Using Differentiated Brands to Deflect Exclusion and Protect Inclusion: The Moderating Role of Self-Esteem on Attachment to Differentiated Brands

SARA LOUGHRAN DOMMER
VANITHA SWAMINATHAN
ROHINI AHLUWALIA

While a substantial body of research suggests that belongingness needs motivate consumers to use brands to assimilate with a reference group, relatively less attention has been devoted to understanding when and why consumers use brands to differentiate themselves from the group. The current research fills this gap in the literature and identifies two ways individuals can differentiate themselves from the group through the use of brands: horizontal and vertical differentiation. Horizontal brands offer differentiation through the expression of personality, taste, traits, and so forth, whereas vertical brands offer differentiation by conferring status or demonstrating one’s superiority to others in a group. The results reveal that under social exclusion (inclusion), low self-esteem consumers increase perceptions of group heterogeneity (seek to protect their future belongingness) and subsequently increase their attachment to horizontal (vertical) brands. Overall, the results suggest that the belongingness goals of low self-esteem individuals drive such seemingly contradictory behaviors.

Brands enable consumers to express their self-identities in various ways (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Fournier 1994; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007). For example, Vans shoes, whose slogan is “Off the wall,” likely appeal to consumers who want to exhibit their uniqueness to differentiate themselves from others. In contrast, Mercedes-Benz’s “Unlike any other” slogan potentially attracts consumers interested in demonstrating their superiority to others. Brands can also emphasize their ability to connect consumers with others, such as AT&T’s slogan, “Reach out and touch someone.”

Although the symbolic use of brands has been an important topic in consumer behavior (Belk 1988), more recent research has focused on developing a better understanding of when and why consumers use products and brands to express their identities. An important variable that has garnered recent attention in this regard is the role of social exclusion. Research has demonstrated that identities associated with brands can help consumers connect with others, reduce their feelings of social exclusion, and strengthen their belongingness to social groups (Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; Fournier 1994, 1998; Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010; Reed 2004; Swaminathan et al. 2007; White and Argo 2009). This stream of research suggests that “in-group” brands, or brands representative of the desired reference group identity, help consumers in the aftermath of social exclusion or threatened belongingness needs. Lee and Shrum (2012)
extend these findings by showing that certain types of social exclusion, such as being rejected, can result in prosocial responses, whereas other types of social exclusion, such as being ignored, can result in conspicuous consumption.

While a substantial body of research suggests that belongingness needs motivate consumers to use brands to assimilate with a reference group (e.g., by selecting symbolic in-group brands), relatively less attention has been devoted to understanding when and why consumers use brands to stand out or differentiate themselves from the reference group. A recent exception is research by Chan, Berger, and van Boven (2012), who show that consumers pursue both assimilation and differentiation goals on different dimensions within a single choice, in a simultaneous fashion. Although Chan et al. (2012) provide important insights, their research does not distinguish between different types of differentiation strategies used by consumers nor discuss the varying social motivations for choosing differentiated brands.

The current research fills this gap in the literature and identifies two distinct ways individuals can differentiate themselves from the group through the use of brands: horizontal and vertical differentiation (Tafarodi, Marshall, and Katsura 2004). Horizontal differentiation implies achieving distinction within a social group (e.g., business students) by exhibiting preferences for brands (such as Hollister) that allow for differentiation from typical members of the reference group based on personality, taste, traits, and so forth. These horizontal brands are not necessarily associated with higher status within the group. Vertical differentiation involves selecting brands that confer status or demonstrate one's superiority to others in a reference group (i.e., "vertical brands," e.g., Armani Exchange).

Thus, brands can help consumers fit in with others, feel different from others based on individual characteristics, or feel different from others based on the status they confer. When consumers rely on brands to achieve each of these goals likely depends on the extent to which belongingness and/or distinctiveness needs are met in their lives (Braun and Wicklund 1989; Rucker and Galinsky 2009; Woodruffe-Burton 1997; Woodruffe-Burton and Reed 1998). We argue that social exclusion and social inclusion in a reference group are important predictors of attachment to brands that differentiate individuals from the group, either horizontally or vertically. Importantly, our framework highlights chronic self-esteem as a moderator of the extent to which inclusion and exclusion affect attachment to differentiating brands. Specifically, our research demonstrates that consumers with low self-esteem (LSE) are more likely to differentiate themselves through horizontal and vertical brands than their high self-esteem (HSE) counterparts. When LSE consumers are socially excluded, they increase their perceptions of group heterogeneity and subsequently increase their attachment to horizontal brands. When they experience social inclusion, however, they increase their attachment to vertical brands to protect their future belongingness within the group.

In summary, the objectives of this research are threefold. First, we identify two types of differentiating brands: horizontal brands and vertical brands. Second, we examine how social inclusion in and exclusion from a reference group can move consumers toward these differentiating brands, focusing on the moderating role of self-esteem. Third, we investigate the processes underlying these effects to better understand why LSE individuals gravitate toward the differentiating brands following social inclusion and exclusion. Taken together, these results provide new insights into when and why consumers exhibit increased attachment to brands that differentiate them from the group.

**THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

The idea that consumers use brands to assimilate with others is not new. We have known for some time that consumers react positively when there is a perceived congruency between their own identity and the brand’s identity (Dolich 1969; Fournier 1994, 1998; Landon 1974; Reed 2004). Consumers use such brands to strengthen their belongingness to social groups (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Reed 2004; Swaminathan et al. 2007) or to cope with interpersonal rejection and social exclusion (Loveland et al. 2010; Mead et al. 2011). While some brands emphasize their assimilative role (e.g., Pepsi’s “Pepsi Generation” advertisements), others reflect a more differentiating positioning (e.g., Apple’s “Think Different”). If brands can help consumers belong, surely they can also help consumers stand out; yet little research has examined brands in this function.

**Horizontal and Vertical Differentiation**

The literature identifies primarily two types of differentiation (Tafarodi et al. 2004). The first type involves achieving distinction through being different or atypical (Tafarodi et al. 2004). Vignoles, Chryssochoou, and Breakwell (2000) describe such differentiation as distinction based on “difference positioning,” or distinctiveness based on intrinsic qualities of the individual, such as their personality, taste, traits, and so forth. Such distinctiveness does not usually imply social superiority or inferiority since intrinsic qualities of the individual cannot be classified as either “good” or “bad.” We describe this as “horizontal differentiation.” Brands that reflect this differentiation, or “horizontal brands,” may be more representative of subgroups within a reference group. Horizontal brands allow the individual an opportunity to differentiate themselves from the rest of the group, while at the same time preserving their association with the mainstream group. It is important to note that horizontal brands are different from out-group brands and dissociative brands (Escalas and Bettman 2005; White and Dahl 2007), which tend to be dissociative in nature. By using the term horizontal, we hope to convey a more precise view of horizontal brands, which focuses on their atypicality in reference to the group as a whole, but not necessarily their dissociative nature.

The second type of differentiation, which we call vertical differentiation (Tafarodi et al. 2004), focuses on acquiring distinction through success, status, or position (Vignoles et
greater attention to brand personality (Swaminathan, Stilley, et al. 2010), are more likely to buy a product symbolic of group membership (Mead et al. 2011), and demonstrate social exclusion and inclusion increase preferences for such differentiated brands and that self-esteem moderates these effects.

When Do Consumers Seek These Types of Differentiation?

Humans have countervailing needs for belongingness and uniqueness (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Brewer 1991; Snyder and Fromkin 1977) and are known to be influenced by social exclusion and inclusion. Therefore, we examine belongingness and distinctiveness needs under social exclusion and inclusion to understand when consumers desire brands to help them feel distinct.

