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Author(s): Morgan K. Ward and Darren W. Dahl

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# Should the Devil Sell Prada? Retail Rejection Increases Aspiring Consumers' Desire for the Brand

MORGAN K. WARD  
DARREN W. DAHL

In response to consumers' complaints that they feel rejected in and thus avoid luxury stores, retailers have encouraged sales personnel to be more friendly. However, prior research on social rejection supports the idea that rejection encourages people to elevate their perceptions of their rejecters and strengthens their predilection to affiliate with them. Four studies examine the circumstances in which consumers increase their regard and willingness to pay after brand rejection. In a retail context, the data reveal that after threat, consumers have more positive attitudes and higher willingness to pay when (1) the rejection comes from an aspirational (vs. nonaspirational) brand, (2) the consumer relates the brand to his/her ideal self-concept, (3) s/he is unable to self-affirm before rejection, (4) the salesperson delivering the threat reflects the brand, and (5) the threat occurred recently. The substantive implications of these findings for retailers are discussed, and opportunities for future research are identified.

When I went to Louis Vuitton . . . the sales-girls were so [unfriendly]—I could not believe it. I was just dressed normally . . . and when I walked in they stopped talking and stared at me. It was like walking into a freezer, they were so cold towards me.

I have only just gotten into the whole designer thing and have decided to buy either a Louis Vuitton clutch or a Dior clutch, but (this is a bit embarrassing) I am too intimidated to go into a store! (Consumers' discussion of their experience shopping at luxury stores on a discussion board at <http://www.fashionspot.com>)

Consumers often feel rejected or condescended to by sales staff at luxury retailers and cite this as a reason

Morgan K. Ward is assistant professor of marketing at the Cox School of Business, Southern Methodist University, 6212 Bishop Blvd., Dallas, TX 75275 ([mkward@smu.edu](mailto:mkward@smu.edu)). Darren W. Dahl is BC Innovation Council Professor at the Sauder School of Business, 2053 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada ([darren.dahl@sauder.ubc.ca](mailto:darren.dahl@sauder.ubc.ca)). The authors would like to thank Bill Dillon, Lea Dunn, Roger Kerin, Kirk Kristofferson, and Kathleen Vohs for earlier comments on this work.

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they avoid shopping in these venues. In fact, shoppers are not just imagining that they are being ignored or rejected in high-end retail stores; insiders in the fashion industry acknowledge that rejection by sales staff is a common occurrence. A former employee of Yves Saint Laurent admits that it is standard practice to size up a customer by looking at his/her watch and shoes. He explains, "If the accessories are not expensive, the customer is not worth the effort of even a simple hello" (Wilson 2009).

In response to consumer complaints, some luxury retailers have made efforts to make stores and staff more approachable (Binkley 2007; Odell 2009). For example, luxury department store Lord & Taylor has been coaching salespeople to be less intimidating. When approaching a customer, the salesperson should not ask, "May I help you?"; instead, s/he is trained to remark on what the customer is looking at, saying something like, "That's a great sweater. By the way, we have it in three additional colors" (Odell 2009). Following suit, Louis Vuitton went so far as to adorn its Rodeo Drive entrance with a cartoonish, smiling apple figure meant to exuberantly welcome consumers (Binkley 2007). Indeed, teaching sales personnel to be friendly and responsive is supported by the extant customer service research, which shows that retailers with friendly and welcoming sales staff will attract and retain loyal and satisfied customers (Gremler and Gwinner 2008; Iacobucci and Ostrom 1993). But, is it always the best practice to provide this type of

customer service? Our research challenges this notion by exploring how negative customer service experiences can, in some instances, facilitate more positive attitudes and customers' desire for the brand.

To do this, we use a conceptual framework based on past research that has identified how social rejection can be an important factor in defining and maintaining one's self-concept (Cialdini and Richardson 1980; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Indeed, research in social psychology supports the idea that people have an innate need to belong to social groups that define and affirm their identities; consequently, social rejection from these groups has been shown to threaten their group membership and necessarily influences their behavior (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Lee and Shrum 2012). In fact, people will go to great lengths to reestablish their social standing in important in-groups after a rejection. Social rejection motivates individuals to conform, obey, change their attitudes, work harder, and generally try to present themselves in a favorable manner in order to gain acceptance (Williams, Cheung, and Choi 2000; Williams and Sommer 1997). Moreover, recent research in consumer behavior has revealed that strategic consumption is an additional way individuals may try to affiliate with desirable in-groups after a rejection (Mead et al. 2011; Romero-Canyas et al. 2010). Mead et al. (2011) found that rejected individuals consume strategically, often choosing products that are symbolic of their rejecters, in an effort to affiliate. Notably, the authors concluded that people were willing to sacrifice their own personal happiness in order to affiliate with their rejecters, hoping to thus establish social harmony.

But are all people equally susceptible to such threats, and are all brands equally likely to threaten consumers' identities? The contribution of this article is centered on understanding who is vulnerable to rejection from a brand and why. We add to the literature in three distinct ways. First, we show a context in which rejection by a brand increases consumers' desire to affiliate with it. Further, we reveal that the degree to which the brand is aspirational to the individual moderates their reaction to rejection. Specifically, we find that consumers are more responsive to rejection from salespeople of brands that represent an ideal self-concept such as luxury (e.g., Prada, Louis Vuitton) or ecoconsciousness (e.g., Toyota Prius), whereas rejection from salespeople who represent less aspirational brands (i.e., brands that are affordable and accessible to most consumers, like Gap and American Eagle) has little or no effect on consumers' desire to affiliate. Second, we establish that individuals who aspire to own these brands or be members of these brand communities are more susceptible to rejection than those who do not possess such aspirations. Indeed, we show that individuals vary in their vulnerability to brand rejection, depending on the nature of their desire to affiliate with the brand; individuals who feel that the rejecting brand is not aspirational are less susceptible to rejection, whereas those who feel that the rejecting brand is highly aspirational are more vulnerable.

Finally, we examine boundary conditions of the effect of

rejection on consumers' subsequent brand attitudes. We show that buttressing individuals' self-concepts before rejection can mitigate its effects, thereby establishing that it is people's uncertainty about their self-concept relative to the brand that leaves them vulnerable to brand rejection. Furthermore, we establish that the effect of rejection is largely dependent on the match between the personal characteristics of the rejecter (i.e., the salesperson) and the brand itself; in other words, the more convincingly the salespeople represent and embody the brand, the greater the impact their rejection has on consumers. Conversely, consumers are less responsive when salespeople do not appear to reflect the brand's aspirational qualities. Finally, we show that the positive brand perceptions resulting from a rejection incident may erode over time and that rejection is likely, ultimately, to alienate customers whose ideal self-concept relates to the aspirational brand.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Social Rejection and Social Groups

People's self-concepts are defined and affirmed by the social groups that they belong to and feel accepted by (Cialdini and Richardson 1980; Tajfel and Turner 1979); as such, they are highly motivated to remain positively perceived by important in-groups. Indeed, social exclusion from such groups has a negative impact on individuals' emotional, psychological, and behavioral health, including mental and physical illnesses, anxiety, and depression (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Baumeister and Tice 1990; Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss 2002; Cacioppo and Hawkey 2009). Prior research has shown that the type of social exclusion individuals experience (e.g., being ignored vs. rejected) threatens different needs, which in turn drives the type of behavioral response displayed (Lee and Shrum 2012). One stream of research in this area finds that after experiencing a rejection, people are prone to exhibiting antisocial or destructive behavior (Twenge et al. 2001, 2007; Warburton, Williams, and Cairns 2006). Indeed, Twenge et al. (2001) suggest that social exclusion weakens social restraints on selfish and hostile behavior, thus releasing the instinctual desire to behave aggressively.

However, much of the extant research on the topic shows the opposite effect: that after a rejection people often increase their efforts to affiliate with and garner approval from the rejecting group (Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010; Mead et al. 2011; Williams 2007) or forge social bonds with a new in-group (Maner et al. 2007). This body of research shows that after experiencing rejection, individuals tend to conform to the rejecting group's norms in order to gain their acceptance. Specifically, rejected individuals may behave strategically in ways that cultivate approval, such as by idealizing the group's attributes or exhibiting an increased willingness to promote its values and work harder for its goals (Williams and Sommer 1997; Williams et al. 2000). Recent research in consumer behavior also reveals that an additional means of affiliating with the group (after rejection) may be

via strategic consumption (Mead et al. 2011; Romero-Canas et al. 2010). Mead et al. (2011) found that rejected individuals consume strategically, often choosing products that were symbolic of their rejecters, in the pursuit of affiliation. Notably, the authors concluded that people were willing to sacrifice their own personal happiness (e.g., eating undesirable food such as chicken feet, using cocaine despite the inherent risks) in an attempt to affiliate with their rejecters and establish harmony between themselves and their rejecters.

