12.41, p < .01$). Conversely, when they did not engage in self-affirmation, excluded participants ($M = 3.32$) scored significantly lower than included participants ($M = 5.05; F(1, 88) = 13.19, p < .001$) on perceived uniqueness.

We then conducted a mediated moderation analysis using perceived uniqueness as the mediator (Muller et al. 2005). As figure 6 shows, the social exclusion \times self-affirmation interaction became nonsignificant after controlling the mediator. In support of hypothesis 4b, a 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (Hayes 2013; Preacher et al. 2007) did not include zero (95% CI: 3.91, 15.45). These results confirmed that perceived uniqueness mediated the relationship between the social exclusion by self-affirmation interaction and consumer choice of a distinctive T-shirt pattern.

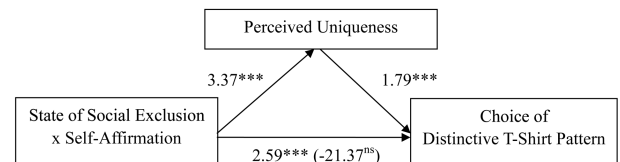
Discussion. Experiment 3 demonstrates that self-affirmation moderates the effect of social exclusion on consumer choice. The excluded participants were more (less) likely to choose the distinctive T-shirt pattern with (without) self-affirmation. Moreover, perceived uniqueness mediated the interaction effect. Similar to experiment 2, experiment 3 did not find that choice context moderated the effect. We think these results might be because in our studies, excluded participants viewed the options endorsed by majority as safe or accurate. We will discuss the possible explanations for this issue and propose further research in detail in the limitation and future study section in the General Discussion.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research examines when and why individuals differentiate themselves from others in response to the experience of social exclusion. We propose that when individuals believe the chance for successful reaffiliation is low or when they perceive a strong self, those who feel socially excluded (vs. socially included) are more likely to perceive that they have a unique self and in turn increase their preference for distinctive products to strengthen their perception of the unique self. Results from three studies support our propositions. In experiments 1 and 2, when participants perceived the exclusion as having a stable (unstable) cause, socially excluded participants were more (less) likely than

FIGURE 6

MEDIATION ANALYSIS: PERCEIVED UNIQUENESS AS A MEDIATOR (EXPERIMENT 3)



NOTE.—*Significant at the .05 level; **significant at the .01 level; ***significant at the .001 level.

included participants to choose distinctive products. In experiment 3, when participants engaged in self-affirmation (did not engage in self-affirmation), socially excluded participants were more (less) likely than included ones to prefer distinctive products. These results were robust whether the manipulation of exclusion versus inclusion was in an online social networking or brand community context, and on a variety of choice tasks including preferences for vacation spot, online video program, and T-shirt pattern.

Importantly, we revealed the process underlying the differentiation coping strategy for social exclusion. When participants inferred the cause of exclusion as stable (experiments 1 and 2), or when they affirmed their core values (experiment 3), they viewed themselves as more unique when they were excluded than when they were included, and the perceived uniqueness mediated the effect on participants' choices of distinctive products. This mediation is robust whether the perceived uniqueness was measured before or after the choice tasks.

Theoretical Contributions

First, the present research contributes to the literature on social exclusion by systemically investigating when and why individuals will strategically differentiate from others' choices. Previous research has found that social exclusion can increase conformity in individuals' decisions and choices (e.g., Mead et al. 2011; Williams et al. 2000) and that it can also increase aggression and decrease helping (e.g., Twenge et al. 2001, 2007). The current research reveals that people will strategically adopt a differentiation approach to cope with social exclusion. When excluded individuals perceive that seeking reaffiliation is an unattractive route, such as when exclusion is due to a stable cause and thus is difficult to change, or when excluded individuals affirm the self, they infer from the exclusion experience that they have a unique self, and they consequently prefer distinctive products to affirm their uniqueness.

The documentation of when and why people adopt a differentiation versus conforming strategy offers a more comprehensive picture of the flexible and strategic nature of

individuals' coping mechanisms when faced with social exclusion. It offers insights into understanding prior findings that document both prosocial and antisocial behavior in response to social exclusion. For example, Maner et al. (2007) find that social exclusion increases individuals' interest in building new sources of affiliation, but when excluded participants did not expect to meet a new partner they acted in a more antisocial manner (e.g., assigning fewer rewards to their new partner) than controls. Consistent with our theorizing, individuals' cognitive inference about the likelihood of reaffiliation leads to conforming or deviating responses. People will appraise the social exclusion situation and choose to fit in or stand out. Either approach can be socially profitable for addressing the unpleasant exclusion experience.