Social Exclusion. Being excluded by a reference group creates a need for belongingness and subsequently elicits multiple responses to potentially restore belongingness. The first response, and arguably the most commonly researched, is to increase behaviors aimed at regaining acceptance to the group (Knowles and Gardner 2008; Lakin and Chartrand 2003). Consumers for whom the need to belong is an active goal (either chronically or temporarily through social exclusion) have a stronger preference for nostalgic products (Loveland et al. 2010), are more likely to buy a product symbolic of group membership (Mead et al. 2011), and demonstrate greater attention to brand personality (Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia 2009). Therefore, in response to social exclusion consumers may exhibit an increase in attachment for brands that connect them with the group (i.e., in-group brands). For instance, an athlete who feels excluded from his team may be more likely to wear Nike to demonstrate his affiliation to the team. Therefore, in line with previous research, we expect all consumers, regardless of self-esteem, to respond to social exclusion by reaffirming their belongingness and subsequently increasing their attachment to in-group brands (Loveland et al. 2010; Mead et al. 2011).

More relevant to our current theorizing, however, is the notion that one may also cope with social exclusion through differentiation. Social exclusion could lead to a desire for differentiation from and reduced identification with (although perhaps not complete dissociation from) the excluding group, while simultaneously seeking belongingness with a different group or subgroup. One strategy for achieving this balance between belongingness and differentiation needs is the subgroup identification process (Hornsey and Jetten 2004). Hornsey and Jetten (2004) describe this process as a change in the perceived structure of the group as a whole in a way that allows for differentiation via subgroup identification. Specifically, perceiving the group to be much more heterogeneous, composed of many different types of unique individuals and subgroups, allows excluded individuals to differentiate themselves from the mainstream reference group (Hornsey and Jetten 2004). Subgroups, by definition, are smaller and hence offer more opportunities for horizontal differentiation.

In addition, this perceived heterogeneity in the structure of the group also helps excluded individuals undermine the implications of the rejection (Jetten et al. 2003). It is easier to maintain a more positive self-image following exclusion if you allow for more heterogeneity within the group because comparisons with dissimilar others are less diagnostic than comparisons with similar others (Doosje, Spears, and Koomen 1995; Festinger 1954). In other words, not only can excluded individuals align themselves with a differentiated subgroup identity, seeking to fulfill their belongingness needs there, but they are also less likely to feel threatened by the exclusion if they perceive the reference group to be more heterogeneous. This notion that individuals can alter their perceptions of the group following a social threat has been demonstrated in the social psychology literature (Pickett, Silver, and Brewer 2002; Pilialoha and Brewer 2006). Thus, horizontal differentiation via attachment to horizontal brands may be a motivational response to social exclusion. We argue next that self-esteem moderates this effect.

Self-Esteem. Self-esteem functions as a sociometer that monitors whether an individual is being included or excluded and motivates the person to engage in behaviors that minimize the probability of future rejection (Leary and Baumeister 2000; Leary et al. 1995). Individuals with HSE possess sufficient motivation, skills, and resources to enhance their self-esteem following a threat (Brown and Dutton 1995; Park and Maner 2009). They tend to worry less about rejection (Leary and Baumeister 2000), and their high levels of self-confidence and self-certainty enable them to take social risks following a threat. Furthermore, HSE consumers often demonstrate a greater desire to connect with close others to affirm their self-worth (Park and Maner 2009). In contrast, LSE individuals lack self-confidence and have more negative self-views, believing that they have fewer positive qualities than HSE consumers (Campbell 1990). LSE individuals do not react to threats by seeking affirmation; their self-doubt causes them to adopt a cautious and self-protective stance in their interactions with the source of rejection (Anthony, Wood, and Holmes 2007; Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton 1989; Heatherton and Vohs 2000). Combining these streams of research, we expect LSE individuals to be more likely than HSE individuals to engage in social monitoring and, as a result, generally more likely to react to social exclusion and inclusion by seeking differentiation.

Therefore, we expect only LSE consumers to increase their attachment to horizontal brands. Focusing on subgroup heterogeneity not only allows LSE individuals to undermine the validity of the social exclusion (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1995; Jetten et al. 2003) but also to reframe the group...
in a way that allows them to find belongingness with a subgroup while distancing themselves from the mainstream reference group (Hornsey and Jetten 2004). This self-protective strategy should be especially important to LSE individuals who want acceptance but are less willing to boldly state this desire for fear of future rejection (Baumeister et al. 1989; Leary and Baumeister 2000; Leary et al. 1995). In line with our theorizing, we expect increases in the perception of group heterogeneity to mediate LSE individuals’ increases in attachment to horizontal brands following social exclusion.

H1: Self-esteem moderates the effect of social exclusion on attachment to horizontal brands. Specifically, compared with a control group, social exclusion leads to greater attachment to horizontal brands among LSE consumers but not among HSE consumers.

H2: Increased perceptions of group heterogeneity mediate the effect of self-esteem and social exclusion on attachment to horizontal brands.

Social Inclusion. While a host of research has looked at the effect of social exclusion and rejection on individuals, relatively less attention has been paid to how individuals respond when they feel accepted and included. According to optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT; Brewer 1991), individuals will seek differentiation when their groups offer too much inclusiveness.

As asserted previously, we expect the effects of social inclusion to be more likely for LSE individuals than HSE individuals because the former are not only more likely to monitor both social exclusion and inclusion, but they are also more likely to have an unsatisfactory level of belongingness. One might argue that following inclusion, LSE individuals’ belongingness needs are met and thus they would no longer need to regulate such needs. Exclusion, however, has a stronger effect in lowering respondents’ self-esteem than inclusion has on raising them (Leary et al. 1995). Hence, inclusion may not be enough to satiate belongingness for LSE individuals, and their goal following inclusion is likely to involve securing their future belongingness, such as showing others that they are a “good” member of the group (Jetten, Branscombe, and Spears 2002). Therefore, even when LSE individuals are included we expect them to engage in behaviors aimed at protecting and securing their future belongingness or position in the group.

In this regard, identifying with a subgroup through horizontal differentiation seems like a less effective tactic, since subgroup identification is more feasible when the individual is already included in the group (Vignoles et al. 2000), since inclusion makes position and status differentiation more legitimate. Therefore, we do not expect vertical differentiation to be a viable option for LSE individuals facing social exclusion; horizontal differentiation (as described earlier) would be the most effective strategy in that scenario. In summary, we expect that LSE individuals are more likely than HSE individuals to increase their attachment to vertical brands following social inclusion, and their desire to secure or protect their future belongingness in the group mediates this effect.

H3: Self-esteem moderates the effect of social inclusion on attachment to vertical brands. Specifically, compared with a control group, social inclusion leads to greater attachment to vertical brands among LSE consumers but not among HSE consumers.

H4: Protection of future belongingness mediates the effect of self-esteem and social inclusion on attachment to vertical brands.

Taken together, our framework predicts that LSE consumers are more likely to attach to differentiating brands (both horizontal and vertical) than HSE consumers. Under social exclusion, LSE consumers attach themselves to horizontally differentiated brands through a subgroup identification process, perceiving greater heterogeneity or more subgroups in the reference group. Conversely, under social inclusion, they shift their attachment to vertical brands to secure their future belongingness within the reference group. Interestingly, in both social exclusion and inclusion their desire to increase belongingness motivates their differentiation efforts.

We conducted five experiments to test our hypotheses. Studies 1 and 2 test our main hypotheses (hypotheses 1 and 3) using both group (study 1) and elicited (study 2) brands. Study 2 also provides evidence of the mechanisms underlying our predictions, thereby testing hypotheses 2 and 4.
Study 3 further examines the role of horizontal brands in shifting group categorization using the Cyberball social exclusion manipulation to test the robustness of our findings. Study 4 demonstrates the impact of consumption of horizontal and verticals brands on belongingness. Finally, study 5 examines the implications of vertical brands in public and private consumption settings, with a view to shedding further light on underlying process.

STUDY 1

In study 1 we measured participants’ chronic self-esteem and randomly assigned them to an exclusion, inclusion, or control condition. The key dependent variable was brand attachment. We expected social exclusion (inclusion) to increase LSE consumers’ attachment to a horizontal (vertical) brand relative to the control condition.