In this article, we look specifically at how rejection in the form of condescension affects consumers' responses to their rejecters. Further, we propose that the outcome of rejection on consumers' behavior is dependent on the nature of the rejecter. Specifically, we qualify Mead et al.'s (2011) effects by suggesting that signals of rejection affect people differently, depending on how aspirational rejecters are (in this case, the brand) and the degree to which the individuals who do the rejecting (e.g., the salesperson) reflect the brand. With respect to the nature of the rejecter, we focus on the purchase of an item from an aspirational retail brand for which the potential for rejection can come from brand representatives (i.e., the salespeople of a particular brand). With respect to how well the rejecter represents the brand, we consider how individuals who fit versus those who do not fit a brand's attributes (e.g., the representatives' clothing, self-presentation, sales style) differentially affect consumers' responses to a brand rejection.

### Group Affiliation via Brand Choice and Its Effect on Self-Concept

Extant research on reference groups confirms that these groups are essential in defining consumers' self-concepts and social status. Reference groups may be classified as "member groups," the groups to which individuals actually belong, or "aspiration groups," the groups to which individuals desire to belong. Since people generally want to affiliate with images or social groups that have socially desirable attributes, there is congruency between reference groups and brand usage (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982; Childers and Rao 1992). Consumers use aspirational brands (e.g., luxury brands, brands that represent cultural ideals) to signal their self-concept because these products are associated with groups that are respected or valued by a culture (Berger and Ward 2010; Veblen 1899).

Interestingly, in recent years aspirational products have expanded beyond traditional luxury merchandise to domains such as environmentally friendly (e.g., Prius), organic (e.g., The Honest Company), healthy (e.g., Lululemon), and intellectual (e.g., Lagavulin) product categories. For example, research on the "conspicuous conservation" effect revealed that consumers perceive environmentally friendly products in much the same way they perceive luxury products and are willing to pay more for the "green halo" generated by a Prius purchase over other hybrid vehicles, which did not as explicitly signal their ideal "green" self-concept (Sexton

and Sexton 2011). Conversely, brands that are not associated with these elite and desirable qualities (e.g., brands associated with poverty, immorality, or lowbrow pursuits or that are ubiquitously available) are less likely to be used as self-concept signals. Taken together, it follows that rejection from representatives of brands that represent aspirational groups will induce feelings of social exclusion, while rejection from brands that are not connected with these groups are less likely to evoke the same response from consumers. Thus, after a rejection, individuals are more likely to attempt to associate themselves with an aspirational brand than a non-aspirational brand through means such as affiliative spending or enhancing their brand attitudes. More formally:

**H1:** After being rejected by (vs. having a neutral interaction with) an aspirational brand representative, consumers will elevate their attitudes toward and increase their willingness to pay for the brand. In a less aspirational retail brand context, these effects will be mitigated.

### Relationship between Aspirational Brands and Self-Concept

After being rejected by a representative of an aspirational brand, consumers do not unanimously attempt to affiliate with the rejecter. We argue that when individuals encounter a rejection from a brand, the outcome depends, in part, on what aspect of their self-concept is threatened. Prior research (Fournier 1998; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) has found that consumers actively construct their self-concepts using brand associations that arise through reference-group usage and result in self-defining brand connections. Indeed, Escalas and Bettman (2003) demonstrated that when aspiration group members use a particular brand, consumers form associations about the brand that they endeavor to transfer to themselves (via consumption or endorsement), despite the fact that they are not yet members of the aspiration group. Thus, brands are meaningful in the process of constructing one's own self-concept vis-à-vis the groups with which one aspires to affiliate.

Previous research finds that the self-concept is composed of an ideal self and an actual self; the ideal self is shaped by individuals' hopes and goals in relation to what they aspire to become (Markus and Nurius 1986; Wylie 1979), while the actual self is how individuals currently perceive themselves (Sirgy 1982). Indeed, people perceive their actual self as something psychologically close and within their control, while their ideal self is psychologically more distant (Malär et al. 2011), less certain, and consequently more vulnerable to external threats. Further, these selves exist along a continuum, and as such, consumers may possess both selves to different degrees in relation to one brand. To understand the selves in relationship to one another, we draw from the self-discrepancy literature (Higgins 1987), which states that discrepancies exist between these two self-concepts and that individuals are motivated to close the gap

between their actual and ideal selves via discrepancy-reducing behaviors. In this research, we capture self-discrepancy by measuring both the ideal and the actual selves and calculating the difference between them.

People are motivated to consume brands that are internally consistent with their self-concepts. Consumption of these brands is an expression of their self-concepts and a form of image crafting (Berger and Heath 2007; Malär et al. 2011). People are less drawn to brands that have no relevance to their self-concept. Thus, consumers may select items from brands associated with aspirational reference groups because of their desire to signal their ideal selves. However, brands that are easily attainable are not associated with aspirational groups, or are not relevant to their self-concepts, and are less likely to act as signals of individuals' ideal self-concepts. Thus, it follows that rejection from an aspirational brand challenges individuals' idealized self-concepts, which are less secure, and therefore will be perceived as more threatening. Support for this line of reasoning is found in research that examines insulation from threat more generally. When people are secure in the status quo, they are often buffered against threats to their self-concept (Finkelstein and Fishbach 2012; Gardner, Jefferis, and Knowles, forthcoming); it is only when they are insecure in their talents, relationships, or position in their social group that rejection poses a threat (Finkelstein and Fishbach 2012; Sommer and Baumeister 2002).

In a retail context, rejection by a representative of an aspirational brand is apt to be unpleasant for any consumer. However, the response to the rejection may depend on how the brand relates to the individual's self-concept. Consumers relate to aspirational products differently, depending on their own expertise and resources. While some consumers choose these sought-after brands to affirm themselves and express their actual self-concept (Belk 1988; Swann 1983), others choose them to self-enhance and express important aspects of their ideal selves (Ditto and Lopez 1992; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). We propose that it is more threatening when salespeople from a brand relating to individuals' ideal self-concept express a signal of rejection toward them. Furthermore, we expect that these rejected individuals will respond by attempting to affiliate with their rejecters by acquiring objects that bolster or reaffirm the threatened part of the self (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009; Lee and Shrum 2012). Thus, we predict:

**H2:** After being rejected by (vs. having a neutral interaction with) an aspirational brand representative, consumers who relate the brand to their ideal self-concept are likely to elevate their attitudes toward and increase their willingness to pay for the brand. These effects are mitigated for consumers who do not relate the brand to their ideal self-concept.

## Validating Rejection as a Self-Threat

Membership in self-relevant groups serves the important purpose of helping to define and maintain an individual's sense of self (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Tajfel and Turner 1979). In order to maintain a coherent sense of self, individuals are motivated to preserve their relationships with self-relevant groups and strategically exhibit traits, special knowledge, and other behaviors that affirm their group membership (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1999). Furthermore, given the importance of group affiliation, it is evident why a psychological threat such as rejection by a self-defining group could destabilize one's sense of self. In response to such a threat, individuals are likely to look for ways to bolster their shaken sense of self (McGlone and Aronson 2006; Steele 1997).

In the context of this study, it is important to confirm that rejection from a brand actually results in a true threat to an individual's self-concept. To achieve this, we draw on the discussion above in testing whether affirming the self before rejection will mitigate its effects. Support for this approach lies in previous research that has demonstrated that affirmation before a psychological threat can inoculate against harmful outcomes caused by threat (Koole et al. 1999; Sherman, Nelson, and Steele 2000). Specifically, by affirming membership in a self-defining group in advance of the threat, people may be able to stabilize uncertain self-concepts by validating relationships important to the self (McGlone and Aronson 2006; Steele 1997). In our context, by demonstrating the prototypical traits or knowledge of a group member before the threat, the individual may be able to affirm his/her group membership and inoculate him/herself against rejection (Sherman et al. 2000).

In sum, if individuals have had a chance to affirm their self-concepts before rejection, there may be less propensity to affiliate with the rejecting party because their self-views will be stable and they will have less need for the group as a means of confirming the self (Sherman et al. 2000; Ward and Broniarczyk 2011). When an aspirational brand relates to individuals' ideal self-concepts, we expect that allowing them to affirm themselves in the same domain before the rejection will neutralize the threat from brand rejection. Formally:

**H3:** For consumers who relate an aspirational brand to their ideal self-concept, affirming (vs. not affirming) their self-concept before rejection from the brand will mitigate the likelihood of them elevating their attitudes toward and increasing their willingness to pay for the brand.

