

Some like it warm: How warm brands mitigate the negative effects of social exclusion

Soyoung Kim¹  | Kyle B. Murray² | Sarah G. Moore²

¹Lubin School of Business, Pace University, New York City, New York, USA

²Alberta School of Business, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Correspondence

Soyoung Kim, Lubin School of Business, Pace University, New York, NY 10038, USA.
Email: skim7@pace.edu

Funding information

SSHRC 895-2019-1011

Abstract

Consumers' feelings of being excluded—which indicate a deficit in important social resources such as connection, acceptance, and support—have increased over the last 50 years. In this research, by adopting a resource-based view of brands, we examine how and why brands play a role in socially excluded consumers' lives. Across a series of studies, we find that excluded consumers perceive warm (vs. less warm) brands as better relationship partners. Because of this, excluded consumers choose warm (vs. less warm) brands more often, and they feel less lonely as a result. We also test the role of brand warmth relative to brand competence and to individual differences in self-acceptance. We find that excluded consumers' preferences for warm brands persist even when the warm brands are low in competence and even when consumers possess high self-acceptance. This research reveals the relational, resource-restorative role of warm brands and provides implications for consumers' coping and emotional well-being in our increasingly isolated society.

KEYWORDS

brand warmth, consumer–brand relationships, consumer choice, loneliness, social exclusion

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consumers are increasingly excluded—isolated or alone—and increasingly lonely—in a chronic state of exclusion (Williams, 2007). These high levels of exclusion and loneliness are due to lifestyle changes and technological advances (Pieters, 2013). In 2018, 40% of American survey respondents reported that they felt isolated sometimes or always and that their relationships were not meaningful (Cigna Newsroom, 2018). The percentage of consumers who report feelings of chronic loneliness has risen from 11% in the 1970s to 20% in the 1980s, to nearly 40% in 2010 (Entis, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic deepened this issue, with the implementation of stay-at-home orders, quarantine, social distancing, and online schooling (Holt-Lunstad, 2020). While COVID-related restrictions have been eased, the pandemic took a toll on well-being, and consumers continue to experience the psychological fallout of insufficient support and social exclusion (Cost, 2022; Morava & Andrew, 2021).

The increasingly pervasive feeling of being socially excluded is painful because it deprives individuals of important social resources such as connection and acceptance, which are necessary to preserve health (Windsor et al., 2015). Social exclusion has adverse effects on physical and psychological health and well-being (Windsor et al., 2015). In fact, the health risks of social exclusion are estimated to be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having an alcohol use disorder (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Given the serious negative effects of social exclusion on consumers, it is important to explore the potential role that brands might play in mitigating these outcomes.

Indeed, in the face of social exclusion, consumption choices change (Wang et al., 2012). For example, excluded consumers may choose nostalgic products or those that provide social connections and affiliation with others (Loveland et al., 2010; Mead et al., 2011). Extending previous work on social exclusion, this research examines how excluded consumers relate to and build relationships with brands. Building on a resource-based view that conceptualizes people

and brands as social resources (Fletcher-Brown et al., 2021; Hobfoll, 1988) and on the idea that brands can be imbued with psychological warmth (Aaker et al., 2004), this research aims to examine the role that brand warmth plays in affecting consumer–brand relationships, purchase preferences, and felt loneliness. Specifically, we ask whether social exclusion increases consumer preference for warm brands, and by what mechanism. We also explore whether warm brands reduce excluded consumers' felt loneliness. Further, we test how other important brand traits (competence) and individual factors (self-acceptance) might affect the relationship between exclusion and brand warmth. We argue that excluded consumers will exhibit an increased preference for warm brands because they perceive those brands as better relationship partners. We further argue that choosing warm brands will reduce consumers' felt loneliness. Finally, we propose that brand warmth may be a stronger factor than brand competence and individual self-acceptance in counteracting exclusion. Overall, this offers a richer picture of how consumer copes with exclusion and highlights the role of warm brands in withstanding exclusion.

Our research contributes to the marketing and psychology literatures and provides managerial implications. First, we complement the literatures on social exclusion and consumer–brand relationships by exploring which brands excluded consumers turn to, and why. Going beyond the use of products as a tool to re-establish social connections or to reduce the need for human affiliation (Mourey et al., 2017), this research reveals that excluded consumers are motivated to choose and build committed relationships with warm brands and shows that they receive comfort from doing so. Further, we reveal the underlying mechanism by which excluded consumers are drawn to particular brands: they view warm brands as better relationship partners. We also show that these effects persist across brand-related (competence) and consumer-related (self-acceptance) factors, revealing the strength of the warm brand effect.

Second, while brand competence has been regarded as a more important factor in affecting purchase intentions than warmth (Aaker et al., 2012), we show that when socially excluded, consumers may shift their attention toward brand warmth and prefer warm brands.

Third, this work contributes to the psychology literature on coping behavior. Previous research in clinical psychology has focused on the importance of a single type of social resource, that is, supportive human relationships, in coping with adversity. However, these needed supportive human relationships might sometimes be denied or may not be readily available (Hobfoll, 2002). By exploring warm brands as another social resource that provides support and reduces felt loneliness, this research expands the scope of the social resource reservoir that consumers can employ, thereby complementing the coping psychology literature.

Lastly, this research delves into the important, real-world issue of social exclusion. By doing so, it provides implications for firms and policymakers. The segment of consumers who feel socially excluded and lonely has grown rapidly in recent years, a trend that was

aggravated by the pandemic. The current research suggests that exclusion is a relevant consumer factor and firms should consider these consumers' psychological states and cultivate brand warmth for this segment. Our studies provide useful guidance for brand managers, designers, and marketers on how to cultivate warmth as an important brand trait. Further, this research has implications for policymakers. As reducing loneliness is an important goal for public mental health (MentalHealth.org., 2021), we show how warm brands alleviate feelings of loneliness and can have a positive impact on consumers' well-being.

In the following sections, we outline our theoretical framework and present five studies. Then we discuss the implications for marketing and psychology along with limitations and directions for future research.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | The rise of social exclusion

As a result of social and technological change, consumers are increasingly experiencing social exclusion (Cigna Newsroom, 2018). Individuals spend more time at work and less time with their families and friends (MentalHealth.org, 2010). Consumers now shop, socialize, and even receive education online, which decreases face-to-face communication and increases social isolation (MentalHealth.org, 2010). Further, those who use social media frequently are more likely to feel excluded and encounter mental health issues (Primack et al., 2021). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified these existing problems; feelings of loneliness increased by 20%–30%, and emotional distress tripled during the pandemic (Holt-Lunstad, 2020).

This widespread phenomenon of social exclusion—that is, feeling isolated or alone—harms consumers' health and well-being. This is because exclusion threatens our fundamental need to belong (DeWall et al., 2009) and deprives consumers of important social resources such as social connection, acceptance, and support (Levontin et al., 2015), which are critical to preserve physical and psychological health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). For example, social exclusion increases distress, sadness, and pain (Zadro et al., 2004) and inhibits cognitive functioning and the ability to self-regulate (Baumeister et al., 2002). Social exclusion is accompanied by dysfunctional physiological symptoms, such as increases in stress hormones and blood pressure (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). Ultimately, exclusion increases individuals' risk of mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Thus, it is important to examine how consumers can cope with—and how marketers can mitigate—the detrimental consequences of social exclusion.

Prior research has investigated how individuals use consumption to cope with social exclusion. This work shows that consumption can help excluded consumers reconnect with or send social signals to others. For example, excluded consumers may use consumption strategically to regain social connections (Mead et al., 2011) or may browse and spend

more money in a crowded retail space (Thomas & Saenger, 2020). Excluded consumers are also more likely to indulge in nostalgic products that invoke favorable childhood memories (Loh et al., 2021; Loveland et al., 2010) and choose more humanlike brands (Chen et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2022; Mourey et al., 2017). However, when the likelihood of social acceptance is low or when the cause of social exclusion is perceived as stable (i.e., when fixing the situation is difficult), consumers may instead engage in conspicuous consumption (Lee & Shrum, 2012).

