Me, my brand and I: consumer responses to luxury brand rejection

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1. Introduction

The need to belong is deeply rooted in human nature. Therefore, people constantly strive to maintain positive social relationships (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) as lack of it could lead to physical and psychological sufferance (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). One of the prominent strategy people employ to foster affiliation is through their consumption behaviour (Belk, 1988). For instance, studies indicate that individuals seek to acquire the brands, and especially luxury brands, used by their membership groups as well as aspirational groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Shukla, 2011), while they tend to avoid brands associated with out-groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Berger and Heath, 2007). The associations and meanings attached by reference group can help individual members in creating their identities (McCracken, 1989) by integrating those brands into their self-concepts.

In addition, research indicates that consumes can use their consumption to defend the self against rejection (Lee and Shrum, 2012). Rejection is a fundamental threat to social survival which can manifest in explicit or implicit forms (Williams 2009) such as being rejected by a romantic partner or simply being ignored during a conversation (Lee and Shrum, 2012).once rejected, individuals respond to the threat at different stages namely reflexive and reflective stages . Reflexive stage includes the immediate reflexive reactions to rejection such as threatened basic needs and negative affect. Then, when given the time to reflect, individuals adopt behavioral responses aimed at fortifying the threatened needs during the reflective stage. Such responses could either be social or aggressive (Williams, 2009)

Recent research (Lisjak, Lee & Gardner, 2012; Cheng, White & Chaplin, 2012) indicates that when brands are intertwined into consumers` self-concepts, a threat to the brands is experienced as a personal failure resulting in similar defensive responses to personal threats. The current study builds on this stream of research by applying the theoretical foundation of rejection literature to a brand level and in so doing offer first integrative account of brand threat and rejection responses. Specifically, this study seeks to investigate consumer responses to luxury brand-related rejection during the reflexive and reflective stages. Brand related rejection can manifest as instances in which the brand used by the consumer is explicitly rejected by others within the social context. In addition, the study seeks to test the moderating role of brand identification. Brand identification entails the integration of the brand identity into one's identity to symbolically represent the self-concept (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). High levels of brand identification result in brand defence as a way to defend one's identity (Lisjak et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2012). Previous studies provide ample evidence that the basis of brand identification stems from reference groups associations (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; 2005, Berger and Heath, 2007). Yet it is unclear how consumers

are likely to respond in case of conflict between their social groups and brand identity as in situations wherein a person's in-group rejects the brand they highly identify with. Existing literature provides two contradicting predictions with regards to how consumers are likely to respond. Research from social identity threat literature proposes that individuals always conform to their in-groups even at the expense of their own interests (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Van Vugt and Hart, 2004). While rejection and brand threat literatures suggest that people are more likely to defend their threatened identity when they highly identify with it (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant & Unnava, 2000; Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012) regardless of the source of rejection (Williams, 2009). Therefore, in order to reconcile these opposing views, this study seeks to investigate the role of source of rejection (in-group vs. an out-group) in moderating consumer responses to brand-related rejection. By integrating rejection and branding literatures, the findings further extend each discipline. For instance, the study adds to the rejection literature by elaborating whether instances of rejection directed at the brand level of the self still evoke similar reactions to interpersonal rejection. Furthermore, it extends the brand threat literature by investigating the impact of new types of brand threats on consumers` responses during the reflexive and reflective stages.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rejection and brand threat

Rejection is a fundamental threat to social survival that leads to severe negative consequences (Williams, 2009). It is a common yet painful social experience with severe consequences (Mead et al. 2011). Due to the importance of actual or possible social rejection, even the slightest form of manipulation can still evoke rejection detection and lead to negative consequences (Williams, 2009). The behavioral responses to personal rejection can manifest in either positive responses such as fostering affiliation or negative responses such as

aggression (Lee and Shrum, 2012). For example, rejected individuals are found to be willing to tailor their spending preferences to get accepted by new social partners (Mead et al., 2011), or self-indulge in conspicuous consumption (Lee and Shrum, 2012).

