

Me, My brand and I: Consumer responses to luxury brand rejection

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Abstract

Integrating the social rejection and brand threat literature, this research examines how consumers respond when the luxury brand they identify with is rejected by their social peers. Across two studies, it is observed that, consumers who identify with a brand, a threat to the brand elicits defensive behavioural response whether it's stemming from an in-group or an out-group. However, consumers who dis-identify with the brand only adopt defensive behaviour when the brand is rejected by an out-group. High brand identifiers report higher need for belonging and negative affect following threat while brand dis-identifiers are not affected. The findings further delineate consumer responses to luxury brand related rejection in reflexive and reflective stages of rejection. The study extends previous work on rejection and offers a number of managerial implications.

Key words: brand threat, rejection, brand identification, in-group, out-group, luxury brands

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 a lack of these can lead to physical and psychological suffering (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). One of the prominent strategies 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 their aspirational groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Shukla, 2011), while tending to avoid brands associated with out-groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Berger and Heath, 2007). The associations and meanings attached by reference groups can help individual members to create their identities (McCracken, 1989) by integrating these brands into their self-concepts.

In addition, prior research indicates that consumers can use their consumption to defend the self against rejection (Lee and Shrum, 2012). Rejection, which entails being ignored or excluded, 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). Williams (2009) offers a temporal model of responses to rejection involving two stages, the reflexive and the reflective. The reflexive stage is an immediate reaction to rejection which results in painful responses such as threatened basic needs and negative affect (Worth and Williams, 2011).

The threatened needs at the reflexive stage direct the individual's attention to reflect on the meaning and importance of the rejection episode, which is termed the reflective stage. In this stage, individuals adopt behavioral responses aimed at fortifying the threatened needs. Such responses may be either prosocial 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 brand is experienced as a personal failure, and therefore results in similar defensive responses to those initiated by 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 offers the first integrative account of brand threat and rejection responses. Specifically, the 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 their social context. In addition, the study seeks to test the moderating role of brand identification, a process which entails the integration of the brand identity into a person's identity to symbolically represent the self-concept (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). High levels of brand identification result in brand defence by an individual as a way to defend their 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). However, it is unclear how consumers are likely to respond in instances of conflict between their social groups and brand identity, as in situations in which an individual's in-group rejects the brand they highly identify with. Indeed, the existing literature provides two contradictory predictions of how consumers are likely to respond, as research from the 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 the 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 the source of rejection (in-group vs. an out-group) in moderating consumer responses to brand-related rejection. By integrating the rejection and branding literatures, the findings further extend each discipline. For instance, the study adds to the rejection literature by investigating whether instances of rejection directed at the brand level of the self are likely to evoke similar reactions to interpersonal rejection. Furthermore, it extends the brand threat literature by investigating the impact of new types of brand threats on consumer responses during the reflexive and reflective stages.

2. Literature Review

2.1.Rejection and brand threat

Rejection is a common yet painful social experience representing a fundamental threat to social survival which leads to severe negative consequences (Williams, 2009; Mead et al., 2011). Due to the importance of actual or possible social rejection, even the slightest form of manipulation can still evoke the detection of rejection, leading 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 gain acceptance from new social partners (Mead et al., 2011), or to 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 the brands integrated into the self-concept are threatened, consumers are likely to show similar defensive responses to those which 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, and bring adverse effects on brand reputations and brand equity (Dutttta and Pullig, 2011). A robust finding in the literature relates to 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 brand defence is resultantly stimulated by a desire to protect the self rather than the brand. For instance, Cheng et al. (2012) argue that consumers with strong self-brand connections (SBC) view the brand as part of the self, and therefore perceive negative brand information as a personal failure (Trump, 2014).

Additionally, Lisjak et al., (2012) indicate that people defend the brands they identify with when under threat to protect the integrity of the self. Building on these ideas, the current study seeks to widen the scope of the research on brand threats, which to date has predominantly focused 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 the brand literature. This study therefore proposes a new framework that predicts consumers’ affective and behavioural responses to brand threats during the reflexive and reflective rejection stages. In doing so, it extends the rejection literature by elaborating that rejection occurring at the brand level of the self creates similar reflexive and reflective

reactions to any other kind of personal rejection. Thus, this research promotes the notion that a brand threat is perceived and responded to as a personal threat. For example, a person may find themselves in a situation where s/he faces explicit rejection by others for wearing a certain brand in public (e.g. when Burberry was banned in UK pubs and clubs in the early 2000s). Such rejection may threaten an individual's need for belonging (i.e. a reflexive reaction), and consequently, the individual may evaluate the brand negatively (i.e. a reflective response).