Method

Brand Selection. To select horizontal, vertical, and ingroup brands relevant to our participant population (undergraduate business school students), we ran a pretest where 61 undergraduate business school majors at the University of Pittsburgh (53% male, 47% female) listed five clothing brands, each with regard to the reference group of business students, that were (i) typical or in-group brands; (ii) atypical or horizontally differentiating; (iii) associated with status or vertically differentiating; or (iv) consistent with an out-group (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Next, they rated each listed brand on both differentiation (similarity between the brand and the business school student identity: consistent/inconsistent, representative/unrepresentative, typical/atypical, similar/dissimilar) and status (extent to which the brand was a symbol of status, wealth, power, and prestige; not at all/very much so; all 9-point scales). Because brands generated were idiosyncratic to participants, we ended up with 100 unique elicited brands. To make the data more manageable, brands listed by seven or more participants were included in the final list of 18 brands that were analyzed.

The dimensions were predefined (differentiation and status), so we performed a confirmatory factor analysis on the eight measures with varimax rotation to ensure two orthogonal factors. The two factors, which had eigenvalues greater than one, explained 94% of the variance. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis identified two types of brands: “horizontal brands” with high levels of differentiation but not necessarily higher status and “vertical brands” with high levels of both differentiation and status. Confirmatory factor analysis also enabled us to distinguish between purely horizontal brands (which have the same status as the in-group brand) and vertical brands (which have a higher status than the in-group brand). Figure 1 illustrates a mapping of the brands on average factor scores for each of the 18 brands.

American Eagle constitutes the best example of an ingroup clothing brand for business school students because it is closest to the origin, which means the brand is consistent with the business school student identity and offers little status. Abercrombie & Fitch and Hollister exemplify horizontal brands, because they are farther away from the origin on the horizontal axis; in other words, these brands are differentiating yet offer little in terms of status. Brands that are
farther away from the origin on both the horizontal and vertical axis (e.g., Gucci, Armani), offer differentiation through status. We decided to use Hollister as the horizontal brand, Armani Exchange as the vertical brand, and American Eagle as the in-group brand for the main study.

Procedure. Two hundred sixty-three undergraduate business school students at the University of Pittsburgh completed the study for course credit in a lab session (51% female, 49% male; $M_{age} = 20.79$). They began by completing measures of chronic self-esteem using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = .89$; $M = 4.19, SD = .65$). Participants then indicated whether or not they had purchased each of the brands (American Eagle, Hollister, Armani Exchange) in the last 3 months. We included this measure in all of our analyses to control for participants’ familiarity with the brand. Given that familiarity with a brand is related to attachment and that we selected our brands from a pretest using a different sample, we felt it necessary to control for any differences in brand familiarity across participants within the study. Then participants completed a seemingly unrelated “life events survey” in which they were assigned to one of the key manipulations (exclusion/inclusion) or the control task (writing about their plans for the following day). In the exclusion (inclusion) manipulation, participants read the following:

Please think about a time when you felt uncomfortable (comfortable) as a business school student and felt that other business school students didn’t value (valued) you as much as you valued them. Now, take a moment and try to get a visual image in your mind of this event. What was it like being in this situation? What did others say to you? What would you say in return? How did you feel? After the visualization, write a sentence or two about your thoughts and feelings regarding this situation.

We removed participants who gave improper responses to the manipulation ask (e.g., no response or nonsense words). This left 189 respondents for analysis (49% female, 51% male; $M_{age} = 20.86$). We looked for systematic differences in age, gender, and self-esteem between participants who completed the study with those who did not provide satisfactory responses and found no significant differences.

A pretest ($n = 44$) of the manipulations confirmed their validity. Participants in the exclusion condition reported greater agreement with feelings of exclusion (“I feel like I don’t fit in,” “I am often not included in other people’s plans,” and “I feel excluded a lot of the time,” $\alpha = .90$) than those in the control and inclusion conditions ($M_{control} = 3.02, M_{exclusion} = 3.90, M_{inclusion} = 2.17, F(1, 41) = 8.09, p < .01$); participants in the inclusion condition reported lower agreement with feelings of exclusion than those in the control and exclusion conditions ($F(1, 41) = 7.91, p < .01$).

Following the exclusion/inclusion manipulation or control task, respondents rated their attachment to each of the following brands: American Eagle (in-group brand), Hollister (horizontal brand), and Armani Exchange (vertical brand). Participants rated their agreement with three items, which we averaged to form one overall brand attachment score ($\alpha_{American~Eagle} = .93$; $\alpha_{Hollister} = .95$; $\alpha_{Armani~Exchange} = .93$). The scale items can be found in appendix A. The study concluded with demographic measures.

Results

A repeated measures ANCOVA revealed a significant three-way interaction of brand type, exclusion/inclusion manipulation, and self-esteem (Wilks’s lambda = .95, $F(4, 364) = 2.52, p < .05$). Our hypotheses predict the effects of exclusion/inclusion and self-esteem on attachment to different types of differentiating brands; hence we present results by differentiating brand condition.

Horizontal Brand. We ran an ANCOVA on attachment to Hollister (the horizontal brand) with exclusion/inclusion manipulation and chronic self-esteem in a full factorial model with the familiarity measure as a control variable. The overall model was significant ($F(6, 182) = 7.39, p < .0001$). The interaction of self-esteem with exclusion/inclusion manipulation was significant ($F(2, 182) = 3.08, p < .05$). The familiarity control measure was also significant ($F(1, 182) = 25.57, p < .0001$). No other effects were significant.

Recall that with horizontal brands, our prediction focuses on social exclusion. We followed the post hoc probing procedure (Aiken and West 1991) to further examine the interaction, plotting mean brand attachment for participants in the control and exclusion conditions at plus or minus one standard deviation from the mean of self-esteem (fig. 2). In support of hypothesis 1, a spotlight analysis revealed that for LSE participants the relationship between exclusion and attachment to a horizontal brand was significant and positive ($b = .82, t(182) = 3.10, p < .01$); compared with the control condition, exclusion led to greater attachment to a horizontal brand.
brand. For HSE participants, the effect of exclusion on brand attachment was not significant ($b = .12, t(182) = .44, NS$). We also ran spotlight analyses with the inclusion condition and found no significant differences (all $p > .58$).

**Vertical Brand.** An ANCOVA on attachment to Armani Exchange (the vertical brand) with exclusion/inclusion manipulation and chronic self-esteem in a full factorial model with the familiarity measure as a control was marginally significant ($F(6, 182) = 2.07, p < .06$). The interaction of self-esteem with exclusion/inclusion manipulation was marginally significant ($F(2, 182) = 2.84, p = .06$). Again, the familiarity measure was significant ($F(1, 182) = 5.42, p < .03$). No other effects were significant.

Our prediction for vertical brands pertained to social inclusion. A spotlight analysis (see fig. 3) examined the effect of inclusion compared with the control condition at high and low levels of self-esteem. The relationship between inclusion and attachment was significant for LSE participants ($b = .66, t(182) = 1.99, p < .05$); compared with the control condition, inclusion led to greater attachment to a vertical brand. This relationship was not significant for HSE participants ($b = -.36, t(182) = 1.22, NS$). These results support hypothesis 3. We also ran spotlight analyses with the exclusion condition but found no significant differences (all $p > .10$).

**In-Group Brand.** When we ran a full factorial ANCOVA on attachment to American Eagle (the in-group brand) chronic self-esteem, not surprisingly, had no significant effect. In line with previous research, we only expected an effect of exclusion on attachment to American Eagle (in-group brand). Specifically, we expected exclusion to increase participants’ attachment to American Eagle compared to the control group, regardless of self-esteem. An ANOVA with exclusion/inclusion manipulation and familiarity as a control predicting attachment to the in-group brand was significant ($F(3, 185) = 22.07, p < .0001$). The effect of exclusion/inclusion manipulation was marginally significant ($F(2, 182) = 2.89, p < .06$), and the effect of familiarity was significant ($F(1, 185) = 60.54, p < .0001$). Planned contrasts revealed that participants in the exclusion condition reported greater attachment to the in-group brand than participants in the control condition ($M_{exclusion} = 3.21$ vs. $M_{control} = 2.64$; $F(1, 185) = 5.62, p < .05$). The difference between attachment to the in-group brand among those in the exclusion and inclusion conditions failed to reach significance, although the difference was in the expected direction ($M_{exclusion} = 3.21$ vs. $M_{inclusion} = 2.83$; $F(1, 185) = 2.13, p < .15$). No difference in attachment to an in-group brand emerged among participants in the control and inclusion conditions ($M_{control} = 2.64$ vs. $M_{inclusion} = 2.83$; $F(1, 185) = .59, NS$).