Just as individuals are vulnerable to threats to their personal self, research suggests that they are also vulnerable to threats to "the physical, social, and symbolic aspects of the self" (Burris and Rempel, 2004, p. 21). For instance, when brands that are integrated into the self-concept are threatened, consumers are likely to show similar defensive responses that arise from personal threats (Lisjak et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2012). Brand threats are unexpected, widely spread negative brand occurrences that thwart consumers' expected benefits from the brand (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dutta and Pullig, 2011). They are quite common in the marketplace with adverse effects on brand reputations and brand equity (Duttta and Pullig, 2011). A robust finding in this literature is the buffering effect of brand identification by stimulating brand defence in the face of brand threats (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). Consumers who highly identify with the brand, experience brand threat as a personal failure and as a result brand defence is stimulated by a desire to protect the self rather than the brand. Building on these ideas, the current study seeks to widen the scope of research on brand threats which predominantly focuses on brand threats arising from product defects or ethical scandals (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dutta and Pullig, 2011) by applying the theoretical foundation of personal rejection to brand literature. In doing so, this study proposes a new framework that predicts consumers` affective and behavioural responses to brand threats during the reflexive and reflective rejection stages. Moreover, this study highlights some of the individual trait factors and situational variables that moderate consumer responses. In particular, the role of brand identification and the source of rejection is examined. Contextually, the investigation examines brand threats targeting luxury fashion brands and

thus extending the scope of previous research that is limited to functional products into hedonic goods arena. Luxury brands are hedonic products used to create and communicate consumers' self-concept and identity (Shukla, Singh and Banerjee, 2015). Therefore, luxury brands represent an appropriate context for the investigations of identity threats.

2.2. Hypotheses development

Rejection is a form of self-directed threat that thwarts individuals' need for belonging (Lee and Shrum, 2012). In his model of the effects of ostracism, Williams (2009) elaborate that at the reflexive stage, individuals experience psychological pain, negative emotional responses as well as threats to their fundamental needs. One of those needs is the need to belong. When ostracized, the individual no longer feels connected to the group or other group members and hence their need to belong is threatened. This study posits that similar reflexive reactions would arise to brand- related rejection, however depending on consumers' level of brand identification.

High brand identifiers integrate the brand into their self-concepts (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012) and use the brand for self-expression (Swaminthan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli, 2007). Hence brand- rejection can be perceived as personal rejection. However, consumers who dis-identify with the brand, hold extremely negative brand attitudes (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Einwiller et al., 2006). They are less likely to use the brand to express the self or communicate their social affiliations. Therefore, brand rejection does not personally affect them. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1: During the reflexive stage, consumers with high brand identification will report higher need for belonging and negative affect following brand-related rejection, while brand dis-identifiers will not be affected.

Following the reflexive stage, individuals tend to behave in ways aimed to fortify the threatened needs during the reflective stage. Previous studies on brand threats elaborate the role of brand identification in moderating responses to brand threats (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Einwiller et al., 2006; Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). Opposed to low brand identifiers, high brand identifiers maintain favourable brand attitudes and purchase intentions after exposure to brand threat (Einwiller et al., 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2007; Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). Therefore, this study suggests that high brand identifiers will maintain their brand evaluation following brand related rejection. However, research indicates that consumers' tendency to identify with brands stems from their desire to associate with their in-groups and dissociate from out-groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2003, 2005; Berger and Heath, 2007). Consequently, it is not clear how high brand identifiers are likely to respond to brand related rejection initiated by their in-groups. Therefore, the current study further investigates the moderating role of the source of rejection in moderating consumer response during the reflexive and reflective stages.

Rejection literature posits that the mere awareness of potential rejection by an out group or even by disliked others is sufficient to evoke the immediate, reflexive responses to rejection. Additionally, in their study, Gonsalkorale and Williams (2007) find that rejection is equally painful whether it is initiated by an in-group, an out group, or even a despised out group. Building on this work, this study posits that the source of rejection results in negative reflexive reactions whether it is initiated by an in-group or an out-group during the reflexive stage. Additionally, these reflexive reactions should only occur for high brand identifiers. Brand dis-identifiers are not connected to the brand and therefore, brand-related rejection should be irrelevant to their needs and affect.