Moreover, the present 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 are examined. Contextually, the investigation examines the brand threats targeting luxury fashion brands, thus extending the scope of the previous research that has been limited to functional products into the hedonic goods arena. For instance, the categories of products for which relationship strength was measured in previous studies has been limited to consumer electronics (Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli, 2007; Cheng et al., 2012), food (Roehm and Brady, 2007), beverages (Lisjak et al., 2012) and jeans (Huber et al., 2010). While consumers do build relationships with these functional products, hedonic goods such as luxury fashion brands help consumers to express their actual and/or ideal self-concepts (Shukla, Singh and Banerjee, 2015), increasing the likelihood of a stronger consumer brand relationship (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Therefore, luxury fashion brands represent an appropriate context for the investigation 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) elaborates that at

the reflexive stage, individuals experience psychological pain, negative emotional responses as well as threats to their fundamental needs including their 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 arise in response to brand-related rejection, 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 (Swaminathan et al., 2007), so for them, brand-rejection can be perceived as a form of personal rejection. However, consumers who dis-identify with the brand hold extremely negative brand attitudes (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Einwiller et al., 2006) and are less likely to use the brand to express their 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 intended 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). As 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 an instance of brand-related rejection. However,

prior 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, the way high brand identifiers are likely to respond to brand-related rejection initiated by their in-groups remains unclear. Therefore, the current study further investigates the moderating role of the source of rejection in moderating consumer response during the reflexive and reflective stages.

The 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 regardless of whether it is initiated by an in-group, an out-group, or even a despised out-group. Building on the prior research, this study posits that the source of rejection results in negative reflexive reactions no matter 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, so brand-related rejection should be irrelevant to their needs and affect.

H2: During the reflexive stage, consumers with high brand identification will report higher need for belonging and negative affect following brand-related rejection irrespective of source of rejection (in-group vs out-group), while brand dis-identifiers will not be affected.

Gonsalkorale et al. (2008) indicate that when participants are given time to recover beyond the reflexive stage, recovery is faster for those rejected by the out-group than by the in-group. Therefore, this study posits that the source of rejection will moderate consumer responses to brand-related rejection during the reflective stage. Intuitively, it seems that

rejection by an in-group should negatively affect brand attitudes and evaluations more significantly than rejection by an out-group. Robust findings in the 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), and also that 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 present study further suggests that this impact only occurs for consumers who dis-identify with the brand. Prior studies consistently demonstrate that high brand identifiers tend to defend the brands with which they identify against threats, and suggest that brand defence is stimulated by a desire to protect the self (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). Moreover, previous 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 that brand in order to protect the personal self. Building on these ideas, this research hypothesizes that:

H3a: In the 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), regardless of whether the source of rejection is an in-group or an out-group.

H3b: In the reflective stage, when in a brand dis-identification condition, exposure to brand-related rejection leads to lower brand evaluation in the rejection condition

(relative to the 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 the no rejection condition).

3. The Current Research

A set of two experiments were performed to test 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, but the role of the source of rejection was only investigated in study 2. Shoppers were approached in large shopping malls and department stores including Harrods, Westfield mall, Harvey Nichols, and House of Fraser in London, UK. Data was collected at different times of the day and on different days of the week.

3.1. Study 1

Study 1 was 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 (39.60% male, 60.40% female, Age 18-40, $M = 21.42$; Marital status: single 77.20%; married or living with partner 8.50%; others 14.30%) participated in this study. They were randomly assigned to two brand identification conditions and two threat conditions. This study utilized a 2 (Threat manipulation: Rejection vs. No rejection) x 2 (Brand identification: high identification vs. dis-identification) between-