**Discussion**

Study 1 provides a basic test of hypotheses 1 and 3 and demonstrates that LSE consumers are more likely to attempt to differentiate themselves through brands than HSE consumers. LSE participants increased attachment to horizontal brands following social exclusion and to vertical brands following social inclusion. Although the motivation to differentiate was greater among LSE consumers, all consumers, regardless of their self-esteem, increased their attachment to the in-group brand following social exclusion.

It is possible that the brands we selected from the pretest did not accurately reflect in-group, horizontal, and vertical brands for some participants. The fact that we still found support for our hypotheses using such brands, however, is encouraging. In study 2, we ask participants to name brands idiosyncratic to them. In addition, although study 1 offers support for our main hypotheses, we have yet to test the underlying processes mediating these effects. Study 2 also tests our hypotheses regarding these mediating processes.

**STUDY 2**

In study 2, participants named horizontal, vertical, and in-group brands. Thus, the brands were idiosyncratic to each respondent. The study was a 3 (brand: horizontal vs. vertical vs. in-group) × 3 (manipulation: exclusion vs. inclusion vs. control) between-subjects design. We also measured chronic self-esteem and used it as a continuous variable in our analyses. The key dependent variable was brand attachment, although participants also responded to measures of perceived group heterogeneity and protection of future belongingness to provide insights into the underlying processes.

**Method**

**Procedure.** Four hundred forty-six participants completed the study online through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in exchange for a small monetary incentive and began by completing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = .91$;
Results

We ran an ANCOVA with brand, exclusion/inclusion manipulation, and self-esteem predicting brand attachment in a full factorial model. The overall model was significant ($F(17, 284) = 2.09, p < .01$). The main effect of brand ($F(2, 284) = 3.70, p < .05$) and the interaction of self-esteem with exclusion/inclusion manipulation ($F(2, 284) = 4.35, p < .05$) were both significant. Importantly, the three-way interaction of brand and exclusion/inclusion manipulation with self-esteem was also significant ($F(4, 284) = 2.43, p < .05$). Next, we present the results by brand condition.

**Horizontal Brand.** We ran an ANCOVA on attachment to the horizontal brand with exclusion/inclusion manipulation and self-esteem in a full factorial model. The interaction of self-esteem with exclusion/inclusion manipulation was significant ($F(2, 94) = 3.32, p < .05$). No other effects were significant.

Following Aiken and West’s (1991) post hoc procedure, we plotted mean brand attachment for participants in the control and exclusion conditions at plus or minus one standard deviation from the mean of self-esteem (fig. 4). A spotlight analysis revealed that for LSE participants, the relationship between exclusion and attachment to a horizontal brand was significant and positive ($b = 1.66, t(60) = 2.77, p < .01$); compared with the control condition, exclusion led to greater attachment to a horizontal brand. For HSE participants, the effect of exclusion on brand attachment was not significant ($b = -0.78, t(60) = 1.38, NS$). These results replicate the results from study 1 and support hypothesis 1. We also ran spotlight analyses with the inclusion condition but found no significant differences (all $p > .12$).

Our theory suggests that perceptions of group heterogeneity drive changes in attachment to a horizontal brand. We found initial evidence of this such that among LSE participants, those in the excluded condition reported greater perceptions of group heterogeneity than those in the control condition ($b = 2.25, t(60) = 3.97, p < .001$). This difference did not emerge among those with HSE ($b = -1.11, t(60) = .31, NS$). To determine whether perceptions of group heterogeneity mediated the results, we began by running regression analyses as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), restricting our analyses to the exclusion and control conditions. First, the interaction of self-esteem and exclusion significantly predicted brand attachment ($b = -1.63, t(60) = 2.84, p < .01$). Second, the interaction of self-esteem and exclusion significantly predicted perceptions of group heterogeneity ($b = -1.42, t(60) = 2.63, p < .05$). Finally, when we added group heterogeneity to the model predicting

![FIGURE 4](image-url)
brand attachment, the effect was significant ($b = .26, t(59) = 1.99, p = .05$), as was the interaction of self-esteem and exclusion ($b = -1.25, t(59) = 2.11, p < .05$). A 95% bootstrap confidence interval (Hayes 2013) for the direct effect did not include zero ($-1.1540, -0.0341$). Thus, in support of hypothesis 2, the moderation is mediated.

We also tested whether protection of future belongingness mediates the effect of self-esteem and exclusion on horizontal brand attachment. The interaction of self-esteem with exclusion did not significantly predict protection of future belongingness ($b = .27, t(60) = .50, NS$), and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval did include zero ($-.1004, .3795$). Therefore, protection of future belongingness does not mediate the effect of self-esteem and exclusion on horizontal brand attachment.

Finally, our theorizing suggests that consumers increase their identification with a specific subgroup as they simultaneously see the group as more fragmented. Thus, we expect that LSE individuals report greater identification with a subgroup following social inclusion. In fact, among LSE participants, those in the excluded condition reported greater identification with a subgroup than those in the control condition ($b = 1.25, t(60) = 2.06, p < .05$). This difference did not emerge among those with HSE ($b = .39, t(60) = .69, NS$).

**Vertical Brand.** We ran an ANCOVA on attachment to the vertical brand in with exclusion/inclusion manipulation and chronic self-esteem in a full factorial model. The interaction of self-esteem with exclusion/inclusion manipulation was the only significant effect ($F(2, 95) = 4.51, p < .05$).

A spotlight analysis (see fig. 5) examined the effect of inclusion, compared to the control condition, at high and low levels of self-esteem. In support of hypothesis 3, the relationship between inclusion and attachment was significant for LSE participants ($b = 1.42, t(58) = 2.24, p < .05$); compared to the control condition, inclusion led to greater attachment to a vertical brand. This relationship was not significant for HSE participants ($b = -1.06, t(58) = 1.48, NS$). We also ran spotlight analyses with the exclusion condition but found no significant differences (all $p > .49$).

Our theory suggests that a desire to secure one’s future belongingness within the group drives changes in attachment to a vertical brand. Initial analyses revealed that among LSE participants, those in the included condition reported a greater desire to protect future belongingness than those in the control condition ($b = .79, t(58) = 2.01, p < .05$). This difference did not emerge among those with HSE ($b = -.46, t(58) = 1.04, NS$). To determine whether protection of future belongingness mediated the results, we again ran a series of regression analyses, restricting our analyses to the inclusion and control conditions. First, the interaction of self-esteem and inclusion significantly predicted brand attachment ($b = -1.65, t(58) = 2.59, p < .05$). Second, the interaction of self-esteem and inclusion significantly predicted protection of future belongingness ($b = -.84, t(58) = 2.11, p < .05$). Finally, when we added protection of future belongingness to the model predicting brand attachment, the effect was significant ($b = .48, t(57) = 2.35, p < .05$), while the interaction of self-esteem and inclusion became marginally significant ($b = -1.25, t(57) = 1.97, p < .06$). Furthermore, a 95% bootstrap confidence interval (Hayes 2013) for the direct effect did not include zero ($-1.0102, -0.0537$). Thus, the moderation is mediated and we found support for hypothesis 4.

We also tested whether perceptions of group heterogeneity mediate the effect of self-esteem and inclusion on attachment to the vertical brand. The interaction of self-esteem with inclusion did not significantly predict group heterogeneity ($b = -.57, t(58) = 1.22, NS$), and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval did include zero ($-.0830, .7931$). Thus, group heterogeneity does not mediate the effect of self-esteem and inclusion on vertical brand attachment.