## Salesperson as Brand Extension

As customers' first point of contact, the service provider often is referred to as the "face" of the organization. Prior research reveals that salespeople play a critical role in influencing brand messages (Mudambi 2002) and often personify the brand's values to consumers (Lynch and de Cher-



natomy 2007). In fact, personal encounters between employees and customers may be more influential in expressing brand meaning than marketing messages (Sirianni et al. 2013). Further, salespeople are seen by consumers as a representation of the brand's understanding, interest, and commitment to the relationship between the firm and the consumer (Humphreys and Williams 1996). In order to support the congruence between brand and salesperson, firms encourage "organizational identification" (Ashforth and Mael 1989) in their employees, which is the process of linking employees' behaviors to the identity of the organization. Employees are encouraged to present the same attributes as those that characterize the organization and thereby express the values of the organization to consumers (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

Research examining the importance of salespersons reflecting the organizational attributes (vs. those who do not reflect the brand's attributes) finds that consumers have better perceptions of service outcomes and stronger purchase intentions when the service provider is reflective of the brand's attributes versus when the service provider does not reflect important aspects of the firm (Engle, Blackwell, and Miniard 1995). In sum, salespeople who reflect the brand are more effective in sending brand signals. Likewise, consumers are more responsive to salespeople who exhibit the brand's values in their exterior presentation and interactions with customers. Thus, in the context of aspirational brands, we predict that rejecting salespeople who fit or reflect the brand will be more effective in threatening participants' self-concept than salespeople who do not fit the brand.

- H4:** For consumers who relate their self-concept to an aspirational brand, receiving a rejection from a brand representative who fits the brand (vs. a brand representative who does not fit the brand) will elevate their attitudes toward and willingness to pay for the brand.

## The Effect of Rejection over Time

The question arises of how persistent these effects will be over time: Will these results get stronger, weaker, or reverse after a time delay? Two perspectives are provided from the literature on this question. First, research on goal striving contends that an unattained goal may become stronger and more desirable over time, resulting in increased efforts by consumers to achieve the goal (Bargh et al. 2001). On the basis of this research, we would predict that after a rejection, individuals will show increasingly positive brand attitudes and higher willingness to pay (WTP) for the brand's products over time, as they continue to seek the approval of the rejecting aspirational brand. Alternatively, the results may grow stronger due to individuals' drive to reduce the dissonance they feel after a rejection from a brand they admire and aspire toward. Specifically, if after an initial rejection individuals purchase products in order to affirm

their membership to the rejecting group, they may be motivated after a time delay to bolster their initial attitude.

Conversely, research on affect and memory suggests that after a negative event, individuals often forget the specifics of the experience but retain the emotional content of the experience (Reisberg and Heuer 2004). On the basis of these findings, we might make the opposite prediction: after being rejected, consumers will be more positive toward the brand in the near term as they try to affiliate with their rejecters. However, after a time delay these consumers will retain the negative emotions from the initial rejection experience, resulting in increasingly negative brand attitudes and lower WTP. Given these competing views, we do not make a formal prediction but rather empirically test the persistence of the effects over time in our final study.

## OVERVIEW

Four studies test the hypotheses. The first study tests hypothesis 1 by examining how consumers respond to being rejected by a salesperson at a luxury retailer. Study 2 examines hypothesis 2 by manipulating participants' self-concept using a sentence rearrangement prime. Next, in study 3 we verify the validity of hypothesis 3 by creating a mock retail situation in which consumers face a rejecting or neutral salesperson from an aspirational brand to test whether our predictions hold in a retail setting. Finally, in study 4 we test hypothesis 4 in a new aspirational product category (e.g., ecoconscious cars) and collect preliminary results on the long-term implications of rejection.

## STUDY 1

In our first study, we tested hypothesis 1 by instructing participants to imagine a scenario in which they enter a well-known aspirational (luxury) or nonaspirational (mass market) branded retailer and are greeted by either a neutral or a rejecting salesperson. Because salespeople are perceived by consumers as extensions of the brand and, as such, a conduit of its point of view (Humphreys and Williams 1996; Lynch and de Chernatony 2007; Mudambi 2002), we assessed how this interaction with a salesperson affected participants' subsequent brand attitudes and WTP for products from this brand.

## Design and Procedure

In a 6 (brand status replicates: luxury [Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Burberry] vs. mass market [American Eagle, Gap, H&M])  $\times$  2 (salesperson behavior: rejecting vs. neutral) between-participants experimental design, 359 females (age 18–70, average age = 31) recruited from Mturk participated in the study for a nominal payment. One participant was dropped from the analysis due to noncompletion of the experimental instrument. Following previous research, in each of the studies reported we matched the applicable population to the aspirational product category. In studies 1–3 we used a female population because females are particularly sen-

sitive to the fact that their consumption of luxury products influences their group membership (Berger and Ward 2010) and are also the dominant buyers and consumers of luxury fashion brands (Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara 2012). In the final study, we broadened to a mixed-gender population, as the product category used in the study is applicable to both genders.

In all conditions, participants read a hypothetical scenario in which they were instructed to imagine a shopping experience in which they entered a retail store and were directed to the items they were looking for by a salesperson. To enhance generalizability, each participant was randomly assigned to a condition with one of six brand replicates. In the rejecting condition, the rejection signal was operationalized by the salesperson “condescendingly” greeting the individual; in the neutral condition, the salesperson simply directed her to the items she was looking for. Thus, the scenarios differed by the brand status of the retail store and the insertion of the word “condescendingly” to describe the salesperson’s demeanor. The hypothetical scenario:

Imagine that you’re out shopping for some new clothes. You decide to go to Louis Vuitton (vs. Burberry, Gucci, American Eagle, Gap, H&M) because you’ve always liked the clothing there. As you are browsing the store, you encounter a saleswoman. She greets you and (**condescendingly**) asks you if she can help you find what you’re looking for. You ask where the clothing is located and she points to the area.

After reading the scenario, participants answered a series of questions on 1–7 point Likert scales assessing the product from each brand on attributes such as liking (1 = strongly dislike; 7 = strongly like), distinctiveness (1 = low distinctiveness; 7 = high distinctiveness), product fashionability (1 = low fashionability; 7 = high fashionability), and their desire to be seen wearing products from the brand (1 = low desire; 7 = high desire). Finally, participants indicated their WTP for an average product from the brand (i.e., open response of dollar value). After the participants completed the study, they were asked to write down what they thought the objective of the experiment was; none of the participants in this study or the subsequent studies correctly guessed the hypotheses.

## Pretests

A pretest was conducted with 66 participants on Mturk to confirm that the manipulation of the word “condescendingly” in the rejecting scenario resulted in participants’ feeling rejected. After reading one of the randomly presented rejecting or control scenarios, participants indicated how rejected, accepted, and rebuffed they would feel after the interaction described in the scenario, on 1–7 point Likert scales (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). The results indicated that after reading the rejecting scenario, participants felt more rejected ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 3.87$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 2.41$ ;  $F(1, 65) = 31.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ), less accepted ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 2.97$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.90$ ;  $F(1, 65) = 30.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and more rebuffed ( $M_{\text{reject}}$

$= 4.16$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 3.00$ ;  $F(1, 65) = 9.88$ ,  $p < .003$ ) than those in the control condition.

A second pretest of 100 participants from the same participant pool answered questions relating to their brand attitudes about luxury (i.e., Louis Vuitton, Burberry, and Gucci) and mass market (i.e., American Eagle, Gap, and H&M) brands. In order to measure how aspirational the brands were, participants judged each brand on its luxuriousness, prestige, and status. The results indicated that the three luxury brands were judged more luxurious ( $M_{\text{luxury}} = 6.23$  vs.  $M_{\text{mass}} = 4.08$ ;  $F(1, 99) = 109.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), prestigious ( $M_{\text{luxury}} = 5.66$  vs.  $M_{\text{mass}} = 4.43$ ;  $F(1, 99) = 15.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and higher status ( $M_{\text{luxury}} = 6.19$  vs.  $M_{\text{mass}} = 4.27$ ;  $F(1, 99) = 80.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than the mass market brands. Furthermore, the brands within each level of status did not differ on the dimensions measured. Specifically, participants judged the three aspirational luxury brands to be equally luxurious and prestigious and to have the same status (all  $p > .27$ ). Likewise, participants judged the three mass brands not to differ on each of the dimensions measured (all  $p > .20$ ).