subjects experimental design. The dependent variables were the 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 investigating the link between personality traits and brand preferences. Afterwards, the participants were provided with a consent form followed by brand identification manipulation. In the high brand identification condition, the respondents were asked to name a luxury brand that 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”*. Consumers in the dis-identification condition were asked to name a brand that 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 a manipulation check using the self-brand connection scale (Escalas and Bettman, 2003, 2005), which measures the extent to which brand identity is integrated into a consumer’s identity. It consists of a 7-item, 7-point scale with “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree” as anchors (see Table 1). 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 scenario was adapted from a previous study focusing on distinctiveness threat in which participants were asked to imagine a scenario involving a social interaction containing 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 the present study was altered from the original manipulation to imply a rejection rather than a 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 only 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, the participants were asked to complete the need for belonging and affect scales (Williams, 2009). Need for belonging is a 5-item 7-point scale, while affect is a 4-item 7-point semantic differential scale (See Table 1). Both scales were reversed to reflect the level of need threat (Williams, 2009). The study ended with some demographic questions and a debriefing statement.

Insert Table 1 about here.

3.1.3. Results

To check whether or not the brand identification manipulation had been successful, an independent sample t-test was conducted and the results ($t(165) = 9.83, p < 0.001$) indicated that participants in the high brand condition ($M = 4.24$) reported a significantly higher score than respondents in the dis-identification condition ($M = 2.26$). The threat manipulation check also indicated significant differences between the 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 for belonging between the rejection ($M = 3.37$) and no rejection ($M = 2.79$) conditions for high brand identifiers ($t(87) = 2.10$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that high brand identifiers who were subjected to brand rejection reported a higher need for belonging than respondents in the no rejection condition. Additionally, in the dis-identification condition, such differences did not reach a statistically significant level ($t(85) = 1.58$, $p > 0.05$). Similarly, the results ($t(53.87) = 3.03$, $p < 0.001$) showed that high brand identifiers who were subjected to brand rejection reported a higher negative affect ($M = 3.66$) than respondents in the no rejection condition ($M = 2.74$). Brand dis-identifiers showed no significant differences between the rejection and no rejection conditions ($t(80) = 1.85$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, the results of this study support H1.

Insert Table 2 about here.

3.1.4. Discussion

The study findings indicate that following an instance of brand-related rejection, high brand identifiers report a significantly higher need for belonging and negative affect. However, when consumers dis-identified with the brand, brand-related rejection affected neither their need for belonging nor affect. This finding is consistent with those of Cheng et al. (2012) and Lisjak et al. (2012), who each 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 the previous work on rejection by elaborating that even when rejection is directed at brands with which consumers highly identify, it still evokes the immediate reactions to rejection that stem from personal rejection. Furthermore, the current study focused on luxury fashion brands, which consumers use 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 fail to achieve social connectedness, resulting 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 only measured consumers' responses during the reflexive stage, but 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: the source of rejection.

3.2.1. Participants and Design

A total of 190 participants (29.40% male, 70.60% female; Age 18-40, Age_M = 23.50; Marital status: single 74.20%; married or living with partner 16.30%; others 9.50%) received a paper questionnaire. This study utilized a 2 (Threat manipulation: rejection vs. no rejection) x 2 (Brand identification: high identification vs. dis-identification) x 2 (Source of rejection: In-group vs. Out-group) between-subjects experimental design. The dependent variables were consumer need for belonging, affect, and brand evaluation.

3.2.2. Procedure

This study followed a 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 and an 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 out-group 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, all participants were asked to complete a manipulation check by measuring their level of identification with the source of rejection using a four item, 7-point scale adopted from a study by 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 by 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much so*) ($\alpha = 0.99$). Next, threat manipulation was administered using the same procedure as Study 1, followed by additional manipulation checks which were also similar to Study 1. After a short, unrelated filler task designed to reduce potential demand effects, the participants completed the same need satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.75$) and affect scales ($\alpha = 0.80$) as in study 1. Finally, they 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 ($t(184) = 28.76, p < 0.001$) as 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, for the brand identification manipulation, participants in the high brand identification condition reported a significantly higher score ($M = 4.13$) than those in the dis-identification condition ($M = 1.61$, $t(114.67) = 12.82$, $p < 0.001$). Lastly, a threat manipulation check indicated significant differences ($t(183) = 6.25$, $p < 0.001$) between the rejection ($M = 5.15$) and no rejection conditions ($M = 3.06$). Hence, all the manipulations were deemed successful.

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

Insert Table 3 about here.