This research enriches the repertoire of findings about behavioral consequences of social exclusion. On top of prior findings about the impact of social exclusion on interpersonal interactions (e.g., Manner et al. 2007; Twenge et al. 2001; Williams et al. 2000), we followed Mead and colleagues' (2011) recent effort in examining the influence of social exclusion on consumers' spending to document new cases showing how social exclusion affects individuals' subsequent consumption choice.

Second, the current research extends the understanding of uniqueness seeking. Previous research has suggested that individuals have the motive to be moderately unique (Brewer 1991; Snyder and Fromkin 1977, 1980), and the extent to which people pursue unusual objects can be influenced by their individual differences in the need for uniqueness (Lynn and Harris 1997; Snyder and Fromkin 1977; Tian et al. 2001), by environmental contexts such as physical distance (e.g., Xu et al. 2012), or by situational cues that activate the concept of uniqueness (Maimaran and Wheeler 2008) or the motive to signal a specific identity (Berger and Heath 2007). The current studies extend this line of research by identifying a new case in which the situational context of experiencing social exclusion triggers the interpretation of the individual's unique personality and leads the person to seek differentiation in the choice context.

Limitations and Future Research

One question that remains unresolved is that the current article did not replicate past findings that the private versus public context moderates the effect of social exclusion on choice (Mead et al. 2011). Based on prior research that intentions to signal self via consumption may be attenuated in private conditions (Berger and Heath 2007; Ratner and Kahn 2002), we predicted that the conforming effect (i.e., preferring the option favored by the majority) would lessen in the private context. However, our studies did not find this moderation effect. We think that the choice options used in our studies might have triggered a different mechanism that operated to influence excluded consumers' choices. In previous research documenting the moderation effect of choice context, the options clearly indicate the opportunity for signaling the intention for affiliation. For example, in Mead et

al. (2011) the target products for consumption (e.g., chicken feet) were favored by partners who the excluded participants were motivated to affiliate with. In contrast, in our studies the choice options were described as being preferred by others who were anonymous and seemingly unrelated to participants (e.g., unknown viewers of YouTube video). Thus, picking options favored by the majority of others did not seem to offer the opportunity to signal the intention for affiliation. Instead, we think that in our studies excluded participants with high motivation for reaffiliation might have used the choice of "nondistinctive option" to confirm their belief that they were "not unique." Prior research on social influence suggests that behaving according to one's internalized belief is less sensitive to the private versus public context (Crandall, Eshleman, and O'Brien 2002; Kelman 1958, 1961). Our results on the uniqueness measure provide support for this explanation. When inferring the cause of exclusion as unstable (experiment 2) or without self-affirmation (experiment 3), excluded participants (vs. included participants) scored lower on uniqueness in both the private and public context. This score mediated the effect on subsequent choice.

We recognize that the current article did not provide adequate tests for our explanation. Future studies should examine these different mechanisms in the context of social exclusion. For example, Kelman (1961) suggests that the power of the influence agent or individuals' need for cognitive clarity can determine whether people exhibit compliance in the public situation or internalize the belief and behave consistently across situations. Future studies can manipulate these factors by varying the information about choice options (e.g., the identity and influential power of other people who favor these options) or the levels of need for cognitive clarity, and examine the different consequences on socially excluded individuals' choices.

A second question worth further investigation is the boundary condition for the effect of self-affirmation. The current research finds that self-affirmation increases excluded individuals' preference for distinctive products because of their belief in uniqueness. However, if the situation suggests the importance of reaffiliation, self-affirmation might boost excluded individuals' confidence in changing the exclusion state and motivate them to pursue reconnection by choosing nondistinctive products.

Finally, other factors might also influence excluded individuals' motivation for reconnection and thus consumer choice. For example, prior research suggests that consumers may use monetary resources to substitute for a relational resource when it is threatened (Zhou, Vohs, and Baumeister 2009). It is possible that excluded consumers with rich monetary resources may think it is not necessary to pursue reconnection. Consequently, these excluded consumers may prefer distinctive products. Future research should examine these additional factors that may influence consumers' response to social exclusion.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The data of study 1 were collected by the third author under the supervision of the second author, with the help of research assistants, at the Peking University's Behavioral Research Lab in fall of 2012. The data of study 2 were collected by the third author under the supervision of the first author, at the University of Hong Kong's Behavioral Lab in spring of 2012. The data of study 3 were collected by the third author under the supervision of the second author, with the help of research assistants, at the Peking University's Behavioral Research Lab in winter of 2011. The third author did the preliminary data analysis. All three authors discussed the data and results in many occasions including face-to-face discussions, conference call meetings, and discussions via email.

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