In their study, Gonsalkorale et al. (2008) indicate that when participants are given time to recover beyond the reflexive stage; recovery is better for those rejected by the out-group than by the in-group. Therefore, this study posits that the source of rejection will moderate consumers' responses to brand related rejection during the reflective stage. Intuitively, rejection by an in-group should negatively affect brand attitudes and evaluations more than rejection by an out-group. Robust findings in social identity literature suggest that group members tend to conform to their in-group even at the expense of their own self-interest (Zdaniuk and Levine, 2001). Moreover, they tend to avoid the brands used by out-groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Berger and Heath, 2007). Hence, this study posits that when the source of brand rejection is an in-group, consumers are more likely to conform to the group and decrease their brand evaluations. However, when the source of rejection is an out-group, consumers will maintain their brand evaluations. The study further suggests that this impact only occurs for consumers who dis-identify with the brand. Prior studies consistently prove that high brand identifiers tend to defend the brands against threats. In addition, they suggest that brand defence is stimulated by a desire to protect the self (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). Moreover, research suggests that individuals are motivated to protect their personal self at the expense of their social self (Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O'Mara & Gebauer, 2013). Consequently, the current study posits that when the brand with which consumers highly identify is rejected even by an in-group; they are more likely to defend the brand in order to protect the personal self. Building on these ideas, this research hypothesizes that:

H2: The source of rejection will interact with brand identification in moderating consumers' responses to brand-related rejection during the reflective stage but not the reflexive stage.

H3a: In reflective stage, when brand identification is high, exposure to brand-related rejection will not lead to any differences in brand evaluation in the rejection condition (relative to no rejection condition) whether the source of rejection is an in-group or an outgroup.

H3b: In reflective stage, when in brand dis-identification condition, exposure to brand-related rejection leads to lower brand evaluation in the rejection condition (relative to no rejection condition) when the source of rejection is an in-group. When the source of rejection is an out-group, there will be no change in brand evaluation in the rejection condition (relative to no rejection condition).

3. The Current Research

A set of two experiments tests the predictions arising from the conceptualization of reflexive and reflective responses to brand-related rejection. Study 1 measured the impact of brand related rejection on consumers' reflexive responses while study 2 measured consumers' reflexive and reflective responses. The moderating role of brand identification was measured in both studies while the role the source of rejection was only investigated in study 2. Consumers in public spaces such as shopping malls and department stores were approached by the researchers and asked to volunteer for the studies. Data was collected at different times of the day and different days of the week.

3.1. Study 1

Study 1 is designed to examine how high brand identifiers versus brand dis-identifiers respond to brand-related rejection during the reflexive stage.

3.1.1. Participants and Design

One hundred and eighty seven respondents (39.6% males, 60.4% females, age 18-40) participated in this study. They were randomly assigned to two brand identification conditions and two threat conditions. This study utilizes a 2 (Threat manipulation: Rejection vs. No rejection) x 2 (Brand identification: high identification vs. dis-identification) between subjects experimental design. The dependent variables are need for belonging and affect. Brand identification and brand threat were manipulated while the need for belonging and affect were measured.

3.1.2. Procedure

The study began with a cover story informing participants that they would be taking part in a research that investigates the link between personality traits and brand preferences. Afterwards participants were provided with a consent form followed by brand identification manipulation. In the high brand identification condition, respondents were asked to name a luxury brand they identify with "*In the box below, I would like you to write a luxury fashion brand that you identify with. This can be a brand that you like or you actually own or wish to own or it can be a brand that shares the same image as you. This brand will be called "Brand A" for the rest of the study*". While consumers in the dis-identification condition were asked to name a brand they dis-identify with "*In the box below, I would like you to type in a luxury fashion brand that you do not identify with. This can be a brand that you dislike or you are less likely to buy/use or it can be a brand that has the opposite image from you.*

This brand will be called "Brand A" for the rest of the study". This was followed by

manipulation checks by asking respondents to complete Escalas and Bettman's (2003, 2005)

self- brand connection scale ($\alpha = 0.95$). Next, threat manipulation was administered by

having participants read and imagine a scenario that described a situation in which they run

into a group of people who reject the luxury brand they were wearing/using. The threat

manipulation is adapted from a previous study focusing on distinctiveness threat in which

participants were asked to imagine a scenario that described a social interaction that involved

a discussion about a brand of perfume/cologne that the participant owned and that was

mimicked by a colleague (White and Argo, 2011). However, the nature of threat

manipulation in this study differed from the original manipulation to imply rejection rather

than distinctiveness threat. More specifically, participants in the rejection scenario read that,

"*Imagine that you were wearing/Using (Brand A) and then you bumped into a group of*

people and once they saw (Brand A), they did not like it and they asked you not to wear/use it

again". Participants in the no rejection condition read the first part of the scenario "*Imagine*

that you were wearing/Using (Brand A) and then you bumped into a group of people and they

saw (Brand A)". To test if the manipulation was successful, participants were asked to

indicate on a 7 point scale (1= Not at all, 7 = Very much) if the group mentioned in the

scenario rejected the brand, "According to the previous scenario does the group reject (Brand

A)?". After a short, unrelated filler task designed to reduce potential demand effects,

participants were asked to fill the need for belonging and affect scales (Williams, 2009).