## Results

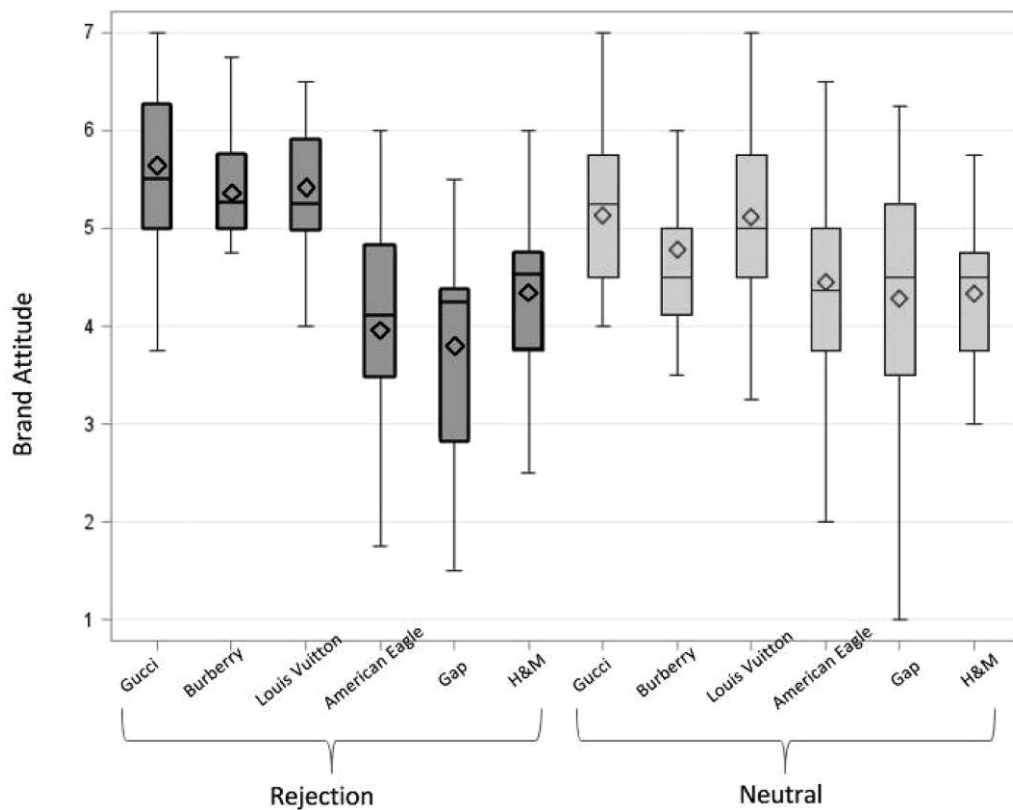
*Attitude toward the Brand.* First, we created a brand attitude variable by combining participants’ measures of product fashionability, distinctiveness, product liking, and desire to be recognized wearing the product ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Next, we examined how the rejecting (vs. neutral) salesperson affected participants’ brand attitudes toward the luxury and mass market brands. An ANOVA including brand and salesperson behavior as predictor variables and brand attitude as the dependent variable revealed a significant interaction ( $F(5, 354) = 3.53$ ,  $p < .004$ ), supporting hypothesis 1 (see fig. 1).

For ease of interpretation, we collapsed the brand replicates into a “brand status” variable in which the three luxury brands (Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Burberry) represented the luxury brand and the remaining three (American Eagle, H&M, Gap) represented the mass brand. The identified interaction noted above remains significant ( $F(1, 358) = 14.54$ ,  $p < .002$ ). We note that the analyses detailed below (for both brand attitude and WTP) hold if the brand replicates are analyzed independently.

To further explore the interaction between brand status and salesperson behavior, we examined the simple effects and found that participants had more positive brand attitudes when they were rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) by the salesperson at a luxury brand retailer ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 5.47$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.35$ ;  $F(1, 358) = 9.94$ ,  $p < .02$ ; see fig. 2). Conversely, participants who imagined the same scenario taking place in a mass market retailer showed lower brand attitudes after being rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) by the salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 4.04$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 5.01$ ;  $F(1, 358) = 4.94$ ,  $p < .03$ ).

*Willingness to Pay.* Next, we determined whether participants’ WTP varied as a function of rejection and the

FIGURE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF BRAND REPLICATES  $\times$  SALESPERSON BEHAVIOR ON BRAND ATTITUDE (STUDY 1)

NOTE.—Brand attitude resulting from treatment versus control conditions across brands that vary by degree of luxury.

brand they were considering. In order to analyze WTP, we logged the WTP variable in order to normalize the distribution (Frederick 2012). The results in studies 1–3 are reported in the log of WTP (in dollars). Using the logged WTP variable, we find a significant interaction of brand status and salesperson behavior on WTP ( $F(1, 358) = 10.21, p < .002$ ). This indicates that when participants imagined being rejected (vs. greeted neutrally) by the representative of a luxury brand, they were willing to pay more for the brand. Specifically, the simple effects indicate that participants were willing to pay more when they felt rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) by the salesperson of a luxury retailer ( $M_{\text{reject}} = \$4.44$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = \$3.95$ ;  $F(1, 358) = 14.32, p < .002$ ) but showed no difference in their WTP when the salesperson of a mass market brand rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) them ( $M_{\text{reject}} = \$2.90$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = \$2.98$ ;  $F(1, 358) = .66, p > .50$ ).

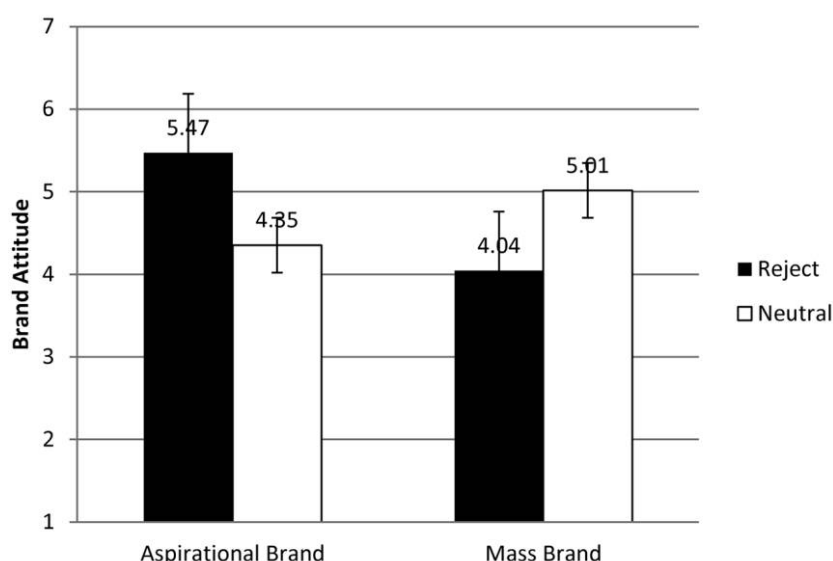
## Discussion

In line with hypothesis 1, the data revealed that when consumers encounter a rejection in a luxury brand retail

context, they find the products in the store more appealing and are willing to pay more for them than when greeted neutrally. However, they do not show this increase in regard for the brand and WTP when they are in a mass market brand retail context. One potential reason that consumers respond differently when they are rejected by a salesperson in a mass market (vs. a luxury) retailer is that mass market brands have a wide, nonexclusive target market, and most people feel accepted and desired by these brands. Thus, consumers do not feel threatened by a rejecting salesperson; consumers' security in being accepted by such brands buttresses them from the threat of rejection. In the next study, we will look at this phenomenon in more detail by examining how consumers' self-concept with regard to the aspirational luxury brand determines their response to rejection. We predict that those who aspire to the brand may be more vulnerable to rejection by its sales staff, whereas those who do not aspire to the brand (because it is either already part of their actual self-concept or is irrelevant) will ignore or be less susceptible to rejection from its sales staff.



FIGURE 2

BRAND STATUS  $\times$  SALESPERSON BEHAVIOR ON BRAND ATTITUDE (STUDY 1)

NOTE.—Brand attitude resulting from treatment versus control conditions across brands that vary by degree of luxury.

## STUDY 2

The primary objective of study 2 was to manipulate consumers' ideal versus actual self-concept with respect to a brand and observe how rejection from it differentially affects consumers' brand attitudes and WTP for the brand. We manipulated the self-concept of the consumer using a sentence rearrangement prime. After completing the prime, participants read the same hypothetical shopping scenario about being rejected or greeted neutrally by a brand representative as in study 1.

### Design and Procedure

In a 2 (salesperson behavior: rejecting vs. neutral)  $\times$  2 (prime self-concept: ideal vs. actual self-concept)  $\times$  3 (brand replicate: Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Burberry) between-subjects experimental design, 122 female participants, with an average age of 35, completed an online study on Mturk in return for a nominal payment. Three participants were dropped from the analysis because they disclosed that they were not female.

First, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions in which their ideal versus actual self-concept was primed. The prime was administered using a sentence creation technique in which participants were asked to rearrange words to create sentences that made sense (Oyserman and Lee 2008). Each sentence incorporated a word relating to the participant's ideal self (e.g., aim, wish, desire)

or actual self (e.g., mine, own, reflect) as well as two sentences with filler words. In order to disguise our intentions, we told respondents that we were "interested in how accurately people can rearrange sentences when they read them in a digital format."

In a separate pretest of 60 female participants, we conducted the same sentence rearrangement task. After participants completed the priming task, they participated in an ostensibly unrelated study in which they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions and asked to consider a luxury brand logo (Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Burberry). After seeing the logo, they were then asked to indicate their (1) ideal and (2) actual self-concept relative to the brand, using the pictorial Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) instrument (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Reimann and Aron 2009). The IOS instrument depicts the individual's self-concept with relation to the brand as a series of increasingly overlapping circles labeled "self" and "brand" (see app. A). This technique of measuring the relationship individuals have with brands is based on Reimann and Aron's (2009) research showing that consumers' relationships with brands are similar to other close relationships they have. We calculate a self-discrepancy score by calculating the difference between participants' ratings of their ideal and actual brand relationship (i.e., the actual rating is subtracted from the ideal rating indicated by the participant). Central to this pretest, a resulting high score indicated that the brand related strongly to participants' ideal self-concept but was much less reflective of their actual self-concept.

Conversely, a low score captured individuals who have already attained the identity, such that the brand is already a part of their actual self-concept or is irrelevant to either their actual or their ideal self-concept. Importantly, after completing the ideal (actual) self-concept prime before considering the brand, pretest participants' difference scores revealed that they were more likely to assess themselves as having a stronger ideal self-concept relative to the brand ( $M_{\text{ideal} - \text{act}} = 1.52$ ). Conversely, after completing the actual (ideal) self-concept prime before considering the brand, pretest participants' difference scores showed that they were significantly less likely to assess themselves as having a stronger ideal self-concept relative to the brand ( $M_{\text{ideal} - \text{act}} = .52$ ;  $t(59) = 2.39$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

After completing the sentence rearrangement task, the main study participants were instructed to complete a second, ostensibly unrelated study using the same scenario used in study 1. After reading the scenario, the participants answered the same series of dependent measures described in study 1.

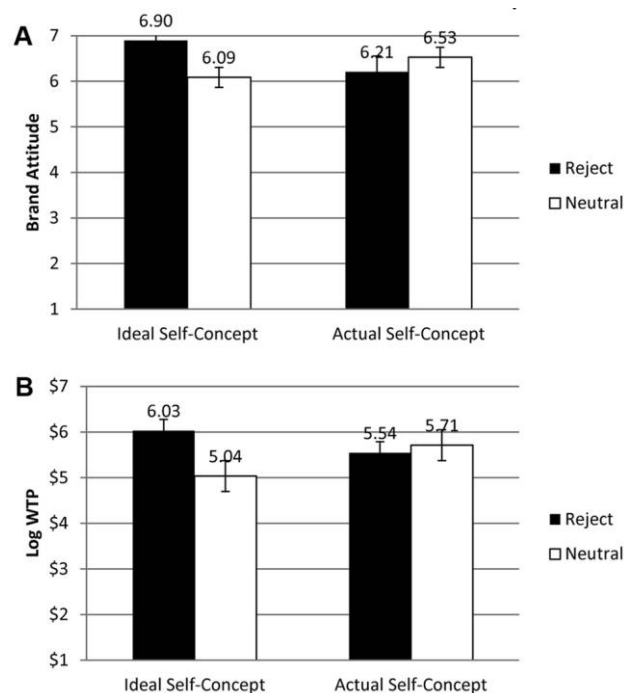
## Results

**Brand Attitude.** We examined how the rejecting (vs. neutral) salesperson differentially affected participants' brand attitudes ( $\alpha = .81$ ) when they had an ideal (vs. actual) self-concept relative to the brand. Given the lack of any theoretical basis for expecting the self-concept by salesperson behavior interaction predicted in the hypothesis to be qualified by the replicate factor, as well as the failure of the three-way interaction term to attain statistical significance in this and subsequent studies (all  $p > .3$ ), we collapsed across the three replicates in the analyses performed. Thus, an ANOVA with self-concept and salesperson behavior as predictor variables showed a significant interaction in support of hypothesis 2 ( $F(1, 121) = 4.85$ ,  $p < .04$ ; see fig. 3). The simple effects reveal that when participants were primed with an ideal self-concept, they had more positive brand attitudes after being rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) by the brand salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 6.90$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 6.09$ ;  $F(1, 121) = 4.84$ ,  $p < .04$ ). Conversely, participants who were primed with actual self-concept showed no difference in brand attitude after being rejected by the brand salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 6.21$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 6.53$ ;  $F(1, 121) = .33$ ,  $p > .50$ ).

**Willingness to Pay.** This pattern of results is replicated with the log of the WTP variable (interaction effect:  $F(1, 121) = 3.10$ ,  $p < .08$ ). The simple effects tests confirm that participants whose ideal self-concept related to the brand were willing to pay more for products after being rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) by the brand salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = \$6.03$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = \$5.04$ ;  $F(1, 121) = 4.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Conversely, participants whose actual self-concept related to the brand showed no significant difference in their WTP when they are rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) by the brand salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = \$5.54$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = \$5.71$ ;  $F(1, 121) = .93$ ,  $p > .35$ ).

FIGURE 3

PRIMED IDENTIFICATION WITH BRAND  $\times$  SALESPERSON BEHAVIOR ON BRAND ATTITUDE (STUDY 2)



NOTE.—A, Brand attitude resulting from treatment versus control conditions across prime conditions. B, Log WTP (willingness to pay) resulting from treatment versus control conditions across brands.

## Discussion

These findings show that retailer rejection may drive consumers to purchase products that ingratiate them to the rejecting group (Mead et al. 2011). Furthermore, supporting hypothesis 2 we confirm this is particularly true for individuals who were primed to belong to the social group the brand represented. The data corroborate our prediction that when individuals with ideal self-concepts related to the brand are faced with rejection, they are more likely to elevate their perceptions in an apparent attempt to affiliate with the rejecting brand. These effects do not duplicate for individuals primed to relate the brand to their actual self-concepts.

We replicated the pattern of results in this study in a follow-up study wherein we used the same experimental design but measured rather than manipulated participants' ideal and actual self-concepts relative to the brand (using the IOS instrument discussed above). As before, a resulting high score indicated that the participant aspired to the brand identity, whereas a lower score indicated that the participant either had already attained the identity or was apathetic toward possessing the brand. It was also possible to get a

negative score, suggesting that the participant had an actual self-concept relating to the brand but did not feel it was an ideal self-concept. Our data set did not include any participants who exhibited this type of summary attitude.

As expected, we observed a self-concept by salesperson behavior interaction ( $F(1, 100) = 4.85, p < .03$ ). Furthermore, a spotlight analysis confirmed that participants who possessed a stronger ideal self-concept relating to the brand had more positive brand attitudes when they felt rejected (vs. treated neutrally) by a salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 6.01$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 5.18$ ;  $F(1, 100) = 4.73, p < .03$ ). Conversely, participants who indicated having a stronger actual self-concept relating to the brand showed no difference in brand attitude when the salesperson rejected them ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 4.83$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.89$ ;  $F(1, 100) = .68, p > .41$ ).

This pattern of results was replicated with the logged WTP variable (interaction effect:  $F(1, 100) = 3.26, p < .02$ ). Simple effects revealed that participants who had a stronger ideal (vs. actual) self-concept relating to the brand were willing to pay more for products when they felt rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) by the salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = \$5.96$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = \$4.82$ ;  $t(100) = 2.26, p < .04$ ). Conversely, participants who had a stronger actual (vs. ideal) self-concept showed no difference in WTP when they are rejected (vs. neutrally greeted) by the salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = \$4.61$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = \$4.52$ ;  $t(100) = .96, p > .30$ ).

In the studies reported thus far, participants read and reacted to a rejecting or neutral scenario. While people are capable of imagining their response to rejection, it is important to see whether the effects hold when individuals are faced with actual rejection from an aspirational brand representative. In our final two studies, we created situations that more closely mimicked the experience of rejection in an actual retail environment.