Rather than focusing on how excluded consumers use products to relate to humans, the current research focuses on how excluded consumers build relationships with brands. Specifically, we examine what brand traits excluded consumers are motivated to seek, and why, along with what consequences. Drawing on a resource-based view of brands (Hobfoll, 1988) and on warmth as a fundamental dimension of brand assessment (Aaker et al., 2004), we propose that warm brands may facilitate stronger consumer–brand relationships and mitigate consumer loneliness.

2.2 | Brand warmth, relationship partner quality, and loneliness

Conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1988) argues that individuals actively strive to acquire and protect personal and social resources. Resources are defined as entities or objects that are either centrally valued in their own right, such as health, or that serve as a means to obtain valued ends, such as social support or money (Hobfoll, 2002). When these resources are threatened or lost, people experience stress and are motivated to restore and protect those resources. As reviewed, social exclusion, that is, being isolated or alone, indicates a deficiency of social resources such as connection, acceptance, and support. Thus, when socially excluded, consumers are motivated to restore those resources (DeWall & Richman, 2011). For example, isolated and vulnerable consumers who try to recover from natural or human-made hazards (e.g., cancer) engage with a brand's corporate social media campaign to replenish their depleted emotional and social resources (Fletcher-Brown et al., 2021). When feeling excluded, consumers attend to potential sources of positivity and social connection, and affiliation, while avoiding the possibility of rejection (DeWall & Richman, 2011). Excluded consumers are more attuned to others' eye gaze (Wilkowski et al., 2009), more quickly identify smiling faces, and fixate their attention on potential sources of affiliation (DeWall et al., 2009).

Given this strong motivation to restore social resources following exclusion, we predict that when socially excluded, consumers will be more likely to be drawn to brand warmth. At the interpersonal level, warmth is a fundamental dimension that concerns the perceived intentions of others and guides individuals' social perceptions (Fiske et al., 2007). For example, when individuals encounter others, they assess whether or not those others have positive intentions toward them. Research on interpersonal relationships suggests that warmth is an important relationship quality because it is positively related to providing emotional support and showing sensitivity to others' needs (Fletcher et al., 2004; MacDonald, 1992).

A substantial body of work in marketing has suggested that consumers build relationships with brands as they build relationships with humans (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2021; Dunn & Hoegg, 2014; Fournier, 1998). Thus, warmth also plays a key role in shaping consumers' perception of and interactions with brands (Aaker et al., 2010; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Fournier, 1998). When assessing brands, consumers consider relational aspects in addition to functional aspects, by asking "what intentions does this brand have?" (Ivens et al., 2015). Brands with positive intentions are seen as kind, friendly, and approachable, and are perceived as warm (Kervyn et al., 2012). Being perceived as a warm brand provides tangible and intangible benefits, including increased positive affect, brand intimacy, customer loyalty, and purchase intentions (Antonetti et al., 2021; Davvetas & Halkias, 2019). For example, brands high in warmth tend to elicit more admiration than brands low in warmth, which increases brand loyalty and purchase intentions; in contrast, brands low in warmth tend to generate more contempt, which decreases brand loyalty and purchase intentions (Kervyn et al., 2012).

We suggest that brand warmth may be a particularly relevant quality during adversity. The interpersonal coping literature suggests that when individuals encounter stressors, their need to affiliate with others increases. As a result, individuals develop strong relationships with those who were present with them during their adversity because these others fulfilled their affiliation need (Fried, 1963). Because exclusion is a painful life experience that intensifies consumers' need to affiliate while avoiding rejection, excluded consumers should be attracted to warm brands. Such brands signal positive intentions and are seen as kind, friendly and accessible; they serve as a safe source of positivity and connection. Thus, excluded consumers will be likely to view warm (vs. less warm) brands as possessing better relationship partner qualities. Partner quality judgments concern consumers' evaluations of a brand's performance in terms of its partnership role and how it will treat them over time (Fournier, 1998; Jahn et al., 2012; Sung & Choi, 2010). In other words, when a warm brand is present with excluded consumers, consumers will be likely to perceive this brand as a potential relationship partner who can be there for them and provide needed support, making them feel wanted, listened to, and cared for (Aaker et al., 2004; Fournier, 1998); in turn, consumers' preferences for that brand should increase (e.g., Blackston, 2000).

However, when consumers do not feel socially excluded, their need for connection and acceptance will be weaker, and thus, attraction to—and preferences for—warm (vs. less warm) brands will decrease; brands with other traits, such as competence, might be more salient and appealing to consumers as relationship partners. Thus,

- H1:** *Socially excluded (vs. non-excluded) consumers will exhibit a greater preference for warm brands.*
- H2:** *Socially excluded (vs. non-excluded) consumers' preference for warm brands will be driven by their perception that these brands are better relationship partners.*

We also propose that when consumers are socially excluded, warm brands can reduce their felt loneliness. Exclusion increases feelings of

loneliness, which reflect deficient social needs and support (DeWall & Richman, 2011). As warm brands signal positive intentions toward consumers (e.g., care and kindness), similar to supportive others that provide connection, acceptance, and support (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Ivens et al., 2015), warm brands may serve as an alternative social resource and alleviate felt loneliness. Therefore,

H3: *Socially excluded consumers will feel less lonely after they encounter warm (vs. less warm) brands.*

2.3 | Strength of brand warmth under social exclusion

We suggest that excluded consumers prefer warm brands. However, to withstand exclusion, consumers may also consider other brand traits or mobilize their personal resources, which are internal and proximal to the self (Hobfoll, 2002). Accordingly, we examine the role of brand warmth in conjunction with brand competence (as an important brand trait) and self-acceptance (as a personal resource) in coping with exclusion. This provides a fuller, more realistic account of consumer coping dynamics. We predict that because brand warmth provides a better fit in addressing the situationally heightened motivation to restore social resources than either brand competence or self-acceptance (Hobfoll, 2002), warm brand preferences will persist.

2.3.1 | Brand competence

Along with brand warmth, brand competence is an important factor that guides consumers' brand judgments (Fiske et al., 2007). Competence reflects perceptions of brands' abilities to act on their intentions, such as their effectiveness, capability, and intelligence. Competence positively affects brand passion, brand loyalty, and purchase behavior (Davvetas & Halkias, 2019). Previous research has regarded competence as a more important factor than warmth in driving consumer purchase behavior (Aaker et al., 2012); however, research also shows that competent brands may invoke the perception of being cold (Davvetas & Halkias, 2019; Remington et al., 2000). Social exclusion activates the motivation to restore connection while avoiding potential rejection. We predict that excluded consumers will see brand warmth as a more valued trait than competence and that they will prefer warm brands—even when those brands lack competence. Thus,

H4: *Socially excluded (vs. non-excluded) consumers will prefer warm brands even at low levels of brand competence.*

2.3.2 | Individual self-acceptance

Individuals possess different personal (e.g., self-control) and social (e.g., supportive human relationships) resources and may

use a combination of these in withstanding stressors. Given this fungibility, excluded consumers may use personal resources, such as self-acceptance, to cope with a lack of social resources. Self-acceptance is the detachment of one's self-worth from one's self-assessment (Chamberlain & Haggga, 2001). Individuals high in self-acceptance value themselves unconditionally, irrespective of whether they meet their ideal state of attractiveness, performance, or others' evaluations (Chamberlain & Haggga, 2001). Thus, if consumers with high self-acceptance rely on this personal resource to cope with social exclusion, they may have less need for a warm brand's relationship partner qualities and may exhibit a weaker preference for warm brands, while those with low self-acceptance may exhibit a stronger preference for warm brands.