Need for belonging is a 5 item 7 point scale ; *"I feel disconnected", "I feel rejected", "I feel like*

an outsider", "I feel I belong to the group", and *"I feel other group members interact with me a lot"*

anchored by (1= Not at all, 7 = Very much) ($\alpha = 0.71$) while affect is a 4 item 7 point semantic

differential scale (*Good/bad, Pleasant/unpleasant, Bothered/Not bothered, Hurt/Not hurt*) (α

= 0.70). Both scales were reversed to reflect the level of need threat (Williams, 2009). The study ended with demographic questions and a debriefing statement.

3.1.3. Results

To check if brand identification manipulation was successful, an independent sample t-test was conducted and the results indicated (t (165) = 9.83, p < 0.001) that participants in the high brand condition (M = 4.24) reported significantly higher score than respondents in the dis-identification condition (M = 2.26). The threat manipulation check also indicated that there were significant differences between rejection (M = 4.70) and no rejection conditions (M = 3.28, t (144) = 4.48, p < 0.001). As predicted in H1, there were significant differences in need satisfaction between rejection (M = 3.37) and no rejection (M = 2.79) conditions for high brand identifiers (t (87) = 2.10, p < 0.01). This indicates that high brand identifiers who were subjected to brand rejection reported higher need for belonging than respondents who were in the no rejection condition. Additionally, in the dis-identification condition such differences seized to reach statistical significance (t (85) = 1.58, p > 0.05). Similarly, the results showed (t (53.87) = 3.03, p < 0.001) that high brand identifiers who were subjected to brand rejection reported higher negative affect (M = 3.66) than respondents who were in the no rejection condition (M = 2.74). As for brand dis-identifiers, there were no significant differences between rejection and no rejection conditions (t (80) = 1.85, p > 0.05). Thus, the results of this study support H1.

3.1.4. Discussion

The study findings indicate that following brand related rejection, high brand identifiers report significantly higher need for belonging and negative affect. However, when consumers dis-identified with the brand, brand related rejection did not affect their need for belonging

nor affect. This finding is consistent with the observations of Cheng et al. (2012) and Lisjak et al. (2012) who report that brand failure is perceived and reacted to as a self-threat but only when the brand is connected to the self. Additionally, the current findings add to and extend previous work on rejection by elaborating that even when rejection was directed at brands with which consumers highly identified, it still evoked the immediate reactions to rejection that stem from personal rejection. Furthermore, the current study focused on luxury fashion brands which are used by consumers for social functions such as expressing and enhancing their image with significant others (Shukla, 2011). Therefore, when this social function of the brand is threatened by social rejection, consumers may fall short of social connectedness which may result in an escalated need for belonging and negative feelings.

3.2. Study 2

Study 2 extends the investigation in two important ways. First, study 1 measured consumers' responses during the reflexive stage only; study 2 examines how consumers respond to brand related rejection during both the reflexive and reflective stages. Second, in addition to brand identification, the study examines a new moderating variable namely the source of rejection.

3.2.1. Participants and Design

A total of one hundred and nighty participants (70.6% females, 29.4% males, Age 18-40) received a paper questionnaire. This study utilizes a 2 (Threat manipulation: rejection vs. no rejection) x2 (Brand identification: high identification vs. dis-identification) x2 (Source of rejection: In-group vs. Out-group) between-subjects experimental design. The dependent variables are consumer need for belonging, affect and brand evaluation.