### STUDY 3

Study 3 strengthens our theoretical framework by confirming our hypothesized process: rejection by the brand acts as a self-threat to a consumer, which leads him/her to express more positive brand attitudes. We demonstrate this process by showing that buttressing individuals' self-concepts, through affirmation of their group membership before rejection, can diminish the effects of rejection. The impact of affirmation in this context establishes that it is the uncertainty in their self-concept relative to the aspirational brand that leaves them vulnerable to the threat of brand rejection. In this study, participants engaged in a "brand assessment task" in which they had an actual face-to-face interaction with a neutral or rejecting brand representative. We restricted this study to just two luxury brand replicates (Gucci, Louis Vuitton) to limit the complexity of the experimental design.

#### Design and Procedure

In a 2 (salesperson behavior: rejecting vs. neutral)  $\times$  2 (prime self-concept: ideal vs. actual self-concept)  $\times$  2 (group

membership affirmation: affirmed vs. control)  $\times$  2 (brand replicate: Gucci vs. Louis Vuitton) between-subjects experimental design, 172 females from Southern Methodist University participated for a nominal payment of \$5. Participants were unaware that they were participating in a marketing study and were told a cover story that they were being recruited to give feedback to a luxury brand (i.e., Gucci, Louis Vuitton) about some of the brand's upcoming spring handbag styles.

While participants waited to give their feedback, they completed the group membership affirmation manipulation in which they were given the opportunity to display their affiliation with their aspiration group. Inoculation against threat has been successfully operationalized in the prior literature by directing participants to display their domain-specific strengths (Reed and Aspinwall 1998; Schmeichel and Vohs 2009). Participants were assigned randomly to one of two conditions in which they were asked to fill out either a "Fashion Knowledge Questionnaire" that assessed their fashion knowledge (affirmed group membership condition) or a "Personal Information" questionnaire that collected information such as their year in school, major, and gender (control condition). The Fashion Knowledge Questionnaire enabled participants to express their expertise on the topic of fashion and style and to identify three well-known luxury brand logos and, in doing so, to affirm their group membership (see Martens et al. [2006] and Ward and Broniarczyk [2011] for a similar manipulation). All participants in this condition correctly identified three luxury brand logos and were thus able to assert their expertise in the area, enabling them to confirm their group membership and consequently buttress their self-concept.

After completing the questionnaire, participants completed the same sentence rearranging task described in study 2, which primed participants' ideal or actual self-concepts. In order to disguise our intentions, participants were told they could do the task to keep themselves occupied while waiting for the brand representative to be ready for them. Once they completed the sentence rearrangement prime, participants were instructed to knock on the door and enter a room with one of the brand representatives and complete the assessment task. Participants were met by the brand representative, who delivered either the neutral or the rejecting brand manipulation. The brand representatives followed a script in which they greeted the participant and explained how to rate the bags pictured in a "Look Book." However, in the rejecting condition the brand representative appeared skeptical of the participant's knowledge of the brand and was disapproving of the participant's appearance and appropriateness for the rating task. In the neutral condition, the brand representative was neutral and friendly (see app. B for script).

To ensure that the interaction between the salesperson and the participant was significantly more rejecting in the rejection condition than in the neutral condition, we videotaped the scripted interaction to establish the validity of the protocol. A sample of 60 Mturks were randomly assigned

to view either the rejecting or the neutral protocol and rate how rejected, accepted, and rebuffed they thought the individuals who had interacted with the salesperson felt during the interaction, on 1–7 point Likert scales (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). The results indicated that the rejecting protocol was more rejecting ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 3.01$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 2.31$ ;  $F(1, 59) = 4.28$ ,  $p < .04$ ), less accepting ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 4.39$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 5.09$ ;  $F(1, 59) = 3.89$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and marginally more rebuffing ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 3.32$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 2.65$ ;  $F(1, 59) = 3.32$ ,  $p < .07$ ) than the control protocol. After interacting with the salesperson, the participants answered the same series of dependent measures (described in previous studies) for the handbags of interest.

## Results

**Brand Attitude.** We examined how a rejecting (vs. neutral) interaction with a salesperson of a luxury brand differentially affected participants' brand attitudes ( $\alpha = .87$ ). We conducted an ANOVA using salesperson behavior, primed self-concept, and affirmation of group membership as predictor variables (the brand replicate factor was collapsed as in previous studies). As predicted, we observed a three-way interaction on the brand attitude index ( $F(1, 171) = 3.99$ ,  $p < .05$ ). We decomposed the interaction by assessing each side of the affirmation manipulation. In the control condition (in which participants did not have the chance to affirm) there is a marginal interaction between self-concept and salesperson behavior ( $F(1, 171) = 3.73$ ,  $p < .06$ ; see fig. 4). Conversely, when participants were able to affirm themselves as knowledgeable about fashion before their interaction with the salesperson, there was no interaction between self-concept and salesperson behavior ( $F(1, 171) = 2.35$ ,  $p > .13$ ).

The simple effects reveal that participants who were primed with an ideal self-concept showed a pattern of results parallel to prior studies. For these individuals, brand attitudes were again elevated after a rejecting (vs. neutral) brand interaction ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 5.64$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.90$ ;  $t(171) = 1.64$ ,  $p < .05$ , one tailed). Conversely, participants who had been primed with an actual self-concept showed no differences in brand attitudes whether they had a rejecting or a neutral interaction with the salesperson ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 4.36$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.15$ ;  $F(1, 171) = .52$ ,  $p > .60$ ).

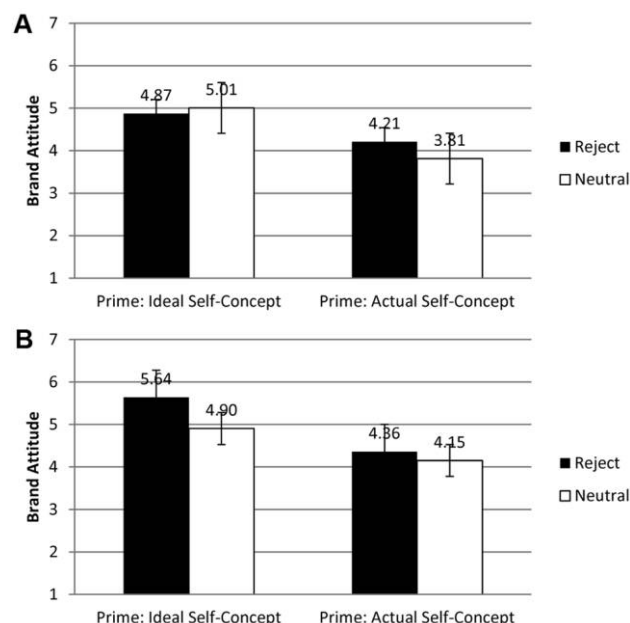
**Willingness to Pay.** We examined how a rejecting (vs. neutral) interaction with a salesperson of a luxury brand differentially affected participants' WTP for the brand. The ANOVA did not render the predicted three-way interaction ( $p > .14$ ).

## Discussion

The results of study 3 provide additional evidence that individuals who possess an ideal self-concept relative to a rejecting brand are likely to elevate their attitudes about the brand as a means to affiliate with the rejecting brand salesperson. Supporting hypothesis 3, the results also showed

FIGURE 4

PRIMED IDENTIFICATION WITH BRAND  $\times$  SALESPERSON BEHAVIOR  $\times$  AFFIRMATION ON ATTITUDES (STUDY 3)



NOTE.—Brand attitude resulting from treatment versus control conditions across prime conditions when the participant's identity has been affirmed prior (A) or has not been affirmed prior (B).

that affirming one's group membership before rejection from the brand will mitigate the likelihood of ingratiation toward the rejecting brand. Indeed, by buttressing the self-concept before rejection, one can mitigate the effects of rejection. This finding indicates that it is people's uncertainty in their self-concept relative to the brand that leaves them vulnerable to the threat of brand rejection. Interestingly, while the pattern of results for brand attitude was shown to support our predictions, the WTP measure did not show significant differences across experimental conditions. We note that the WTP variable exhibited high range and extreme variability across participant estimates. We speculate that the lack of knowledge in the specific product category among study participants contributed to this effect; thus, it is perhaps not surprising that we show null findings in this instance.

## STUDY 4

In our final study, we observe how the salespersons' reflection of the brand (i.e., their fit with the brand) potentially increases or mitigates the effects hereto identified. Prior research has shown that exemplars of a group are more relevant sources of social validation for other members' social identity than are "black sheep," or marginalized members



of a relevant in-group (Pinto et al. 2010). Thus, we test our hypothesis 4 prediction that individuals will be more (vs. less) vulnerable to rejection from a salesperson who fits or is an exemplar (vs. a misfit) to the brand.