In addition, this study 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, the three-way interaction, and all possible two-way interactions. The results of the analysis indicate that there was a main effect of the source of rejection ($F(1, 168) = 54.26$, $p < 0.001$), brand threat ($F(1, 168) = 8.96$, $p < 0.005$) and brand identification ($F(1, 168) = 5.02$, $p < 0.05$) on the 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 the source of rejection on consumer affect was statistically significant ($F(1, 151) = 6.81, p < 0.001$), the three-way interaction was not ($F(1, 151) = 0.51, p > 0.05$). The findings therefore indicate that the source of rejection does not moderate consumers' reflexive responses to brand-related rejection, thus supporting H2.

Insert Table 4 about here.

Lastly, the present study investigated the role of the source of rejection in moderating consumers' responses during the reflective stage. The results showed that brand identification had a significant main effect ($F(1, 166) = 78.42, p < 0.001$) but brand threat ($F(1, 166) = 0.20, p > 0.05$) and the source of rejection ($F(1, 166) = 2.14, p > 0.05$) did not. 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, the data were split by brand identification and a 2-way ANOVA between brand threat and source of rejection was conducted for both the 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 the rejection ($M = 2.33$) and no rejection conditions ($M = 3.92$). However, when the threat was by an out-group, the differences in

brand evaluation did not reach statistical significance ($t(32) = 1.82, p > 0.05$), thus supporting H3a and H3b.

3.2.4. Discussion

As with study 1, the results of study 2 were that brand-related rejection negatively affects high brand identifiers' reflexive responses, while brand dis-identifiers are unaffected. In addition, the high brand identifiers maintain their favourable brand evaluations following a brand threat, while brand dis-identifiers maintain their negative brand evaluations. The findings also indicate that the source of rejection plays a moderating role; however, this was only the case during the reflective stage here. Consistent with Williams (2009), the findings indicate that consumers' reflexive responses to brand-related rejection occur regardless of the source of rejection. With regard to the role of the source of rejection in moderating consumers' reflective responses, the results indicate that exposure to brand-related rejection by an in-group leads to lower brand evaluations for consumers who dis-identify 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), where individuals try to align their self-concept with the group identity to foster affiliation (Mead et al., 2011).

4. General discussion and implications

The results of the two empirical studies described above 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 is integrated into the consumer's self-concept, brand rejection is experienced as a personal rejection, thus extending the previous research on brand threats (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). In the reflective stage, consumers who highly identified with the brand defend it by maintaining their brand evaluations. An interesting finding relates to the influence of the source of rejection in moderating consumer responses during the reflective stage, and is that when the source of rejection is an in-group, the consumer responses are more negatively affected by brand threat than when the rejection is by an out-group. However, perhaps surprisingly, this pattern was only observed when consumers dis-identify with the brand. When brand identification is high, consumer responses are not affected by either their in-groups or their out-groups.

The key theoretical contribution of the current research stems from its integration of perspectives from brand threat, and social rejection literature to predict how consumers respond to brand-related rejection during the reflexive and reflective stages. In doing so, it uniquely contributes 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 also extend the rejection literature by highlighting that instances of rejection directed at the brand level of the self still evoke similar reflexive reactions to interpersonal rejection by threatening the consumer's need for belonging and affect. Furthermore, the study illuminates the strategic nature of group conformity by identifying a boundary condition to the previously-documented findings relating to reference group influence on brand preferences (Escalas and Bettman, 2003, 2005). Consumers are only inclined to follow group preferences when they dis-identify with a brand. However, when the brand constitutes a part of their self, consumers are no longer influenced by their in-groups.

This counterintuitive finding extends the previous results by indicating that highly identified group members can sometimes deviate from their in-groups to pursue their personal interests rather than the group interest.

The current findings have important implications for luxury brand managers. 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 possibilities for how brand managers should engage with their loyal customers, and suggests that they could devise campaigns that stress consumer individuality, highlighting the unique value of the brand and how it can help consumers to differentiate themselves from others. For example, LVMH created a digital experience campaign – nowness.com – which offers a unique visual storytelling platform. The campaign allowed consumers to highlight their individuality and uniqueness by curating their own content on the website.

The present findings also elaborate that brand dis-identifiers are negatively influenced by brand rejection initiated by their in-group. Hence, a different strategy should be used to “win” those consumers by communicating messages that highlight the social nature of the brand and its popularity. Luxury brand managers should aim to build and enhance consumer–brand relationships with brand dis-identifiers through the creation of brand communities and organized social events (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Moreover, their advertising campaigns should emphasize conformity and social values. For example, Dolce and Gabbana successfully portrayed social values and conformity in their advertising campaigns by showing families using their brand together. Such campaigns allow dis-identifiers to connect with a brand's societal values and social identity.