3.2.2. Procedure

This study followed similar pattern to Study 1 in the first part followed by manipulating the source of rejection by randomly assigning participants into two conditions: an in-group or out-group. In the in-group condition, respondents were asked to name a group they identify with "*In the box below, I would like you to type in the name of a group that you belong to and feel a part of. You should feel you are this type of person and that you fit in with these people. This group should be a tightly knit group, consisting of individuals who are very similar to one another. For the rest of the study, this group will be called (Group A)*". In the outgroup condition, participants were asked to name a group to which they do not identify "*In the box below, I would like you to type in the name of a group that you do not belong to and do not feel a part of. You should feel you are not this type of person and that you do not fit in with these people. This group should be a tightly knit group, consisting of individuals who are very similar to one another. For the rest of the study, this group will be called (Group A)*". Following the manipulation, participant were asked to complete a manipulation check by measuring their level of identification with source of rejection using a four item, 7-point scale adopted from (Spears, Doosje and Ellemers, 1997): "I see myself as a member of this group," "I am pleased to be a member of this group", "I feel strong ties with other members of this group" and "I identify with other members of this group". All four items are anchored with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much so*) ($\alpha = 0.99$). Next, threat manipulation was administered also using the same procedure in Study 1 followed by additional manipulation check also similar to Study 1. After a short, unrelated filler task designed to reduce potential demand effects, participants completed the same need satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.75$) and affect scales ($\alpha = 0.80$) as study 1. Finally, respondents were asked to evaluate the brand on a 3-item 9-point scale (unfavourable/ favourable, dislike/like, and bad/good) (White and Dahl, 2006) ($\alpha = 0.97$). The study ended with some demographic questions and a debriefing statement.

3.2.3. Results

The source of rejection manipulation was checked first. The results indicated a successful manipulation (t (184) = 28.76, p<0.001) wherein significant differences in the level of identification between participants in the in-group (M = 6.36) and out- group conditions (M = 1.66) were observed. Similarly, in brand identification manipulation, participants in the high brand identification condition reported significantly higher score (M = 4.13) than in the dis-identification condition (M = 1.61, t (114.67) = 12.82, p<0.001). Lastly, a threat manipulation check indicated that there were significant differences (t (183) = 6.25, p<0.001) between rejection (M = 5.15) and no rejection conditions (M = 3.06), Hence all our manipulations were successful.

To re-test H1, the same procedure used in Study 1 was followed. The results revealed that there were significant differences in need satisfaction levels (t (83) = 3.03, p < 0.001) between rejection (M = 3.26) and no rejection conditions (M = 2.43) for high brand identifiers, However, in the dis-identification condition such differences seized to reach statistical significance (t (81) = 1.18, p > 0.05). Similarly, there were significant differences in affect (t (72) = 4.51, p < 0.01) between rejection (M = 3.86) and no rejection conditions (M = 2.40) for high brand identifiers. In the dis-identification condition there were no significant differences between the two conditions (t (83) = 0.05, p > 0.05). Thus H1 is supported again.

In addition, we tested the role of the source of rejection in moderating consumer responses to brand-related rejection during the reflexive stage including the main effects of brand threat, brand identification and the source of rejection and the three way interaction and all possible two-way Interactions. The results of analysis indicated that there was a main effect for the source of rejection on (F (1, 168) = 54.26, p<0.001), brand threat (F (1, 168) = 8.96, p<0.005)

and brand identification (F (1, 168) = 5.02, p<0.5) on need for belonging. However, neither the three way interaction (F (1, 168) = 0.46, p>0.05) nor any of the two way interactions were significant. Similarly, although the main effect of source of rejection on consumer affect was significant (F (1, 151) = 6.81, p<0.001), the three way interactions was not (F (1, 151) = 0.51, p>0.05). Our findings indicate the source of rejection does not moderate consumers' reflexive responses to brand-related rejection.

Lastly, we investigated the role of the source of rejection in moderating consumers` responses during the reflective stage. The results showed that there were significant main effects of brand identification (F (1, 166) = 78.42, p<0.001) but non-significant for brand threat (F (1, 166) = 0.20, p>0.05) and source of rejection (F (1, 166) = 2.14, p>0.05). The three way interaction between brand rejection, brand identification and source of rejection was significant (F (1, 166) = 5.79, p<0.05). To explore the three-way interaction further, data was split by brand identification and a 2 way ANOVA between brand threat and source of rejection was conducted for both high identifiers and dis-identifiers. In the high identification condition, the interaction effect was not significant (F (1, 80) = 0.40, p>0.05). However, in the dis-identification condition, the two way interaction between brand threat and source of rejection was significant (F (1, 88) = 8.49, p<0.01). A simple effects test exploring the two-way interaction between source of rejection by an in-group and brand threat in the dis-identification condition revealed significant differences (t (56) = -2.45, p<0.05) in consumer brand evaluations between rejection (M = 2.33) and no rejection conditions (M = 3.92), However, when the threat was by an out-group such differences in brand evaluation seize to reach statistical significance (t (32) =1.82, p>0.05), thus, supporting, H2, H3a and H3b.