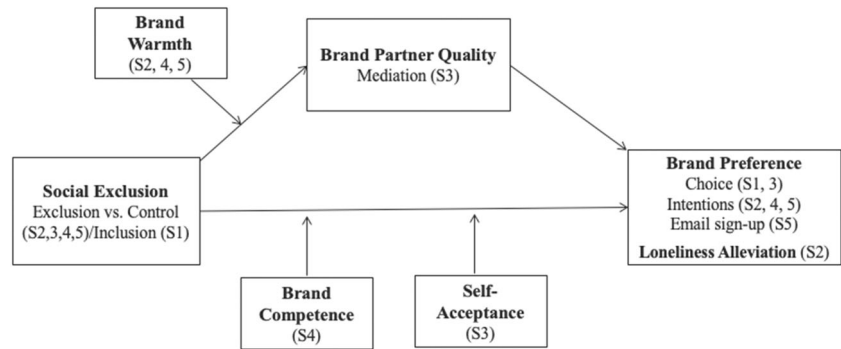
However, based on resource fit theory (Hobfoll, 2002), we argue that self-acceptance may not be sufficient to counteract the depletion of social resources following exclusion. This is because in order for a resource to facilitate coping, the degree of fit between the resource and the situational demand is important. In other words, a resource is beneficial to the extent that it is capable of replacing the lost resources. As theorized, warm brands possess relationship partner qualities that are well suited to connecting with consumers, which makes them particularly relevant support for excluded consumers. Although self-acceptance may have intuitive appeal as a defense against exclusion, it is not well suited to providing the relational resources that warm brands can, and thus we expect that it is less likely to mitigate the effects of social exclusion. Stated differently, higher self-acceptance is unlikely to affect preference for warm brands among socially excluded consumers. Thus,

H5: *Socially excluded (vs. non-excluded) consumers who are high in self-acceptance will show a preference for warm brands.*

Figure 1 displays our conceptual framework and indicates which studies test different parts of this framework.

2.4 | Alternative explanations

Although we suggest that the positive effect of social exclusion on warm brand preference is driven by favorable perceptions of warm brands' relationship partner quality, three alternative explanations could account for this effect: mood, self-brand distance, and cuteness. First, excluded consumers might prefer warm brands due to a motivation to repair their negative mood, which can be generated following social exclusion (Mourey et al., 2017). Second, excluded consumers could prefer warm brands because exclusion decreases the perceived distance between the brands and themselves (Kull et al., 2021). Third, excluded consumers could exhibit a preference for warm brands because such brands might be perceived as cute (Shin & Mattila, 2021). Each of these potential explanations is examined in our studies.

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework.

3 | OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We test our framework in five studies. Study 1 tests the main effect of social exclusion on warm brand preference using a consequential choice. Study 2 replicates the main effect using different warm brands and examines warm brands' ability to alleviate loneliness. Study 3 tests brand partner quality as the underlying mechanism of warm brand choice and investigates whether consumer self-acceptance affects brand preference. Study 4 explores whether brand competence affects consumer warm brand preference. Lastly, Study 5 replicates the warm brand preference using a brand description and a consequential email sign-up measure.

4 | STUDY 1

Study 1 tested the relationship between social exclusion and warm brand preference. Specifically, we examined the effect of social exclusion on warm brand preference using real laundry brands (i.e., Snuggle and Tide) that we pretested on warmth. In addition, we tested whether negative mood could explain the predicted warm brand effect.

4.1 | Pretest

Before conducting Study 1, we conducted a pretest with a separate sample of undergraduate participants ($N = 22$, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.8$; 45.5% female) on the extent to which Snuggle and Tide were seen as warm and competent (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). The results showed that Snuggle was perceived as warmer ($M_{\text{Snuggle}} = 6.27$, $SD = 0.98$) than Tide ($M_{\text{Tide}} = 5.09$, $SD = 1.06$; $p < 0.001$), while the two brands did not differ in competence ($M_{\text{Snuggle}} = 5.36$, $SD = 1.05$, $M_{\text{Tide}} = 5.86$, $SD = 1.25$; $p = 0.10$).

4.2 | Method

One hundred and thirty undergraduate students participated in the experiment for partial course credit. Upon arriving at the lab, participants were seated in front of a computer. Participants were told that they would be playing an Internet game called Cyberball, which has been

widely used to manipulate social exclusion (Williams et al., 2000). They would play with two other students to test their visualization skills. However, the other players were actually generated by computer. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: exclusion or inclusion. In the beginning, one of two players threw a ball to a participant. After receiving a ball from one of the players, the participant had to decide to whom they would like to throw a ball by clicking on a button that indicated each player. In the exclusion condition, participants received a ball three times and then were completely excluded from the game. In other words, they did not receive the ball from the two players. In the inclusion condition, participants randomly received the ball 33% of the time. After finishing the game of 24 throws, participants indicated their perception of being excluded as a manipulation check. They also reported their mood using five items: angry, sad, bad, happy, and pleasant (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*; Williams et al., 2000).

Upon completion of the game, participants were instructed to raise their hands to notify the experimenter. The experimenter told participants that as a token of appreciation for their participation, they could have a bag that contained several laundry detergent pods. Then participants were presented with two gift bags to choose between. One gift bag had a Snuggle logo printed on it, and the other had a Tide logo printed on it (Supporting Information: Appendix A). After participants chose a gift bag to keep, they were asked to record their choice on the computer by checking the box for either Snuggle or Tide. They also reported how involved they were in purchasing laundry detergent as a covariate (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Upon completion of the study, participants were thanked and debriefed. Three participants who failed to raise their hands and thus did not receive a gift bag and one participant who refused a gift bag due to environmental concerns were excluded from the analyses, leaving a final sample of 126 ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.6$, $SD = 2.54$; 55.5% female).

4.3 | Results

4.3.1 | Manipulation check

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) analysis showed that participants in the exclusion condition felt more excluded than those in the inclusion condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 4.35$ vs. $M_{\text{inclusion}} = 2.30$; $F(1, 124) = 120.84$, $p < 0.001$).

4.3.2 | Brand choice

A logistic regression of brand choice on social exclusion yielded a significant effect of exclusion (Wald $\chi^2 = 4.44$, $p = 0.035$): excluded participants were more likely to choose the Snuggle brand gift bag (i.e., the warm brand) than included participants (64.8% vs. 44.8%).

To account for any effects of involvement, the same analysis was conducted with involvement as a covariate. However, including this covariate did not change the observed result, as the effect of social exclusion on warm brand preference remained significant ($p = 0.022$). Since this was also the case for Studies 2–5, we do not include involvement in our subsequent analyses.


4.3.3 | Negative mood

Next, we tested whether negative mood could explain the effect of social exclusion on warm brand choice. After reverse-coding feelings of happy and pleasant, all five mood items were combined into an overall negative mood score ($\alpha = .86$); higher numbers indicate stronger negative mood. The effect of social exclusion on negative mood was significant ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 3.58$ vs. $M_{\text{inclusion}} = 2.41$; $t(123) = 8.63$, $p < 0.01$): excluded participants experienced more negative mood than included participants. However, the indirect effect of social exclusion on warm brand choice via negative mood was not significant (Model 4, indirect effect = -0.031 , 95% CI: $-0.667, 0.642$; Hayes, 2013).




4.4 | Discussion

The results of Study 1 provide evidence that social exclusion increases consumers' choice of warm brands. As predicted, relative to socially included participants, excluded participants were more likely to choose a Snuggle gift bag over a Tide gift bag. We also show that negative mood does not account for the warm brand effect.

5 | STUDY 2

The objectives of Study 2 were to replicate the main effect of Study 1 and to test the loneliness-alleviating function of warm brands. To achieve these objectives, instead of using real brands, Study 2 used two fictitious clothing brands that varied on warmth (Sammy  Danny vs. SAMMY & DANNY), with different logos and fonts drawn from Aaker et al. (2004). Second, instead of a Cyberball game, this study used a writing task to manipulate social exclusion (Lee & Shrum, 2012). Third, instead of an inclusion condition, Study 2 included a no-exclusion control condition to ensure the main effect is driven by exclusion and not inclusion.