Furthermore, in study 4 we change the brand from representing the aspirational lifestyle of luxury to that of environmental conscientiousness, using the Toyota ecofriendly car brand. Given the growing concern about environmental damage and global climate change, status is increasingly conferred upon demonstrations of austerity rather than ostentation, particularly with regard to product choices or behaviors that minimize the environmental impact of consumption. In an effort to express their environmental awareness, consumers may publicly consume ecofriendly products in order to signal their concern for the environment, a phenomenon termed "conspicuous conservation" (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010; Sexton and Sexton 2011). Furthermore, car ownership decisions are among the most visible consumption decisions households make. Consumers attach symbolic meanings to vehicles and use vehicle choices to communicate interests, beliefs, values, and status (Grubb and Hupp 1968; Heffner, Turrentine, and Kurani 2006; Sirgy 1982).

In this experiment, we included both male and female participants in order to observe whether the effects are robust across gender. Finally, we followed up with participants 2 weeks after their interaction with the salesperson to gauge their feelings toward the brand and, thus, the persistence of the effects identified.

### Pretests of Toyota Brand and Salesperson Fit

A pretest of 30 participants from the pool used for the focal study answered questions on their brand attitudes about Toyota and other car manufacturers (i.e., Acura, Ford, GMC, VW, Subaru, Honda, Chevrolet) in order to confirm that Toyota was perceived as an ecofriendly car brand compared to other available brands. Participants rated each brand on how "green" it is, how good for the environment the cars are, and the brand's ability to make a consumer feel "ecofriendly." The results indicate that the Toyota brand was judged more green ( $M_{\text{Toyota}} = 4.23$  vs.  $M_{\text{other}} = 3.50$ ;  $F(1, 29) = 5.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and good for the environment ( $M_{\text{Toyota}} = 4.26$  vs.  $M_{\text{other}} = 3.76$ ;  $F(1, 29) = 6.93$ ,  $p < .005$ ) and that driving Toyota brand cars enabled a consumer to be more ecofriendly ( $M_{\text{Toyota}} = 3.8$  vs.  $M_{\text{other}} = 3.16$ ;  $F(1, 29) = 4.94$ ,  $p < .02$ ) than do the other car brands. There was no gender effect for any of these measures.

We also conducted a pretest of 62 participants from Mturk in order to determine what kind of physical and personal attributes a Toyota salesperson who "fit" (vs. misfit) the Toyota brand would possess. Participants were instructed to answer an open-ended question about how they imagined a Toyota representative selling ecofriendly cars would look and behave. We then used these descriptions to find models that fit these portrayals. Some representative responses to the open-ended question were that this salesperson would be a "nice, young guy dressed in casual business clothes,"

"male, well-dressed, smiling, friendly, high-energy, smart," "probably a guy wearing a long-sleeve button-up shirt who presents himself as confident and professional," and "would look professional and neat." We then asked 37 participants to assess two professional models, one of whom matched the descriptions given in the prior pretest and one did not. We showed participants pictures of the two models next to each other and asked the participants to indicate which individual they thought was more reflective of a Toyota ecoconscious salesperson, by using a sliding bar scale ( $-100$  = model intended to be misfit to brand;  $100$  = model intended to fit brand;  $0$  = neutral). We counterbalanced the position of the two pictures. In order to confirm that the model we chose as a fit was a better match to participants' perceptions of the Toyota brand, we compared the mean of the responses to the midpoint of the scale and found that participants felt that the individual who was intended to fit the brand was both more reflective of the Toyota brand ( $M_{\text{fit}} = 7.19$  vs.  $M_{\text{midpoint}} = 0$ ;  $F(1, 36) = 19.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and more likely to sell Toyota ecofriendly cars ( $M_{\text{fit}} = 9.41$  vs.  $M_{\text{midpoint}} = 0$ ;  $F(1, 36) = 18.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than the brand misfit. We then employed these two models to act as salespeople for the experiment.

### Design and Procedure

In a 2 (salesperson behavior: rejecting vs. neutral)  $\times$  2 (salesperson fit with brand: fit vs. misfit)  $\times$  1 (IOS measure of ideal self-concept) between-subjects experimental design, 85 participants from Southern Methodist University took part in an experiment in return for course credit. Participants were unaware that they were participating in a marketing study and were told they were participating in marketing research related to a partnership between Toyota and the university. The cover story was that Toyota wanted to assess students' attitudes toward ecofriendly cars in order to determine whether to put a dealership near the campus. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in which they met with a salesperson who either fit or did not fit the Toyota ecoconscious brand and who either behaved neutrally or rejected the participant during the interaction.

First, participants were met by the Toyota brand representative who fit (vs. was a misfit) with the Toyota brand and delivered either a neutral or a rejecting brand manipulation. Following the descriptions/pictures used in the pretest, the fit brand representative was dressed in business casual clothing and horn-rimmed glasses and possessed a generally neat and professional appearance. The actor posing as the brand misfit wore jeans and a collared shirt, and his appearance was much more informal.

The brand representatives followed identical scripts in which they greeted the participants and explained that they were there on behalf of Toyota to assess students' perceptions of the brand in order to determine whether to locate a new ecofriendly car dealership near the school. They showed each participant three ecofriendly Toyota cars pictured in a brochure and asked the participants whether they

were familiar with the brand. Following a script very similar to the one described in study 3, in the rejecting condition the brand representative appeared skeptical of participants' knowledge of the brand and disapproving of participants' appropriateness for the rating task. In the neutral condition, the brand representative was neutral about the participants' knowledge of the brand and acted friendly during the interaction.

After meeting with the salesperson, participants rated each of the four cars on brand attitude items similar to those used in the prior studies (i.e., liking of the car, would want to be seen in the car, would like to test drive the car, and would like to own the car), as well as their WTP for each vehicle, assuming they were in the market for a car. Given the high variability in price estimates shown in study 3, we controlled for such variability by providing guidance with respect to price range by telling participants the cars cost between \$10,000 and \$60,000. After finishing the task, participants were asked how friendly, likable, intimidating, condescending, and rejecting they found the brand representative. Additionally, they rated the brand representative on how well he fit and represented the brand (all measures used 1–7 point Likert scales).

Next, in order to collect some preliminary data that would provide insight into how persistent the results of these studies are, 2 weeks after the first phase of the experiment, participants were contacted to complete phase 2 of the experiment. The second phase involved completion of a follow-up online survey in which we assessed their environmental identity using the pictorial IOS instrument (Aron et al. 1992; Reimann and Aron 2009) used in prior studies to assess their ideal versus actual self-concept relative to being ecoconscious. Additionally, participants answered some questions about their perceptions of the Toyota brand, on 1–7 point Likert scales, including how favorable, negative (reverse coded), and positive they felt about the brand.

## Results

**Manipulation Checks.** Those in the rejecting condition felt that the salesperson was less friendly ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 3.21$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 5.51$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 35.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ), more intimidating ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 2.82$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 2.00$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 6.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ), more condescending ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 2.95$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 1.67$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 12.91$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), and more rejecting ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 3.01$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 1.97$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 9.65$ ,  $p < .002$ ) than did those in the neutral condition. Further, participants felt that the salesperson who reflected the brand was a better fit with the brand than the salesperson who did not fit the brand ( $M_{\text{fit}} = 5.30$  vs.  $M_{\text{misfit}} = 3.20$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 30.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For all measures, no other effects were shown to be significant.

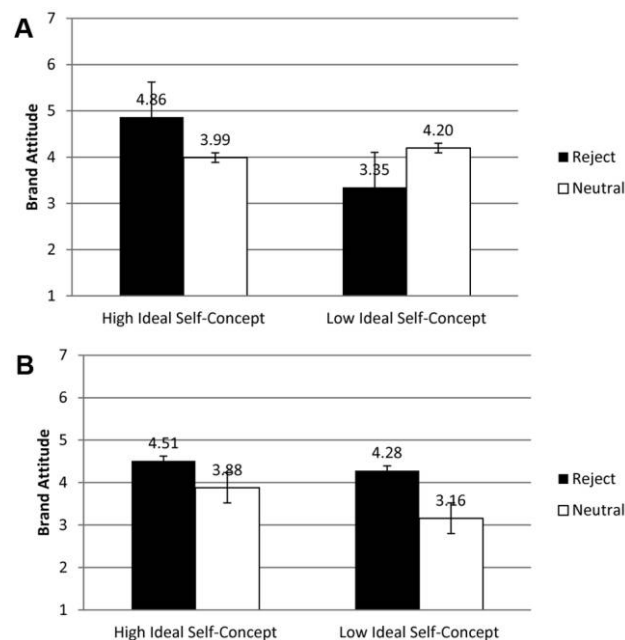
**Brand Attitude.** Next, we examined how a rejecting (vs. neutral) interaction with a salesperson who fit (vs. misfit) the brand differentially affected participants' brand attitudes ( $\alpha = .87$ ) when they strongly (vs. weakly) aspired to an environmental identity. We conducted an ANOVA using

salesperson behavior, the IOS measure of ideal self-concept, and salesperson fit as predictor variables and brand attitude as the dependent variable. As predicted in hypothesis 4, we observed a three-way interaction ( $F(1, 84) = 4.84$ ,  $p < .03$ ). We decompose the interaction by assessing each side of the salesperson fit manipulation. As predicted, when the salesperson fit the brand, we show a significant interaction between ideal self-concept relating to environmental identity and salesperson behavior ( $F(1, 84) = 11.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Conversely, in the salesperson misfit condition, we do not observe a significant interaction between these variables ( $p > .57$ ; see fig. 5B).