3.2.4. Discussion

Similar to study 1, brand related rejection negatively affected high brand identifiers' reflexive responses while brand dis-identifiers were not affected. In addition, high brand identifiers maintained their favourable brand evaluations following brand threat while brand dis-identifiers maintained their negative brand evaluations. The findings also indicated that the source of rejection played a moderating role however only during the reflective stage. Consistent with Williams (2009), the findings indicate that consumers' reflexive responses to brand-related rejection occurred regardless of the source of rejection. With regards to the role of the source of rejection in moderating consumers' reflective responses, the results indicated that exposure to brand-related rejection by an in-group led to lower brand evaluations for consumers who dis-identified with the brand but not in the case of an out-group. This can be attributed to the influence of in-group identification and group conformity (Ellemers, Spears and Doosje, 2002) wherein individuals attempt to align their self-concept with the group identity to foster affiliation (Mead et al. 2011).

4. General discussion and implications

The results of two empirical studies demonstrate the impact of brand related rejection on consumer responses during the reflexive (Study 1) and reflective (Study 2) stages. The moderating roles of brand identification and the source of rejection during the reflexive and reflective stages were also investigated. The findings make a number of contributions to academic theory and practice. Taken together, the results elaborate the powerful role of brand identification in moderating responses to brand–related rejection in both the reflexive and reflective stages. During the reflexive stage, the findings elaborate that when the brand was integrated into consumer self-concepts, brand rejection was experienced as a personal rejection thus extending previous research on brand threats (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). In the reflective stage, consumers who highly identified with the brand defended the

brand by maintaining their band evaluations. An interesting finding was the influence of the source of rejection in moderating consumer responses during the reflective stage. When the source of rejection was an in-group, consumer responses were more negatively affected by brand threat than when the rejection was by an out-group. However, surprisingly enough this pattern was only observed when consumers dis-identified with the brand. Across both studies, when identification was high, consumer responses were neither affected by their in-groups nor out-groups.

The key theoretical contribution of the current research stems from the integration of perspectives from brand threat, and the social rejection literature to predict how consumers respond to brand-related status threats during the reflexive and reflective stages. In doing so, it uniquely contribute to each stream of research. The current findings add to the brand threat literature by investigating the impact of new types of brand threats on consumer responses. In addition, the findings extend the rejection literature by elaborating that instances of rejection directed at the brand level of the self still evoke similar reflexive reactions to interpersonal rejection by threatening consumer need for belonging and affect. Furthermore, the study illuminates the strategic nature of group conformity by elaborating a boundary condition to the previously documented findings of reference group influence on brand preferences (Escalas and Bettman, 2003, 2005). Consumers were only inclined to follow group preferences when they dis-identified with the brand. However, when the brand constituted part of the self, consumers were no longer influenced by their in-groups. This counterintuitive finding extends previous results by indicating that highly identified group members can sometimes deviate from their in-groups for personal interests rather than group interest.

The current findings have important implications for luxury brands marketers. With respect to brand threats stemming from consumers' social circles, the findings suggest that if consumers highly identify with the brand, they will defend it even if their peers reject it. This offers new suggestion of how brand managers should market their brands among loyal customers. Luxury brand marketers should devise campaigns that stress on consumer individuality, highlighting the uniqueness value of the brand and how it can help consumers differentiate themselves. However, an opposite strategy should be used to "win" consumers who dis-identify with the brand. Our findings also elaborate that brand dis-identifiers are negatively influenced by brand rejection. Thus, when targeting dis-identifiers, messages that highlight the social nature of the brand and its popularity should be emphasized.

This study offers a number of insights and illuminates a number of avenues for future research. Based on study limitations, future research should take relational threats into perspective (Sedikidies et al., 2013). Furthering the relational-self agenda, future research should investigate brand-related rejection stemming from significant others, relationship partners, and potential or ex-partners.

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