5.1 | Pretest

We conducted a separate pretest on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; $N = 103$, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.1$). Participants evaluated either “Sammy  Danny” or “SAMMY & DANNY” in terms of warmth and competence (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; Aaker et al., 2012). An independent t -test showed that participants perceived “Sammy  Danny” as warmer ($M_{\text{warmth}} = 5.88$, $SD = 1.06$) than “SAMMY & DANNY” ($M_{\text{warmth}} = 4.88$, $SD = 1.01$; $p < 0.001$). There were no differences in competence perceptions ($M_{\text{Sammy  Danny}} = 4.67$, $SD = 1.06$ vs. $M_{\text{SAMMY & DANNY}} = 4.73$, $SD = 1.02$; $p = 0.80$).

5.2 | Method

MTurk participants ($N = 389$) were randomly assigned to a 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. no exclusion) by 2 (brand warmth: warm vs. less warm) between-subjects design.

Participants were told that they would be participating in a series of unrelated studies. First, they were asked to write about a personal experience for 5 minutes. Participants were randomly assigned to either an exclusion or a no-exclusion (control) condition. In the exclusion condition, participants recalled and wrote about a time in which they were socially excluded by groups or individuals (Lee & Shrum, 2012; see Supporting Information: Supplementary Material for writing instructions). In the no-exclusion condition, participants recalled and wrote about a time in which they had driven or walked to the grocery store. After writing their essay, as a manipulation check, participants indicated how excluded they had felt during the experience they wrote about (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Next, as part of the ostensibly unrelated second study, participants completed a brand evaluation task, in which they viewed a brand logo: either Sammy  Danny (warm brand) or SAMMY & DANNY (less warm brand; for stimuli, see Supporting Information: Appendix A) and rated the extent to which they were interested in purchasing the brand (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Finally, to assess loneliness, participants answered two questions about whether they were currently feeling lonely and deprived of social connections with people (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; DeWall & Richman, 2011). Participants also completed an attention check, where they were instructed to select “none of the above” in response to the question. Thirteen participants who failed the attention check or did not follow the writing task instructions (e.g., not recalling a social exclusion experience, writing irrelevant stories) were excluded from analysis (Lee et al., 2017), leaving a final sample of 376 ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.7$, $SD = 11.64$; 48.1% female).

5.3 | Results

5.3.1 | Manipulation check

An ANOVA analysis showed that participants in the social exclusion condition felt more excluded than those in the no-exclusion

condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 6.38$ vs. $M_{\text{no-exclusion}} = 1.73$; $F(1, 374) = 1651.73$, $p < 0.001$).

5.3.2 | Brand purchase intentions

A 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. no exclusion) by 2 (brand warmth: warm vs. less warm) ANOVA on brand purchase intentions revealed a marginally significant main effect of social exclusion ($F(1, 372) = 3.49$, $p = 0.06$): when participants were socially excluded, they had higher overall purchase intentions than those who were not excluded. The main effect of brand warmth on purchase intentions was not significant ($F(1, 372) = 2.15$, $p = 0.14$). Importantly, the analysis showed a significant interaction of social exclusion and brand warmth ($F(1, 372) = 7.54$, $p < 0.01$). When excluded, participants had higher intentions to purchase the warm brand (i.e., Sammy ❤️ Danny) than the less warm brand (i.e., SAMMY & DANNY; $M_{\text{Warm}} = 4.59$, $SD = 1.54$ vs. $M_{\text{Less warm}} = 3.86$, $SD = 1.77$; $p < 0.01$). This difference was not significant in the no-exclusion condition ($M_{\text{Warm}} = 3.80$, $SD = 1.68$ vs. $M_{\text{Less warm}} = 4.01$, $SD = 1.65$; $p > 0.35$). When excluded, participants had higher purchase intentions for a warm brand than non-excluded participants ($M_{\text{Excluded}} = 4.59$, $SD = 1.54$ vs. $M_{\text{Non-excluded}} = 3.80$, $SD = 1.68$; $p < 0.01$); the difference was not significant in the less warm brand condition ($M_{\text{Excluded}} = 3.86$, $SD = 1.77$ vs. $M_{\text{Non-excluded}} = 4.01$, $SD = 1.65$; $p > 0.50$).

5.3.3 | Loneliness

After averaging the two loneliness items ($\gamma = .81$, DeWall & Richman, 2011), we conducted a 2 (social exclusion) by 2 (brand warmth) ANOVA on overall felt loneliness. The main effect of social exclusion on loneliness was significant ($F(1, 372) = 21.36$, $p < 0.001$): excluded participants felt lonelier than non-excluded participants. The main effect of brand warmth on loneliness was not significant ($F(1, 372) = 0.68$, $p = 0.41$). Importantly, the analysis yielded a significant two-way interaction ($F(1, 372) = 12.31$, $p = 0.022$). When participants were excluded, those in the warm brand condition felt less lonely ($M_{\text{Warm}} = 2.41$, $SD = 1.54$) than those in the less warm brand condition ($M_{\text{Less warm}} = 2.91$, $SD = 1.71$, $p = 0.047$). However, loneliness did not differ by brand warmth when participants were not excluded ($M_{\text{Warm}} = 2.05$, $SD = 1.49$, $M_{\text{Less warm}} = 1.82$, $SD = 1.37$; $p > 0.25$).

5.4 | Discussion

Using different warm brands, a different exclusion manipulation, and a no-exclusion control condition, these findings replicate Study 1 and provide consistent support for the effect of social exclusion on warm brand preference. The results also indicate that warm brands may indeed restore social resources: when excluded participants encountered a warm brand, they felt less lonely and less deprived of social

connections with people. This finding suggests that warm brands may partially restore social connection and acceptance.

6 | STUDY 3

Using the laundry brands from Study 1, Study 3 tested perceived brand partner quality as a potential mediator of excluded consumers' preference for warm brands. We also tested self-acceptance as a moderator.

6.1 | Pretest

We first pretested Snuggle and Tide in terms of warmth and competence on MTurk, from which we drew the Study 3 sample ($N = 101$, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.9$, $SD = 12.15$). Replicating the pretest in Study 1, Snuggle was perceived as warmer ($M_{\text{Snuggle}} = 6.12$, $SD = 1.04$) than Tide ($M_{\text{Tide}} = 5.37$, $SD = 1.27$; $p < 0.01$), while there was no significant difference in competence ($M_{\text{Snuggle}} = 5.46$, $SD = 1.21$; $M_{\text{Tide}} = 5.71$, $SD = 1.04$; $p = 0.26$).

6.2 | Method

Two hundred and eighty-two MTurk participants completed Study 3. In this study, we used a single factor—social exclusion (exclusion vs. no exclusion)—between-subjects design and measured brand choice and individual self-acceptance.

Upon consent, participants were randomly assigned to the social exclusion or the no-exclusion condition, which used the writing task from Study 2. Next, participants proceeded to an unrelated brand evaluation task in which they viewed both Snuggle and Tide in a randomized order; across conditions, Snuggle and Tide remained constant. Specifically, participants were presented with Snuggle and Tide in a counterbalanced order. They reported on anticipated partner quality for each brand in turn, using three items adapted from Fournier (1998) to report on each: "This brand would treat me as an important and valuable customer," "This brand would take good care of me," "I have a lot of respect for this brand" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Next, participants were presented with both brands simultaneously and indicated which of the two they would prefer to buy: Snuggle or Tide. The order in which the brands appeared in this choice measure was counterbalanced.

Last, participants answered 20 self-acceptance items (e.g., "To feel like a worthwhile person, I must be loved by the people who are important to me"; 1 = *almost always untrue*, 7 = *almost always true*; Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001) and reported their involvement in purchasing laundry detergent (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Finally, they completed the same attention check as in Study 2. Twenty-two participants who failed the attention check or did not follow the writing task instructions were excluded from the analyses, leaving a final sample of 260 ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.2$, $SD = 12.19$; 54% female).

6.3 | Results

6.3.1 | Manipulation check

An ANOVA analysis revealed that participants in the social exclusion condition felt more excluded than those in the no-exclusion condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 6.42$, $SD = 1.35$ vs. $M_{\text{no-exclusion}} = 1.78$, $SD = 0.90$; $F(1, 258) = 1005.64$, $p < 0.001$).