**In-Group Brand.** When we ran a full factorial ANCOVA on attachment to the in-group brand, chronic self-esteem again had no significant effect. Removing self-esteem for parsimony, an ANOVA with exclusion/inclusion manipulation predicting attachment revealed a marginally significant effect of belongingness ($F(2, 98) = 2.62, p < .08$). Planned contrasts revealed that participants in the exclusion condition reported greater attachment to the in-group brand than participants in the control condition ($M_{exclusion} = 4.17 vs. M_{control} = 3.47; F(1, 98) = 4.33, p < .05$) and marginally greater attachment compared to those in the inclusion condition ($M_{exclusion} = 4.17 vs. M_{inclusion} = 3.48; F(1, 98) = 3.31, p = .07$). No difference in attachment to an in-group brand emerged among participants in the control and inclusion conditions ($M_{control} = 3.47 vs. M_{inclusion} = 3.48; F(1, 98) < .01, NS$).

**Discussion**

The first two studies together provide strong support for our hypothesized effects. Specifically we found the same
pattern of effects in both studies: LSE consumers were more likely to seek brands to differentiate themselves—both under conditions in which belongingness goals were met (inclusion) and in which these goals were threatened (exclusion). Importantly, increased attachment to horizontal (vertical) brands under conditions of exclusion (inclusion) emerged robustly whether the brands were selected from a pretest or elicited by participants.

Most importantly, study 2 provides evidence for the process underlying these effects. Increased perceptions of group heterogeneity mediate LSE individuals’ increase in attachment to horizontal brands as they begin to identify with a subgroup, while a desire to protect future belongingness mediates their increase in attachment to vertical brands.

An interesting, and somewhat unexpected finding, was that HSE individuals reported greater attachment to horizontal brands than LSE individuals in the absence of exclusion or inclusion. Recall that we defined horizontal differentiation as differentiation based on personality, taste, traits, and so forth. Because HSE individuals worry less about rejection and have higher levels of self-confidence than LSE individuals (Leary and Baumeister 2000), it is likely the case that they feel more at ease expressing their idiosyncrasies through their brand attachments.

Our rationale for why LSE individuals increase their attachment to horizontal brands following social exclusion is that they increase their perception of subgroup heterogeneity within the reference group as a self-protective measure against the social exclusion. While we found evidence of this in study 2, we would like additional support for this explanation. Specifically, if LSE individuals are using horizontal brands to affiliate and identify with a subgroup, then it follows that their identification with the superordinate identity should decrease. Study 3 will test this part of our process explanation. Also, although we have theoretically delineated horizontal brands as distinct from out-group or dissociative brands, we would like to empirically test whether the latter brands provide viable alternatives to horizontal brands for LSE consumers after social exclusion. Study 3 addresses both of these issues.

**STUDY 3**

Study 3 attempts to demonstrate the robustness of our results by using an alternative manipulation of social exclusion (Cyberball). Since the focus of this study was to follow up on the underlying process and predictions in the social exclusion condition, and the Cyberball manipulation has been reported to be less reliable with social inclusion, often resulting in similar behaviors in inclusion and control conditions (Loveland et al. 2010), we focus solely on the social exclusion condition in study 3.

**Method and Procedure**

One hundred forty-one undergraduate business school students at the University of Pittsburgh completed the study for course credit in a lab session (50% female, 50% male). Participants began by completing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (α = .88; M = 4.29, SD = .63). After several filler measures, participants engaged in the same brand elicitation procedure as in study 2 in which they named four clothing brands: horizontal brand, in-group brand, out-group brand, and an alternative (nonbusiness student) identity-related brand linked to a different identity of the respondent; for example, cultural group, sport, gender. The latter two brands provide two alternative ways to cope with social exclusion through an identity shift: reactance (by associating with a dissociative brand) and substitution (by shifting focus to an alternative identity). Therefore, this study attempts to determine whether the group heterogeneity shift provided by horizontal brands is similar to or different from these alternative plausible mechanisms and which mechanism best accounts for the pattern of findings observed for the LSE participants in the first two studies.

We randomly assigned participants to either the control condition, in which they wrote about their plans for the next day, or the exclusion condition. Those in the exclusion condition played a game of Cyberball (Williams, Cheung, and Choi 2000). Instructions informed participants that they were taking part in a mental visualization study that involved a computer ball-tossing game called Cyberball. The screen showed three Cyberball icons, intended to represent other business school students in the lab, and an animated hand at the bottom of the screen, intended to represent the participant. Participants received no information about the other players in the lab. In actuality, there were no other players; the participant played with the computer. The game consisted of 32 throws. We manipulated exclusion by programming the number of ball tosses thrown to the participant. Participants received three tosses at the beginning of the game and then never received another toss. The number of throws participants went without a toss between their last toss and the end of the game varied, but on average they went 21 rounds without a toss.

After the game or the control task, we asked all participants to think about what they planned on wearing the next day. They then distributed 100 points among the brands they had named previously. More points indicated a greater likelihood of wearing the brand the next day.

Finally, participants completed a measure intended to assess their identification with the business school student identity and how similar they felt to the identity. The measure used a Venn diagram illustrating the overlap between the participants’ identity and a business school student identity, such that the overlap represented the extent to which the participant identified with the identity (see Lam et al. [2010] for an illustration).

**Results**

**Manipulation Check.** Immediately following the Cyberball game or the control task, participants completed eight items from Leary et al.’s (2012) need-to-belong scale. The measures were adapted to refer to a specific need to belong
with other business school students and can be found in appendix A ($\alpha = .83$).

Participants in the social exclusion (Cyberball) condition had higher scores on the need-to-belong scale than those in the control condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 2.98$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.62$; $F(1, 139) = 7.74, p < .01$), suggesting that the manipulation was successful. We also ran a full factorial model with exclusion and self-esteem predicting the need-to-belong scores. Only the main effect of manipulation was significant in the model ($F(1, 137) = 7.27, p < .01$).

**Brand Preference.** We ran an ANCOVA with exclusion, self-esteem, and their interaction predicting points awarded to the horizontal brand. As expected, the interaction of exclusion with self-esteem was significant ($F(1, 137) = 5.91, p < .05$). As figure 6 shows, a spotlight analysis revealed that for LSE participants, the relationship between exclusion and preference for the horizontal brand was positive and significant ($b = 12.34, p < .05$); exclusion almost doubled the likelihood of wearing the horizontal brand compared with the control condition. This effect did not emerge for HSE participants ($b = -7.21$, NS).

In line with previous research, we expected preference for the in-group brand to increase under exclusion. We ran an ANCOVA with exclusion, self-esteem, and their interaction predicting points awarded to the business in-group brand. Only the main effect of exclusion was significant. Participants in the exclusion condition gave more points to the business in-group brand than did those in the control condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 36.00$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 27.57$; $F(1, 139) = 4.00, p < .05$).

We also examined the impact of exclusion and self-esteem on preference for the out-group and alternative in-group brands. Exclusion and self-esteem had no effect on points awarded to the out-group brand. For the alternative in-group brand, however, there was a significant interaction of exclusion with self-esteem. A spotlight analysis revealed that for LSE participants, the relationship between exclusion and preference for the alternative in-group brand was negative and significant ($b = -18.90, p < .01$); exclusion reduced the likelihood of wearing this brand. This effect did not emerge for HSE participants ($b = .11$, NS).

**Business School Student Identification.** We also examined the effect of exclusion and self-esteem on the extent to which participants reported identifying with the typical business student identity. The interaction of exclusion with self-esteem was significant ($F(1, 84) = 6.58, p < .05$). A spotlight analysis revealed that exclusion reduced LSE participants’ identification with the typical business school identity ($b = -.93, p < .05$). Exclusion had no effect among HSE participants ($b = .65$, NS).

**Discussion**

The results from study 3 suggest that following social exclusion, consistent with our theorizing, LSE consumers reduce their identification with the reference group that excludes them. When LSE participants felt excluded from their fellow business school students, they reported less identification with that identity. Furthermore, the results suggest that exclusion does not motivate LSE consumers to completely disassociate with the in-group, nor does exclusion prompt them to begin associating more strongly with an out-group or an alternative in-group brand. Instead, combined with our earlier results, these findings suggest that consistent with our framework LSE consumers shift their identification away from the superordinate identity and toward a subgroup through horizontal differentiation, without necessarily dissociating themselves completely from the reference group. This shift, as represented by an increase in attachment to the horizontal brand, is consistent with the mediating role of group heterogeneity found in study 2.