Overall, the findings show that high brand identifiers and dis-identifiers require distinct and separate communication and engagement approaches. A single campaign which attempts to reach both market segments may not be a viable strategy for luxury brands.

This study offers a number of insights and illuminates a number of avenues for future research. With respect to the source of brand-related rejection, the study focused on threats arising from the in-group versus those from the out-group in order to investigate the inter-relationships between different levels of identity within a person's self-schema. However, the relational self, which has a higher rank than the social self in the hierarchy of the selves (Sedikidies et al., 2013) was not taken into account. Future research should therefore investigate brand-related rejection stemming from significant others, relationship partners, and potential or ex-partners.

In addition, the source of rejection was manipulated in the current research by asking the participants to list a social group to which they felt they belonged or did not belong, resulting in a wide variance in the nature of these groups. Prior research indicates that the social groups to which people belong vary in importance and influence (Ellemers et al., 2002), so an interesting avenue for future research would be to examine the impact of brand-related rejection stemming from different types of in-groups and out-groups. Different types of groups may have varying effects on the extent to which consumers are willing to confirm or dissent.

A fruitful line of further enquiry may also be to examine the role of culture as a moderator. We opine that the relational self as well as social grouping is bound to be influenced by the culture to which an individual belongs. Thus, the exploration of both macro level cultural traits such as individualism vs collectivism (Hofstede, 2001) and micro level traits such as self-

construal (interdependence vs independence; Markus and Kitayama, 1991) could produce further nuanced understanding of brand rejection through a cultural lens.

Future research would also benefit by examining and controlling for other relevant socio-demographic variables, such as education and occupation, among others. Additionally, in addition to examining the threats arising from an individual's social groups, researchers could investigate the influence of different sources of brand threats, including non-personal commercial sources such as advertising and marketing professionals, as well as the credibility of these sources, in order to gain further generalizability.

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Table 1: Scale items for Study 1

Variable	Scale Items	Scale Type	Cronbach's alpha
Brand Identification (Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This brand reflects who I am 2. I can identify with this brand 3. I feel a personal connection to this brand 4. I use this brand to communicate who I am to other people 5. I think this brand helps me become the type of person I want to be 6. I consider this brand to be “me”, It reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others 7. This brand suits me well 	7-point scale (1=strongly disagree/7=(strongly agree))	0.95
Need for Belonging (Williams 2009)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I feel disconnected 2. I feel rejected 3. I feel like an outsider” 4. I feel I belong to the group 5. I feel other group members interact with me a lot 	7-point scale (1=Not at all/7=(very much))	0.71
Affect (Williams 2009)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Good/bad, 2. Pleasant/unpleasant, 3. Bothered/Not bothered 4. Hurt/Not hurt). 	7-point semantic differential scale	0.70

Table 2: Effect of brand rejection and brand identification on need for belonging and affect for Study 1

	Disidentification		High identification	
	No rejection	Rejection	No rejection	Rejection
<i>Need for belonging</i>				
M	2.96	3.36	2.79	3.37
SD	1.27	1.12	1.46	1.14
<i>Affect</i>				
M	3.39	3.90	2.74	3.66
SD	1.27	1.18	1.42	1.12

Table 3: Effect of brand rejection and brand identification on need for belonging and affect for Study 2

	Disidentification		High identification	
	No rejection	Rejection	No rejection	Rejection
<i>Need for belonging</i>				
M	3.21	3.26	2.43	3.26
SD	1.42	1.18	1.24	1.15
<i>Affect</i>				
M	3.47	3.49	2.40	3.86
SD	1.17	1.40	1.37	1.22

Table 4: Effects of brand rejection, brand identification and source of rejection on brand evaluation for Study 2

	No Rejection		Rejection	
	M	SD	M	SD
<i>High identification</i>				
In-group	7.06	2.26	6.82	2.53
Out-group	6.53	2.32	5.60	2.53
<i>Dis-Identification</i>				
In-group	3.92	2.61	2.33	1.88
Out-group	2.65	1.77	4.00	2.50