6.3.2 | Brand choice

Regressing choice of Snuggle versus Tide on social exclusion yielded a significant effect (Wald $\chi^2 = 5.83$, $p = 0.016$): socially excluded participants were more likely to choose Snuggle than non-excluded participants (46.2% vs. 31.5%).

6.3.3 | Self-acceptance

Regressing the choice of Snuggle versus Tide on social exclusion, self-acceptance ($\alpha = .72$), and the self-acceptance by social exclusion interaction showed a marginal effect of social exclusion ($\beta = -2.36$, Wald $\chi^2 = 3.24$, $p = 0.072$) and a significant main effect of self-acceptance ($\beta = -.61$, Wald $\chi^2 = 8.67$, $p = 0.003$). The results also showed a significant two-way interaction between social exclusion and self-acceptance ($\beta = .65$, Wald $\chi^2 = 5.23$, $p = 0.033$). Further analysis using the inverse logit function revealed that self-acceptance did not affect excluded participants' choices; that is, excluded participants preferred Snuggle regardless of their self-acceptance level. However, self-acceptance mattered when participants were not excluded. In other words, in the no-exclusion condition, those who were higher in self-acceptance had a lower preference for Snuggle, whereas those who were low in self-acceptance had a higher preference for Snuggle (Figure 2).

6.3.4 | Mediation and moderation

Before testing for mediation, we averaged the three brand partner quality items for each brand to create overall scores for Snuggle



FIGURE 2 Warm brand choice as a function of social exclusion and self-acceptance, Study 3.

($\alpha = .88$) and for Tide ($\alpha = .92$). As participants evaluated partner quality for both brands, we subtracted Tide brand partner quality from Snuggle brand partner quality to calculate relative brand partner quality. Because self-acceptance moderated the effect of social exclusion on choice of Snuggle over Tide, we followed Model 5 of the Process Macro (Hayes, 2013), with social exclusion as an independent variable, relative brand partner quality as a mediator, self-acceptance as a moderator, and relative preference for Snuggle over Tide as a dependent variable. This model tested our mediation prediction for brand partner quality while accounting for the direct moderating role of self-acceptance on relative preference that was revealed by our prior analysis.

A bootstrapping confidence interval for the indirect effect of social exclusion on brand choice revealed significant mediation by brand partner quality (*indirect effect* = 0.27, 95% CI: 0.085, 0.537). Excluded participants anticipated that Snuggle would be a better relationship partner than Tide ($\beta = .51$, $p = 0.004$, CI: 0.164, 0.847), which increased choice of Snuggle over Tide ($\beta = .54$, $p < 0.001$, CI: 0.301, 0.780).

6.4 | Discussion

Study 3 demonstrates that brand partner quality mediates the effect of social exclusion on warm brand preference. Using a comparative choice measure, we found that excluded consumers were more likely to choose a warm brand over a less warm brand because they perceived the warm brand as a better relationship partner. The comparative measure in this study also offered a more realistic reflection of consumers' buying processes (Qazzafi, 2019): consumers were exposed to both brands, evaluated them, and made a final choice.

Further, these findings showed that self-acceptance did not affect excluded consumers' preference for warm brands. Excluded consumers preferred the warm brand whether they were high or low in self-acceptance. However, self-acceptance mattered when consumers were not excluded. That is, as self-acceptance increased, non-excluded consumers decreased their preference for a warm brand. Perhaps consumers who have lower self-acceptance have a greater need for others' approval and acceptance (Isaksen & Roper, 2012), which may lead to an increased preference for warm brands, whereas the opposite occurs for those high in self-acceptance. This finding suggests that the strength of warm brands may supersede any protection offered by self-acceptance, as self-acceptance did not weaken the importance of brand warmth to excluded consumers.

7 | STUDY 4

Study 4 manipulated brand competence to test whether excluded consumers' preference for warm brands would persist at different competence levels. Specifically, we compared preference for a warm brand with varying competence levels (Snuggle) to preference for a less warm yet competent brand (Tide).

7.1 | Method

Four hundred and eight-two MTurk participants completed the survey. We used a 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. no exclusion) by 3 (warm brand competence: high vs. moderate vs. low) between-subjects design. First, participants were randomly assigned to the exclusion or the no-exclusion condition and completed the writing task and manipulation check from prior studies.

Next, participants engaged in an ostensibly unrelated task of evaluating two laundry detergent brands (Snuggle and Tide). Participants were told that they would see a brand logo, as well as star ratings drawn from online consumer reviews. The ratings indicated how well each brand cleaned clothes, where a five-star rating meant that the brand cleaned clothes very well and a one-star rating meant that the brand cleaned clothes very poorly. Then participants viewed both Snuggle (a warm brand) and Tide (a less warm brand) in a counterbalanced order. Tide was consistently presented with a five-star rating (less warm with high competence) and remained constant across conditions, whereas the competence ratings of Snuggle varied by condition. When evaluating Snuggle, participants were randomly assigned to see one of three Snuggle ratings: (1) a one-star rating (warm with low competence), (2) a three-star rating (warm with moderate competence), or (3) a five-star rating (warm with high competence). Participants then rated Snuggle's brand competence as a manipulation check (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). They also reported their purchase intentions for both Snuggle and Tide, as dependent measures (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Fifteen participants who failed the attention check or did not follow the writing task instructions were excluded from analyses, leaving a final sample of 467 ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.2$, $SD = 12.19$; 54% female).

7.2 | Results

7.2.1 | Manipulation checks

Participants in the exclusion condition reported feeling more excluded than did those in the no-exclusion condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 6.38$, $SD = 0.82$ vs. $M_{\text{no-exclusion}} = 1.78$, $SD = 1.23$; $F(1, 465) = 2194.60$, $p < 0.001$).

For the competence manipulation check, because competence had three levels, we dummy coded one-star, three-star, and five-star ratings (e.g., one star = 1, three star = 0, five star = 0) to compare the one-star and five-star conditions with the three-star condition as a reference point (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). Using a regression analysis, Snuggle with a three-star rating was perceived as significantly more competent than Snuggle with a one-star rating ($t(464) = -8.23$, $p < 0.001$). The five-star rating was also perceived as more competent than the three-star rating ($t(464) = 7.28$, $p < 0.001$).

7.2.2 | Brand purchase intentions

Because participants viewed and rated both Snuggle and Tide, we subtracted their purchase intentions of Tide from those of Snuggle;

higher numbers indicate a stronger preference for Snuggle. We then conducted a 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. no exclusion) by 3 (Snuggle competence: high vs. moderate vs. low) ANOVA on the relative preference for Snuggle over Tide.

The results showed that as Snuggle's star rating increased, participants exhibited greater preferences for Snuggle ($F(2, 461) = 54.36$, $p < 0.001$). Importantly, the analysis also showed a significant effect of exclusion on preferences for Snuggle over Tide ($F(1, 461) = 4.98$, $p = 0.030$): relative to non-excluded participants, excluded participants exhibited a significantly greater preference for Snuggle over Tide. This preference persisted regardless of which Snuggle star rating was presented—a one-star, a three-star, or a five-star rating. Therefore, the interaction of social exclusion and brand competence of Snuggle was not significant ($F(2, 461) = 0.31$, $p = 0.81$; Figure 3).

7.3 | Discussion

This study demonstrates that the warm brand effect holds even when warm brands are associated with different levels of competence (high vs. moderate vs. low). This finding suggests the relative importance of brand warmth to excluded consumers: excluded consumers still preferred a warm brand, even though it was low in competence.

In this study, as in Study 3, participants evaluated two brands. While these comparative designs reflect consumers' buying processes (Qazafi, 2019), we wanted to replicate the findings using a non-comparative design. Thus, in a follow-up study (see Supporting Information: Supplementary Material), we manipulated the competence of a warm brand and measured purchase intentions. This allowed us to examine whether excluded consumers' warm brand preferences would persist at different competence levels, without a comparison to a less warm brand. Further, supplementing prior studies' single-item purchase intention measures, we used a multi-item measure to improve reliability (Diamantopoulos et al., 2012). The follow-up study also showed that compared with non-excluded participants, excluded participants had higher purchase intentions for the warm brand, regardless of its competence levels.