**STUDY 4**

If LSE individuals’ attachment to the horizontal (vertical) brand following social exclusion (inclusion) is with the goal of restoring (securing) their belongingness, then consumption of a horizontal (vertical) brand under social exclusion (inclusion) should result in an enhancement in the consumers’ levels of felt belongingness. In other words, if LSE individuals’ seemingly differentiated behaviors are meant to serve their belongingness needs, then we should expect consumption of the appropriate differentiating brand to increase their feelings of belongingness. We test this expectation in study 4. We use a periodical consumption context in which participants consume (read an article) from one of two periodicals (horizontal or vertical) after the social inclusion or exclusion manipulations.
Method and Procedure

Two hundred thirty undergraduate business school students completed the study in exchange for course credit as part of a lab session. We removed 14 participants for being unable to adequately summarize the article they were asked to read (e.g., saying “I didn’t really read it” or not mentioning the main topic in their summary). This left 216 respondents for analysis (45% female, 55% male). The study was completed at both the University of Pittsburgh and the Georgia Institute of Technology, but the two samples did not differ on basic demographic measures. A dummy variable for sample was also tested in the models but was not significant so we removed it for parsimony.

The study began with participants selecting both a horizontal and vertical periodical from a list of 17 periodicals, using their business school student identity as their reference group. The procedure for eliciting these brands was similar to that in study 2. The most commonly selected horizontal periodicals were ESPN the Magazine (17.73%), People (15.60%), and Sports Illustrated (11.35%), whereas the most popular vertical periodicals were Wall Street Journal (18.44%), Forbes (13.48%), and the New York Times (10.64%). Next, participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (α = .91, M = 4.05, SD = .78). Following some filler tasks, they completed either the exclusion or inclusion manipulation from study 1. Immediately following this writing task, respondents rated their current feelings of belongingness on eight items, which can be found in appendix A (α = .87). Next, female participants read an article detailing research on the validity of toning sneakers for toning and shaping muscles while male participants read an article detailing research on the effectiveness of basketball shoes in increasing a player’s vertical jump. The participants were led to believe that the article appeared in either their selected horizontal periodical or their selected vertical periodical. Thus the study was a 2 (periodical: horizontal vs. vertical) × 3 (manipulation: exclusion vs. inclusion vs. control) between-subjects design with chronic self-esteem as a measured factor.

After reading the article, all respondents completed a second set of measures related to how much belongingness they currently felt. On a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much so) they rated the extent to which they felt included, connected, typical, and belonging (α = .73). We created our dependent variable (change in belongingness) by subtracting the pre-measure of belongingness from this post-measure of belongingness. Finally, respondents were asked to briefly summarize the article and then to complete a brief demographics section.

Results

We ran an ANCOVA with exclusion/inclusion manipulation, periodical, self-esteem, and their interaction predicting change in belongingness. We included gender as a covariate to control for any article effects since male and female participants read different articles. The overall model was significant (F(12, 203) = 4.82, p < .0001). There was a main effect of self-esteem (F(1, 203) = 22.25, p < .0001), a significant interaction of exclusion/inclusion manipulation with periodical (F(2, 203) = 3.31, p < .05), a significant interaction of self-esteem with exclusion/inclusion manipulation (F(2, 203) = 4.17, p < .05), and a significant three-way interaction of exclusion/inclusion manipulation and periodical with self-esteem (F(2, 203) = 3.34, p < .05). Gender was a significant covariate (F(1, 203) = 4.79, p < .05). To simplify interpretation of these results, we next present the results by horizontal and vertical periodical conditions.

Horizontal Brand. We ran an ANCOVA with exclusion/inclusion manipulation and self-esteem predicting change in belongingness among those in the horizontal condition, with gender as a covariate. The main effect of self-esteem was significant (F(1, 108) = 11.83, p < .01) as was the interaction of exclusion/inclusion manipulation with self-esteem (F(2, 108) = 4.89, p < .01). No other effects were significant. As seen in figure 7, a spotlight analysis at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of self-esteem revealed that the effect of exclusion/inclusion manipulation was significant among LSE participants but not HSE participants (LSE: F(2, 108) = 4.65, p < .05; HSE: F(2, 108) = 1.64, NS). After reading the horizontal periodical, individuals with LSE in the exclusion condition reported greater enhancement in felt belongingness compared to those in the control condition (b = 1.07, t(108) = 2.69, p < .01). LSE respondents did not, however, exhibit a similar enhancement in belongingness subsequent to reading the same article in the inclusion condition (b = .18, t(108) = .43, NS). In other words, consumption of the horizontal brand led to an enhancement in LSE individuals’ felt belongingness following exclusion, but not inclusion.

FIGURE 7
IMPACT OF EXCLUSION/INCLUSION MANIPULATION AND SELF-ESTEEM ON CHANGES IN BELONGINGNESS AMONG PARTICIPANTS WHO READ A HORIZONTAL PERIODICAL (STUDY 4)
Participants with HSE, however, exhibited a decrease in felt belongingness after consumption of the horizontal periodical following exclusion ($b = -.60, t(108) = 1.79, p < .08$). This result is not surprising. Consumption of a brand that is differentiated from the mainstream group (either horizontally or vertically) immediately after social exclusion is likely to make even those with HSE feel less associated to the group, and hence it decreases their felt belongingness.

**Vertical Brand.** Next we ran an ANCOVA with exclusion/inclusion and self-esteem predicting change in belongingness among those in the vertical brand condition, with gender as a covariate. The main effect of self-esteem was significant ($F(1, 94) = 10.57, p < .01$), while the main effect of exclusion/inclusion was marginally significant ($F(2, 94) = 3.02, p < .06$). Importantly, the interaction of exclusion/inclusion manipulation with self-esteem was significant ($F(2, 94) = 4.14, p < .05$). Gender was also a significant covariate ($F(1, 94) = 5.57, p < .05$). Spotlight analyses (see fig. 8) revealed that the effect of periodical condition was significant among LSE participants ($F(2, 94) = 5.06, p < .01$) but not HSE participants ($F(2, 94) = 1.88, NS$). After reading the vertical periodical, individuals with LSE reported greater changes in (or enhanced level of) belongingness in the inclusion condition compared to those in the control condition ($b = 1.10, t(94) = 2.81, p < .01$). Reading the vertical periodical after social exclusion, however, did not enhance the level of felt belongingness of the LSE participants as compared to the control group ($b = -.07, t(94) = .15, NS$), suggesting that the vertical brand was able to enhance the belongingness for this group under conditions of inclusion, but not exclusion.

Participants with HSE exhibited a decrease in felt belongingness after consumption of the vertical periodical following exclusion ($b = -.58, t(94) = 1.74, p < .09$), but not inclusion ($b = -.46, t(94) = 1.46, NS$). Once again, it is likely that consumption of the vertical brand immediately after social exclusion makes even those with HSE feel less connected to the group and, hence, decreases their felt belongingness.

**Discussion**

Study 4 makes an important contribution to our theorizing. We found that consumption of a horizontal (vertical) brand increases feelings of belongingness among LSE consumers following social exclusion (inclusion). This provides further evidence that LSE individuals seek differentiation to serve their belongingness needs. Combined with the results from our earlier studies, these results suggest that following inclusion, LSE individuals seek to protect their belongingness by attaching to vertical brands, which subsequently increases their feelings of belongingness. Recall from study 2 that following exclusion, LSE individuals do not seek to protect their belongingness but, rather, perceive more subgroup heterogeneity within the group to deflect the exclusion. It is easier for them to maintain a more positive self-image following exclusion if they allow for more heterogeneity within the group because it becomes “okay” to be different. This deflection via group heterogeneity results in their increased attachment to horizontal brands and a subsequent increase in feelings of belongingness. In summary, the belongingness goals of LSE individuals appear to be driving their seemingly contradictory behavior of seeking differentiation through brands.