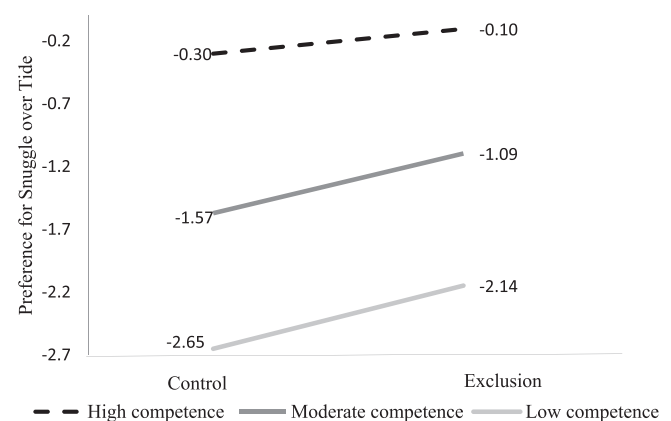


FIGURE 3 Preference for Snuggle over Tide, Study 4.

8 | STUDY 5

Extending our prior studies, our final study used a verbal brand description to invoke warmth and used a different product category (i.e., footwear). As in Study 4, we assessed purchase intentions using a multi-item measure. Further, Study 5 also used a consequential choice dependent variable (Inman, 2012): we tested whether excluded consumers would prefer warm brands, this time via their willingness to sign up to receive emails from the brand. Finally, Study 5 tested whether self-brand distance or cuteness perceptions could explain the warm brand effect.

8.1 | Method

Six hundred and ninety-three Prolific participants completed the study. We used a 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. no exclusion) by 2 (brand warmth: warm vs. less warm) between-subjects design. First, participants were randomly assigned to the exclusion or the no-exclusion condition and completed the writing task and manipulation check as in prior studies.

Next, as part of an ostensibly unrelated second study, participants completed a brand evaluation study in which they were randomly assigned to the warm or less warm brand condition. In the less warm brand condition, participants were presented with a logo and the following description: "Cortina is a shoe-manufacturing brand. They sell shoes in different countries." In the warm brand condition, we added this sentence to the description: "Cortina is a warm, friendly, and caring brand." (see Supporting Information: Appendix A). Participants reported their purchase intentions using four items: how interested they were in buying the brand; to what extent they would patronize the brand; how willing they were to try the brand; and how likely they were to purchase from the brand (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; Bruner et al., 2005). Next, participants indicated whether they would be interested in signing up to receive emails from Cortina (1 = *Yes*, 0 = *No*). They were told that if they selected "yes," they would be redirected to Cortina's website after the study. Finally, participants rated how cute, adorable, and endearing Cortina was, and reported to what extent they felt: (1) close to the brand, (2) personally connected to the brand, and that (3) the brand was close to who they were (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Thirty-nine participants who failed the attention check or did not follow the writing task instructions were excluded from analyses, leaving a final sample of 654 ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.7$, $SD = 13.94$; 51% female).

8.2 | Results

8.2.1 | Manipulation checks

Participants in the exclusion condition reported feeling more excluded than did those in the no-exclusion condition ($M_{\text{exclusion}} = 6.38$, $SD = 0.85$

vs. $M_{\text{no-exclusion}} = 1.76$, $SD = 1.36$; $F(1, 652) = 2643.36$, $p < 0.001$). In the warm description condition, Cortina was perceived as warmer ($M_{\text{Warm}} = 5.17$, $SD = 1.32$) than in the less warm description condition ($M_{\text{Less warm}} = 3.89$, $SD = 1.35$; $p < 0.001$), while there was no significant difference in competence ($M_{\text{Warm}} = 5.07$, $SD = 1.22$; $M_{\text{Less warm}} = 4.91$, $SD = 1.39$; $p = 0.11$).

8.2.2 | Brand purchase intentions

A 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. no exclusion) by 2 (brand warmth: warm vs. less warm) ANOVA on purchase intentions showed a significant effect of brand warmth ($F(1, 650) = 18.65$, $p < 0.001$) and a non-significant effect of exclusion ($F(1, 650) = 0.66$, $p > 0.41$). Importantly, the interaction of social exclusion and brand warmth was significant ($F(1, 650) = 4.47$, $p = 0.035$). Excluded participants had higher purchase intentions for a warm brand than non-excluded participants ($M_{\text{Excluded}} = 4.30$, $SD = 1.16$ vs. $M_{\text{Non-excluded}} = 4.02$, $SD = 1.20$; $p = 0.035$); the difference was not significant in the less warm brand condition ($M_{\text{Excluded}} = 3.69$, $SD = 1.29$ vs. $M_{\text{Non-excluded}} = 3.82$, $SD = 1.21$; $p = 0.37$). When excluded, participants had higher intentions to purchase the warm brand than the less warm brand ($M_{\text{Warm}} = 4.30$, $SD = 1.16$ vs. $M_{\text{Less warm}} = 3.69$, $SD = 1.29$; $p < 0.001$). This difference was not significant in the no-exclusion condition ($M_{\text{Warm}} = 4.02$, $SD = 1.20$ vs. $M_{\text{Less warm}} = 3.82$, $SD = 1.21$; $p = 0.11$).

8.2.3 | Email sign-up

A regression of email sign-up choice on social exclusion, brand warmth, and the exclusion by brand warmth interaction showed a significant interaction between social exclusion and brand warmth (Wald $\chi^2 = 4.13$, $p < 0.05$). No other effects were significant ($p > 0.50$). Compared with non-excluded participants, excluded participants had a higher likelihood of signing up to receive emails from the warm brand (15.4% vs. 7.0%; Wald $\chi^2 = 5.70$, $p < 0.05$). However, excluded and non-excluded participants did not vary in their likelihood of signing up to receive emails from the less warm brand (6.0% vs. 7.7%; $p > 0.40$).

8.2.4 | Alternative explanations

The three self-brand distance items ($\alpha = 0.95$) and the three cuteness items ($\alpha = .93$) were averaged to create overall scores. Excluded and non-excluded participants did not vary in their perceptions of the warm brand in terms of cuteness or self-brand distance (Cuteness: $M_{\text{Excluded}} = 3.72$, $SD = 1.23$ vs. $M_{\text{Non-excluded}} = 3.75$, $SD = 1.38$; $p > 0.80$; Self-brand distance: $M_{\text{Excluded}} = 2.84$, $SD = 1.58$ vs. $M_{\text{Non-excluded}} = 2.64$, $SD = 1.59$; $p > 0.20$); neither variable mediated the effect of social exclusion on warm brand preference (Hayes, 2013; Model 8; moderated mediation; Cuteness CI: -0.149 – 0.223 ; Self-brand distance CI: -0.101 – 0.359).

9 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Consumers' social isolation and loneliness have been steadily increasing (Cigna Newsroom, 2018). These feelings were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and have persisted although the pandemic has subsided (Cost, 2022; Walsh, 2021). Thus, it is important to examine how consumers can effectively cope with this painful and increasingly common social hardship and mitigate its negative outcomes. Across five studies, our findings suggest that socially excluded consumers prefer warm over less warm brands because they perceive these brands as better relationship partners; warm brands also reduce consumers' felt loneliness. Further, we delve into the role of brand warmth by exploring its interaction with brand competence and individual self-acceptance; these results demonstrate the strength of the warm brand effect and the importance of warm brands to excluded consumers. Our findings emerge across multiple product categories, when using different manipulations of social exclusion and of brand warmth, and for behavioral intentions measures, as well as for consequential choice and email-sign-up measures.

9.1 | Theoretical contributions

By examining the relational role of warm brands, this work contributes to prior research in marketing and psychology on social exclusion and coping. While prior work has shown that excluded consumers may rely on different types of products or brands to satisfy or reduce the need for human social connection, the current research shows that consumers may also directly build relationships with brands and receive comfort from those brands. We examine this motivational, underlying relationship mechanism and identify the brand trait that facilitates such committed consumer-brand relationships: warmth. Given that consumers are increasingly experiencing the deficiency of social connection and support (i.e., social resources), we suggest that warm brands can serve as better relationship partners that can reduce felt loneliness.

Second, by showing that warm brands may have a restorative function to reduce loneliness, this research contributes to the literature in clinical psychology. Previous research in clinical psychology has highlighted the importance of a single type of social resource, that is, supportive human relationships; however, these human relationships may not be readily available (Hobfoll, 2002). By showing that warm brands can serve as an alternative supportive resource that reduces loneliness, this research identifies a novel source of support and broadens the scope of available social resources.

Lastly, this work provides useful insight into consumer coping processes by exploring when the observed warm brand effect occurs and persists. Specifically, we test possible interactions with different brand traits (brand competence) and personal resources (individual self-acceptance). By examining the effects of brand warmth relative to competence and to self-acceptance, our research contributes to a

fuller understanding of consumer coping processes. We find that warm brands provide a better fit to restoring deficient social resources than brand competence and self-acceptance; excluded consumers place importance on and prefer warm brands, even when those brands lack competence and consumers have high self-acceptance.

9.2 | Managerial implications

This work provides managerial implications. First, considering that warm brands are frequently chosen and preferred by excluded consumers, firms should consider consumers' psychological states when developing branding and positioning strategies. Our series of studies provide useful guidance for firms and marketing practitioners on how to garner psychological warmth in brands. For example, human-like attributes can invoke the perception of brand warmth; however, using human-like features (e.g., faces, hands) may not be suitable for all brands. In addition to human-like features, our studies suggest that a warm brand identity can be built using visual design elements such as fonts, logos, or icons (e.g., hearts). Even in the absence of visual design cues, our studies show that verbal cues—using warmth-related words in brand descriptions—can be sufficient to invoke brand warmth for motivated, excluded consumers.

In addition, given that the warmth effect persists across other brand traits such as competence, this suggests that our findings apply broadly to different types of companies. For example, firms of different sizes, both large and small, can benefit from increasing perceptions of brand warmth. Large firms with significant financial resources in the marketplace are usually seen as competent yet may invoke perceptions of being cold (Davvetas & Halkias, 2019). Thus, large firms may focus on cultivating perceived warmth, which allows them to build and maintain strong customer relationships and enhance their brand perceptions (Aaker et al., 2004). Small businesses may position themselves as more caring than larger companies (Smith, 2001), differentiating themselves from large companies to enter the competitive market that may be dominated by large companies. Non-profit organizations may also benefit from perceived warmth that arises from their focus on people over profits, which can encourage company endorsement behaviors (Bernritter et al., 2016) such as charity donations.

Second, this research provides implications for brand loyalty and relationship marketing. The findings suggest that excluded and lonely consumers perceive warm brands as better relationship partners. Because cultivating strong consumer-brand relationship is an important step to establish brand loyalty, brand managers may wish to revisit or strengthen psychological warmth in their brands, which can facilitate a stronger consumer-brand relationship and thus customer loyalty, leading to long-term profitability.

Lastly, by dealing with the issue of prevalent social exclusion and loneliness, this research provides implications for policymakers. The segment of consumers who feel socially excluded and lonely has grown rapidly in recent years (MentalHealth.org., 2021), spurred in

part by the pandemic. Thus, reducing loneliness has become an important goal for public mental health. We find that by alleviating feelings of loneliness, warm brands can positively impact consumers' emotional well-being. Considering this positive warm brand effect, not-for-profit organizations or policymakers could consider increasing psychological warmth (via visual designs or warmth-related words) in designing their mental health campaigns, which can benefit increasingly lonely populations.

9.3 | Limitations and future research

This research focuses on the relationship between social exclusion and warm brands, and how this relationship impacts brand preference, consumer–brand relationships, and loneliness. However, this work has some limitations which provide valuable opportunities for future work. For example, it would be interesting to test how consumer–brand relationships created via social exclusion predict consumer behavior in different contexts. Future research could explore how excluded consumers respond to transgressions by warm brands (e.g., service failures), and whether or not these relationships would survive (leading to forgiveness) or be undermined by a transgression. Alternatively, researchers could explore how excluded consumers respond to promotions from competing brands. Exploring consumer–brand relationships in different contexts will lead to a fuller understanding of the dynamics of consumers' relationships with warm brands.

Second, this research investigated the role of warm brands in the general consumer population. While the population overall is getting lonelier and more isolated, the importance of warm brands could also be explored in the more specific consumer segments, such as elderly consumers or vulnerable consumers. For example, (Fletcher-Brown et al. 2021) examine how vulnerable consumers (cancer patients and their families) engage with a brand's corporate social media campaign to replenish their depleted emotional and social support resources and form a knowledge hub to share information and advice. Building on this work, future research could examine how those vulnerable consumers relate to and build relationships with warm brands, and whether their relationships with warm brands can be maintained and would persist in different contexts (brand transgressions or service failures) via a field study.

Third, this research focused on social exclusion. However, an additional direction for future research would be to examine other socially adverse contexts such as bullying or explicit rejection. Depending on the intensity of social resource deprivation that is caused by bullying and rejection (e.g., hurt feelings and social pain), these situations may also increase preferences for warm brands. Alternately, depending on the reasons for which bullying or rejection occurs, it is possible that preferences for warm brands might decrease. For example, if bullying and social rejection are clearly caused by an individual's lack of competence, the need for competence might be more salient than the need for social

acceptance and support. As a result, those affected individuals may prefer competence brands to offset their lower competence.

In summary, this research examines the relational, restorative aspects of warm brands in the face of social exclusion. We hope that the current research opens a new door to understanding how brands can help consumers better cope in an increasingly isolated society.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Soyoung Kim  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8442-7834>

REFERENCES

- Aaker, J., Fournier, S., & Brasel, S. A. (2004). When good brands do bad. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(1), 1–16.
- Aaker, J. L., Garbinsky, E. N., & Vohs, K. D. (2012). Cultivating admiration in brands: Warmth, competence, and landing in the "golden quadrant". *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22(2), 191–194.
- Aaker, J., Vohs, K. D., & Mogilner, C. (2010). Nonprofits are seen as warm and for-profits as competent: Firm stereotypes matter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(2), 224–237. <https://doi.org/10.1086/651566>
- Alvarez, C., Brick, D. J., & Fournier, S. (2021). Doing relationship work: A theory of change in consumer–brand relationships. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 48(4), 610–632.
- Antonetti, P., Crisafulli, B., & Maklan, S. (2021). When doing good will not save us: Revisiting the buffering effect of CSR following service failures. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38(9), 1608–1627.
- Baumeister, R. F., Twenge, J. M., & Nuss, C. K. (2002). Effects of social exclusion on cognitive processes: Anticipated aloneness reduces intelligent thought. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(4), 817–827.
- Bernitter, S. F., Verlegh, P. W. J., & Smit, E. G. (2016). Why nonprofits are easier to endorse on social media: The roles of warmth and brand symbolism. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 33, 27–42.
- Blackston, M. (2000). Observations: Building brand equity by managing the brand's relationships. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 40(6), 101–105.
- Bruner, G. C., Hensel, P. J., & James, K. E. (2005). Marketing scales handbook, volume IV: Consumer behavior (Marketing Scales Series). South-Western Educational Publishing
- Chamberlain, J. M., & Haaga, D. A. F. (2001). Unconditional self-acceptance and psychological health. *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 19(3), 163–176.
- Chen, R. P., Wan, E. W., & Levy, E. (2017). The effect of social exclusion on consumer preference for anthropomorphized brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 27(1), 23–34.
- Cigna Newsroom. (2018). Cigna surveys loneliness in America. <https://newsroom.cigna.com/loneliness-in-america>
- Cost, B. (2022). COVID caused "loneliness epidemic": NYC health commissioner. <https://nypost.com/2022/03/11/covid-caused-loneliness-epidemic-nyc-health-commissioner/>
- Davvetas, V., & Halkias, G. (2019). Global and local brand stereotypes: Formation, content transfer, and impact. *International Marketing Review*, 36, 675–701.
- DeWall, C. N., Maner, J. K., & Rouby, D. A. (2009). Social exclusion and early-stage interpersonal perception: Selective attention to signs of acceptance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(4), 729–741.