Although we have demonstrated that LSE individuals’ gravitation toward the vertical brands in the social inclusion condition is driven by their desire to strengthen and protect their position in the group, additional support for this mechanism would be desirable. Our theorizing suggests that LSE consumers are attracted to vertical brands because the power and status conferred by them may increase LSE individuals’ social approval by other members of the group. Therefore, another way of testing the position protection mechanism is to assess whether LSE consumers would be more willing to display their choice of vertical brands publicly (Ratner and Kahn 2002). Study 5 explicitly tests this hypothesis.

**STUDY 5**

In study 5 we measured participants’ chronic self-esteem and randomly assigned them to either an inclusion or control condition. If LSE consumers’ preference for the vertical brand under social inclusion is driven by a desire to protect and strengthen their position and status by seeking social approval from other members of the reference group, then we expect them to be more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption of the vertical brand.

One hundred twenty-five undergraduate business school students completed the study online through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in exchange for a small monetary incentive. After completing measures of chronic self-esteem ($\alpha = .91$;
$M = 4.12, SD = .67)$, they were then randomly assigned to either the inclusion condition or the control condition. The inclusion manipulation was identical to study 1. Participants who could not think of an inclusion situation were removed from the data set, which left 100 respondents for analysis. Participants in the control condition wrote about their commute to campus that day.

Next, participants were asked to imagine themselves in the following scenario:

Assume you are a member of your school’s chapter of Phi Beta Lambda, a national professional student business organization. You are about to go to a meeting of Phi Beta Lambda and are deciding what to wear to the meeting. You are choosing between three different brands of shirts. Which brand of shirt would you be most likely to wear to the meeting?

Participants chose among the same three brands used in study 1: an in-group brand (American Eagle), a vertical brand (Armani Exchange), and a horizontal brand (Hollister).

Following the choice task, participants saw two shirt options for each of the three brands (i.e., total of six shirt options). For each brand, one shirt version publicly displayed the brand and logo on the upper-left area of the shirt; in the second shirt version, the logo was only visible on the inside tag, behind the neck (hidden from public view). Participants ranked all six shirt options in order of their likelihood of wearing them to the meeting. Male and female participants saw slightly different shirts tailored to the shirt style of their gender. Finally, participants completed demographic measures.

Participants in a pretest ($n = 29$) saw one of the six shirt options, read a description of both a private good and a public good, and then rated their agreement with the statements “This shirt is a public good” and “This shirt is a private good.” Those who saw the shirt options with the brand name and logo prominently displayed rated the shirt as more public than private ($M_{public} = 6.60$ vs. $M_{private} = 1.60; \chi^2(14) = 20.92, p < .001$). Conversely, those who saw the shirt with the logo on the inside tag rated the shirt as more private than public ($M_{public} = 3.00$ vs. $M_{private} = 4.93; \chi^2(13) = 3.97, p < .01$).

Results

**Brand Choice.** We ran a logistic regression with a dummy variable for a condition (inclusion vs. control), self-esteem, and their interaction predicting choice of Armani Exchange (the vertical brand). Since men and women saw slightly different shirt versions, we included gender as a covariate. As in study 1, we also included whether or not they had purchased Armani Exchange in the last 3 months as a familiarity control variable.

The main effect of inclusion was significant ($b = .90$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 3.87, p < .05$). As expected, and consistent with the previous studies, the interaction of inclusion with self-esteem was significant ($b = -1.59$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.55, p < .05$); neither the effect of gender nor the effect of familiarity was significant.

Next, we analyzed the percentage of participants choosing Armani Exchange (the vertical brand) across the inclusion and control conditions at low and high levels of self-esteem (using a median split of self-esteem scores). Consistent with hypothesis 3, LSE participants who felt socially included were more likely to choose the Armani Exchange brand than participants in the control condition (61.1% vs. 20.0%; $\chi^2(1) = 8.31, p < .01$). However, for HSE participants, inclusion had no effect on the probability of choosing the Armani Exchange brand (40.7% vs. 48.0%; $\chi^2(1) = .28, NS$).

We used Aiken and West’s (1991) post hoc procedure to plot the probabilities for the control and inclusion conditions at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of self-esteem. As shown in figure 9, the relationship between inclusion and choice of Armani Exchange brand was significant for LSE participants ($b = 1.99, p < .01$); inclusion led to a greater probability of choosing the vertical brand. Inclusion had no effect on the probability of choosing a vertical brand for HSE participants ($b = -.16, NS$).

We also ran logistic regressions with inclusion, self-esteem, and their interaction predicting both choice of the in-group brand (American Eagle) and choice of the horizontal brand (Hollister). None of the effects were significant in the model predicting choice of the horizontal brand (all $p > .56$). In terms of choice of the in-group brand, however, the interaction of inclusion with self-esteem was significant ($b = 1.43$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.09, p < .05$). LSE participants who felt socially included were less likely to choose American Eagle than participants in the control condition (33.3% vs. 73.3%; $\chi^2(1) = 7.41, p < .01$). Thus, when LSE consumers increase their preference for vertical brands following social inclusion, it comes at the expense of in-group brands. In contrast, for HSE

![Figure 9](image-url)
participants, inclusion had no effect on the choice of American Eagle (55.6% vs. 44.0%; \( \chi^2(1) = .69, \text{NS} \)).

**Signaling through Conspicuous Consumption.** To examine whether inclusion increased LSE participants’ preference for conspicuous consumption of the vertical brand, we first analyzed the rankings for both the private and the public shirt versions of the vertical brand (Armani Exchange) using ordered logit models with a dummy variable for condition (inclusion vs. control), self-esteem, and their interaction as independent variables. We again included gender and brand familiarity as covariates. For the public shirt ranking, the effect of self-esteem was significant (\( b = 1.17, \text{Wald } \chi^2(1) = 6.11, p < .05 \)), as was the interaction of self-esteem with inclusion (\( b = -2.17, \text{Wald } \chi^2(1) = 6.97, p < .01 \)). For the private shirt ranking, none of the effects were significant (Wald \( \chi^2 < 1 \)).

For simplification purposes, we also ran an ANCOVA predicting the Armani Exchange public shirt ranking with inclusion, self-esteem, and their interaction as predictors and gender and brand familiarity as covariates. The interaction of self-esteem with inclusion was significant (\( F(1, 92) = 8.32, p < .01 \)). Inclusion increased LSE participants’ rankings of the public Armani Exchange shirt (\( b = .19, p < .05 \)) but had no effect on HSE participants’ rankings (\( b = -.09, \text{NS} \)). Figures are not provided here to save space but can be made available upon request.

We also tested the relative preference for the public shirt for the other brands (American Eagle and Hollister). None of the effects were significant in either model.

**Discussion**

Study 5 replicated the previous findings for the inclusion condition in the context of a choice setting. LSE participants were more likely to choose a vertical brand under social inclusion than those in the control condition. In addition, the findings reveal that when LSE participants felt socially included, they tried to elevate their distinctiveness by signaling their superiority to others within the group. This signaling intent resulted in a greater preference for a shirt with a prominent (publicly visible) logo of a vertical brand.

Taken together, the results from this study along with previous studies provide strong support for our theorizing and hypothesized effects. LSE consumers are more likely to attach to and choose a vertical brand under social inclusion and to consume these brands conspicuously in an effort to strengthen their belongingness to the core group. This finding also provides further support for the process evidence obtained in study 2. We have argued that under social inclusion the desire for vertical brands is perhaps the result of their desire to secure the position and protect their belongingness. Such a desire should manifest itself in conspicuously consuming the vertical brand, which is exactly what we find in this study.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Although research suggests that social exclusion motivates consumers to use brands as a way to connect with their social group, recent research has shifted focus from the role of belongingness to that of distinctiveness (Chan et al. 2012). The current research argues that social exclusion/inclusion and self-esteem jointly create a preference for two types of differentiated brands: horizontal and vertical brands. Taken together, the results from five studies provide strong support for the existence of two types of differentiated brands and the hypothesized conditions under which consumers increase attachment to such brands. In line with previous work, the results suggest that individuals who feel excluded from the group have greater attachment to brands representative of that group. In addition, LSE consumers have greater attachment to horizontal brands under social exclusion and vertical brands under social inclusion. Differentiation with horizontal brands enables LSE consumers to protect themselves from the exclusion by perceiving the group as containing many heterogeneous subgroups and identifying with those subgroups for belongingness, while differentiation with vertical brands enables them to protect their future belongingness within the group following inclusion.