- DeWall, C. N., & Richman, S. B. (2011). Social exclusion and the desire to reconnect. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 5(11), 919–932.
- Diamantopoulos, A., Sarstedt, M., Fuchs, C., Wilczynski, P., & Kaiser, S. (2012). Guidelines for choosing between multi-item and single-item scales for construct measurement: A predictive validity perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 40(3), 434–449.
- Dickerson, S. S., & Kemeny, M. E. (2004). Acute stressors and cortisol responses: A theoretical integration and synthesis of laboratory research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(3), 355–391.
- Dunn, L., & Hoegg, J. (2014). The impact of fear on emotional brand attachment. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(1), 152–168.
- Entis, L. (2016). *Chronic loneliness is a modern-day epidemic*. Fortune. <https://fortune.com/2016/06/22/loneliness-is-a-modern-day-epidemic/>
- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J. C., & Glick, P. (2007). Universal dimensions of social cognition: Warmth and competence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 11(2), 77–83.
- Fletcher-Brown, J., Turnbull, S., Viglia, G., Chen, T., & Pereira, V. (2021). Vulnerable consumer engagement: How corporate social media can facilitate the replenishment of depleted resources. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 38(2), 518–529.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., Tither, J. M., O'Loughlin, C., Friesen, M., & Overall, N. (2004). Warm and homely or cold and beautiful? Sex differences in trading off traits in mate selection. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30(6), 659–672.
- Fournier, S. (1998). Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24(4), 343–373.
- Fournier, S., & Alvarez, C. (2012). Brands as relationship partners: Warmth, competence, and in-between. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22(2), 177–185.
- Fried, M. (1963). Grieving for a lost home, in the urban condition: People and policy in the metropolis. In L. J. Duhl, (Ed.). *Basic Books*.
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach*. Guilford Press.
- Hayes, A. F., & Preacher, K. J. (2014). Statistical mediation analysis with a multicategorical independent variable. *British Journal of Mathematical and Statistical Psychology*, 67(3), 451–470. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bmsp.12028>
- Hobfoll, S. E. (1988). *The ecology of stress*. Taylor & Francis.
- Hobfoll, S. E. (2002). Social and psychological resources and adaptation. *Review of General Psychology*, 6(4), 307–324.
- Holt-Lunstad, J. (2020). *The double pandemic of social isolation and COVID-19: Cross-sector policy must address both*. Health Affairs Blog, 22.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 227–237.
- Inman, J. J. (2012). *The elephant not in the room: The need for useful, actionable insights in behavioral research*. ACR North American Advances.
- Isaksen, K. J., & Roper, S. (2012). The commodification of self-esteem: Branding and British teenagers. *Psychology & Marketing*, 29(3), 117–135.
- Ivens, B. S., Leischnig, A., Muller, B., & Valta, K. (2015). On the role of brand stereotypes in shaping consumer response toward brands: An empirical examination of direct and mediating effects of warmth and competence. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(8), 808–820.
- Jahn, S., Gaus, H., & Kiessling, T. (2012). Trust, commitment, and older women: Exploring brand attachment differences in the elderly segment. *Psychology & Marketing*, 29(6), 445–457.
- Kervyn, N., Fiske, S. T., & Malone, C. (2012). Brands as intentional agents framework: How perceived intentions and ability can map brand perception. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22(2), 166–176.
- Kull, A. J., Romero, M., & Monahan, L. (2021). How may I help you? Driving brand engagement through the warmth of an initial chatbot message. *Journal of Business Research*, 135, 840–850.
- Lee, J., & Shrum, L. J. (2012). Conspicuous consumption versus charitable behavior in response to social exclusion: A differential needs explanation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(3), 530–544.
- Lee, J., Shrum, L. J., & Yi, Y. (2017). The role of cultural communication norms in social exclusion effects. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 27(1), 108–116.
- Levontin, L., Ein-Gar, D., & Lee, A. Y. (2015). Acts of emptying promote self-focus: A perceived resource deficiency perspective. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(2), 257–267.
- Liu, F., Wei, H., Zhu, Z., & Chen, H. (2022). Warmth or competence: Brand anthropomorphism, social exclusion, and advertisement effectiveness. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 67, 103025.
- Loh, H. S., Gaur, S. S., & Sharma, P. (2021). Demystifying the link between emotional loneliness and brand loyalty: Mediating roles of nostalgia, materialism, and self-brand connections. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38(3), 537–552.
- Loveland, K. E., Smeesters, D., & Mandel, N. (2010). Still preoccupied with 1995: The need to belong and preference for nostalgic products. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(3), 393–408.
- MacDonald, K. (1992). Warmth as a developmental construct: An evolutionary analysis. *Child Development*, 63(4), 753–773.
- Mead, N. L., Baumeister, R. F., Stillman, T. F., Rawn, C. D., & Vohs, K. D. (2011). Social exclusion causes people to spend and consume strategically in the service of affiliation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(5), 902–919.
- Morava, M., & Andrew, S. (2021). *Loneliness won't end when the pandemic ends*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/17/us/loneliness-epidemic-covid-wellness-trnd/index.html>
- Mourey, J. A., Olson, J. G., & Yoon, C. (2017). Products as pals: Engaging with anthropomorphic products mitigates the effects of social exclusion. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(2), 414–431.
- Pieters, R. (2013). Bidirectional dynamics of materialism and loneliness: Not just a vicious cycle. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(4), 615–631.
- Primack, B. A., Shensa, A., Sidani, J. E., Escobar-Viera, C. G., & Fine, M. J. (2021). Temporal associations between social media use and depression. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 60(2), 179–188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2020.09.014>
- Qazzafi, S. (2019). Consumer buying decision process toward products. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Engineering Development*, 2(5), 130–134.
- Remington, N. A., Fabrigar, L. R., & Visser, P. S. (2000). Reexamining the circumplex model of affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 286–300.
- Shin, J., & Mattila, A. S. (2021). Aww effect: Engaging consumers in “non-cute” prosocial initiatives with cuteness. *Journal of Business Research*, 126, 209–220.
- Smith, S. (2001). *America's greatest brands* (Vol. 1). America's Greatest Brands.
- Sung, Y., & Choi, S. M. (2010). “I won't leave you although you disappoint me”: The interplay between satisfaction, investment, and alternatives in determining consumer–brand relationship commitment. *Psychology & Marketing*, 27(11), 1050–1073.
- Thomas, V. L., & Saenger, C. (2020). Feeling excluded? Join the crowd: How social exclusion affects approach behavior toward consumer-dense retail environments. *Journal of Business Research*, 120, 520–528.
- Walsh, C. (2021). *Young adults hardest hit by loneliness during pandemic*. The Harvard Gazette. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/02/young-adults-teens-loneliness-mental-health-coronavirus-covid-pandemic/>

- Wang, J., Zhu, R., & Shiv, B. (2012). The lonely consumer: Loner or conformer? *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(6), 1116–1128.
- Wilkowski, B. M., Robinson, M. D., & Friesen, C. K. (2009). Gaze-triggered orienting as a tool of the belongingness self-regulation system. *Psychological Science*, 20(4), 495–501.
- Williams, K. D. (2007). Ostracism. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 425–452.
- Williams, K. D., Cheung, C. K., & Choi, W. (2000). Cyberostracism: Effects of being ignored over the internet. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 748–762.
- Windsor, T. D., Gerstorff, D., & Luszcz, M. A. (2015). Social resource correlates of levels and time-to-death-related changes in late-life affect. *Psychology and Aging*, 30(1), 136–148.
- Zadro, L., Williams, K. D., & Richardson, R. (2004). How low can you go? Ostracism by a computer is sufficient to lower self-reported levels of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful

existence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(4), 560–567.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Kim, S., Murray, K. B., & Moore, S. G. (2023). Some like it warm: How warm brands mitigate the negative effects of social exclusion. *Psychology & Marketing*, 40, 777–790. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21786>