The results of this research contribute to the literature in several ways. First, although research shows that brands and products help fulfill belongingness needs (Loveland et al. 2010; Mead et al. 2011; Swaminathan et al. 2009), we identify two types of differentiating brands, horizontal and vertical, as well as conditions that result in an increase in attachment to these brands. Our findings suggest that these differentiating brands can also be distinguished from out-group or dissociative brands.

Second, the results reveal that social exclusion may not always lead to conformity to the in-group. LSE participants increased their attachment to and preference for horizontal brands following social exclusion from their group. This result is noteworthy because research has shown that when need for belongingness is high, consumers turn to brands that help them connect with others (Loveland et al. 2010; Mead et al. 2011). We demonstrate that changes in inclusion and exclusion can prompt varying responses. For those with LSE, a high need to belong may also lead them to engage in strategies aimed at deflecting exclusion, such as perceiving the group as composed of subgroups and subsequently increasing their attachment to horizontal brands. In further support of this, we find that excluded LSE participants report greater identification with a subgroup and less identification with the reference group that excluded them.

Third, this research sheds light on the role of social inclusion as a driver of preferences for vertical brands. To our knowledge, our findings are novel in highlighting the role of social inclusion in enhancing brand attachment. Social inclusion is not enough to satisfy LSE individuals’ belongingness needs and they seek vertical differentiation through brands to protect their future belongingness within the group. Study 5 demonstrates the importance of publicly sig-
The current research contributes to both identity theory and optimal distinctiveness theory within consumer behavior. The studies demonstrate conditions under which consumers use brands for identity expression, be it group membership or differentiation. Reed (2004) contends that identity expression can vary in importance depending on contextual cues that make identity more salient or important. Individuals’ construal of self (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Swaminathan et al. 2007) and type of reference groups (White and Dahl 2007) also affect identity expression. By highlighting the moderating role of self-esteem in the desire for horizontal and vertical differentiation, we build on White and Argo’s (2009) findings regarding the role of collective self-esteem, and White, Argo and Sengupta’s (2012) findings regarding self-construal, in determining identity expression effects.

The findings presented here help integrate three distinct streams of research: optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer 1991), belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and self-esteem as a sociometer (Leary and Baumeister 2000). Combining these perspectives, we show that for LSE consumers, differentiation is actually another tactic to achieve belongingness. Horizontal differentiation following social exclusion seems driven by a desire to deflect the social exclusion through identifying with a subgroup; to the extent that the reference group contains many subgroups, it becomes “okay” to be different. Vertical differentiation following social inclusion appears to be a result of LSE individuals protecting their future belongingness within the group. Such position-based differentiation is only meaningful in a relational context (Vignoles et al. 2000). Thus, we believe that the goals of belongingness and uniqueness are not always in opposition and that belongingness goals may actually drive seemingly contradictory behaviors.

Our research opens up a variety of potential future research opportunities. First, while we examined differentiating behaviors as a response to social exclusion, an alternative response is to abandon the excluding group altogether. Withdrawing from those who have rejected you helps avoid potential future rejection and hurt but may also leave you without social connections. This is not an ideal scenario for those who perceive the possibility of potential social alternatives as low (Richman and Leary 2009), which is likely the case for LSE individuals. Richman and Leary (2009) also argue, however, that the probability of abandonment increases with perceptions of chronic rejection, which also describes LSE individuals. Therefore, it is possible that LSE individuals are torn over whether or not to abandon the group. Our results suggest that they are not ready to abandon the group completely following rejection. Future research could examine when abandonment may be more likely to occur. Perhaps after persistent rejection LSE individuals are more willing to search for alternative sources of belongingness.

Recent research by Lee and Shrum (2012) has suggested that there are significant differences between being rejected and being ignored. These authors find that being rejected is more likely to increase prosocial behaviors and being ignored is more likely to increase attention-getting behaviors. Our exclusion manipulations were not specific enough to know for sure whether individuals were feeling rejected or ignored. The fact that HSE individuals increased their attachment to in-group brands suggests they were more likely to write about rejection. LSE individuals, however, demonstrated increased attachment to both in-group and horizontal brands, suggesting that they wrote either about being rejected or being ignored. Future research could look at whether type of exclusion moderates brand choice for LSE consumers.

Answers to which consumers engage in horizontal or vertical differentiation and when and why they do so hold important implications for marketers. Although managers may not be able to target LSE consumers per se, several target segments (e.g., teenagers) are characterized by LSE. A somewhat counterintuitive finding is that such consumers increase attachment to vertically differentiated brands when their belongingness needs are met. Brand names that address consumers’ belongingness needs by creating brand communities and engaging in social media (e.g., a Facebook page) may satiate consumers’ need for belongingness while also counterintuitively enhancing certain consumers’ (i.e., LSE consumers) desire to differentiate. Therefore, marketers should understand how their marketing efforts may affect consumers’ belongingness or differentiation needs and how brand positioning strategies based on differentiation can appeal to various segments of consumers.

APPENDIX A

Brand Attachment Measures (Studies 1 and 2)

Measured on 7-point Likert scale

1. If the brand was permanently gone from my life I would be upset.
2. Losing this brand forever would be distressing for me.
3. If this brand was not available at the store it would make me upset to have to choose another brand.

Protection of Future Belongingness Measures (Study 2)

Measured on 7-point Likert scale

1. Securing my future social status in this group is important to me.
2. I would like to protect my future place within this group.
3. I would like to strengthen my future position within this group.

Perceived Group Heterogeneity Measures (Study 2)

Measured on 7-point Likert scale
1. I feel that this group is made up of a few subgroups.

Measured on 7-point scale where 1 = “not at all” and 7 = “extremely”
2. To what extent do members of this group belong to subgroups?
3. To what extent is this group composed of several subgroups?

Manipulation Check Measures (Study 3)

Measured on 5-point Likert scale
1. I want other business school students to accept me.
2. It bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other business school students’ plans.
3. I try hard not to do things that will make other business school students avoid or reject me.
4. I seldom worry about whether other business school students care about me.
5. I have a strong need to belong with other business school students.
6. My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that other business school students do not accept me.
7. If other business school students don’t seem to accept me, I don’t let it bother me.
8. I need to feel that there are business school students I can turn to in times of need.

Pre-Measure of Belongingness (Study 4)

Measured on 7-point Likert scale—all reverse coded
1. I feel like I don’t fit in.
2. When I am with others, I feel like I don’t belong.
3. I feel like others don’t accept me.
4. I am often not included in other people’s plans.
5. I feel excluded a lot of the time.
6. I worry about whether other people care about me.
7. I want other people to accept me.
8. I feel alone.

APPENDIX B

BRAND ELICITATION PROCEDURE (STUDY 2)

In-Group Brand Elicitation

In the box below, we would like you to type in a clothing brand that makes you feel like a typical member of the group you just named (inserted group name here). This brand could be something that the average group member owns. It should be a clothing brand that fits with who you are as a member of the group and says something about the type of member you believe yourself to be.

Horizontal Brand Elicitation

In the box below, we would like you to type the name of clothing brand that makes you feel different from other members of the group you just named (inserted group name here) based on who you are as an individual. It could be a brand that most group members don’t use, but not necessarily something that they wouldn’t use. It should be a clothing brand that highlights how your own individual qualities, such as your abilities, opinions, and traits, make you different from other group members.

Vertical Brand Elicitation

In the box below, we would like you to type the name of clothing brand that makes you feel different from other members of the group you just named (inserted group name here) by enhancing your social standing or role within the group. It should be a clothing brand that highlights how your superiority and role within the group make you different from other group members.

REFERENCES