In the salesperson brand fit condition, we employed a spotlight analysis 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of the ideal environmental self-concept variable. The simple effects reveal that participants who possess a strong ideal environmental self-concept showed a similar pattern of results as found in prior studies. For these individuals, brand attitudes were elevated after a rejecting (vs. neutral) brand interaction ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 4.86$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.99$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 8.83$ ,  $p < .003$ ). Conversely, participants who indicated a strong actual environmental self-concept (or for whom the environmental identity was less relevant to their self-concept) showed a marginal difference in brand atti-

FIGURE 5

CONTINUOUS DIFFERENCE SCORE OF SELF-CONCEPT  $\times$  SALESPERSON BEHAVIOR  $\times$  SALESPERSON FIT (STUDY 4)



NOTE.—Brand attitude resulting from treatment versus control conditions across measured identity conditions when the salesperson “fits” the brand (A) or does not “fit” the brand (B).

tudes in the opposite direction as those with a high ideal self-concept ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 3.35$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.20$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 3.25, p > .07$ ).

**Willingness to Pay.** Next, we examined how a rejecting (vs. neutral) interaction with a salesperson who fit (vs. misfit) the brand differentially affected participants' WTP when they have a strong ideal self-concept relative to the brand. Because we constrained participant's WTP interval to eliminate extreme data, we did not log the WTP data. We conducted an ANOVA using salesperson behavior, self-concept, and salesperson fit as predictor variables. We used the WTP as the dependent variable and observed a significant three-way interaction ( $F(1, 84) = 4.12, p < .05$ ). We decompose the interaction by assessing each side of the salesperson fit manipulation. As predicted, when the salesperson fit the brand we show a significant interaction between the degree of aspiration for environmental identity and salesperson behavior ( $F(1, 84) = 5.69, p < .02$ ). Conversely, in the salesperson misfit condition, we do not observe a significant interaction between these variables ( $F(1, 84) = .66, p > .41$ ).

In the salesperson brand fit condition, we again employed a spotlight analysis 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of ideal environmental self-concept. This analysis reveals that participants who possess a strong ideal environmental self-concept showed a similar pattern of results as in prior studies. For these individuals, WTP was elevated after a rejecting versus a neutral brand interaction ( $M_{\text{reject}} = \$31,000$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = \$24,300$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 6.00, p < .02$ ). Conversely, participants who possess an actual environmental self-concept, or for whom this self-concept was irrelevant, showed no differences in their WTP when they experienced a rejecting versus neutral interaction with the sales associate ( $M_{\text{reject}} = \$23,030$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = \$24,200$ ;  $t(84) = .22, p > .64$ ).

**Persistence of Effects after Time Delay.** Finally, we examined the persistence of the identified effects and show that having a rejecting (vs. neutral) interaction with a salesperson who fits (vs. misfits) the brand differentially affects participants' brand assessments 2 weeks after the interaction with individuals whose ideal self-concept relates to the brand. First, we created a composite brand attitude measure that includes participants' endorsement of the statements "I feel favorable about the Toyota brand," "I feel negative about the Toyota brand" (reverse coded), and "I feel positive about the Toyota brand" ( $\alpha = .89$ ). We conducted an ANOVA using salesperson behavior, self-concept, and salesperson fit as predictor variables and brand attitude as the dependent variable. Again, we observed a three-way interaction ( $F(1, 84) = 11.28, p < .001$ ). We decompose the interaction by assessing each side of the salesperson fit manipulation. As predicted, when the salesperson fit the brand we show a significant interaction between self-concept and salesperson behavior ( $F(1, 84) = 3.93, p < .05$ ). Conversely, in the salesperson misfit condition, we do not observe a

significant interaction between these variables ( $F(1, 84) = .02, p > .88$ ).

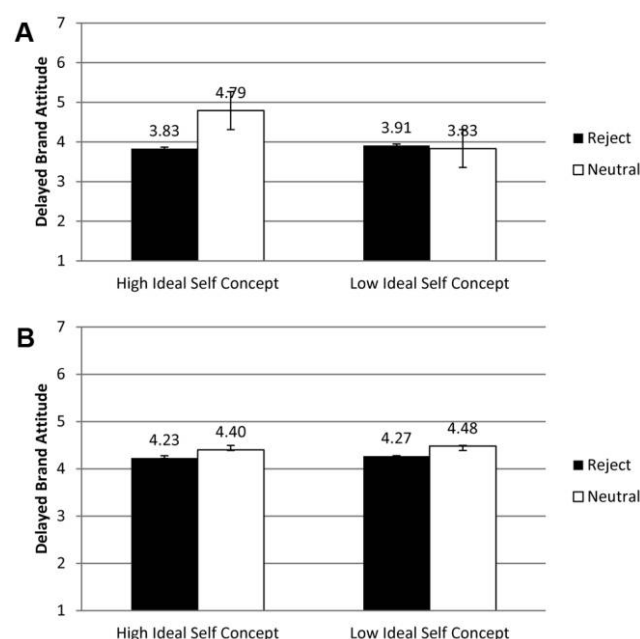
In the salesperson brand fit condition, the simple effects reveal that participants who had an ideal self-concept of being environmentally conscious showed the reverse pattern of results to those found in the previous studies. For these individuals, brand attitudes were deflated after a rejecting versus a neutral brand interaction ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 3.83$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.79$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 3.95, p < .05$ ). Conversely, participants who indicated that their actual self-concept related to being environmentally conscious (or for whom the environmentalist identity was less relevant to their self-concept) showed no differences in brand attitudes whether they had a rejecting or a neutral interaction with the sales associate ( $M_{\text{reject}} = 3.91$  vs.  $M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.83$ ;  $F(1, 84) = 1.52, p > .22$ ; see fig. 6).

## Discussion

The results of study 4 support hypothesis 4 and provide additional evidence that across genders and product categories, individuals who possess a strong ideal self-concept

FIGURE 6

TIME-DELAYED CONDITION: CONTINUOUS DIFFERENCE SCORE OF SELF-CONCEPT  $\times$  SALESPERSON BEHAVIOR  $\times$  SALESPERSON FIT (STUDY 4)



NOTE.—Brand attitude resulting from treatment versus control conditions across measured identity conditions after a time delay when the salesperson "fits" the brand (A) or does not "fit" the brand (B).

relative to the rejecting brand are likely to elevate their attitudes after experiencing a rejection from a representative of the brand. Furthermore, consumers' desire to affiliate is expressed via elevation of the brand perceptions and the consumers' WTP for the product, when the salesperson him/herself reflects the brand (vs. when s/he does not reflect the brand's values). In our prior studies, we examined consumers' identities relative to the brand. In this study, we broadened the context of the rejection by looking at the identity the brand represents (ecofriendly cars), rather than the identity relative to the brand itself (i.e., Toyota Prius). This expands the implications of our findings, in that a threat from one brand could potentially drive consumers to affiliate via purchase with a different brand in the product category. Future research could explore this remarkable consequence of threat.

Interestingly, the feelings of rejection work in the brand's favor immediately after the rejection; however, after a time lapse we show that rejection has the reverse effect on brand preferences such that consumers feel less favorable toward the brand after being rejected by a salesperson who strongly (vs. weakly) represents it. On the basis of this finding, we suggest that there are instances in which the immediate positive effects of brand rejection may be undermined by consumers' lowered perceptions over the long term. As noted previously, we conjecture that this is due to the fact that after a time delay, consumers often forget the nature of their prior interaction but have access to the affective state the interaction produced. As noted in our general discussion, future research should further explore this interesting reversal.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Past research has identified social rejection as an important factor in defining and maintaining self-concept (Cialdini and Richardson 1980; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Indeed, people have an inherent need to belong to social groups that create, support, and affirm their self-concept. In order to maintain these group memberships, people behave in ways that endear them to the group and help them avoid social rejection (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Lee and Shrum 2012). Mead et al. (2011) show that after a social rejection, individuals may consume products that will enable them to regain acceptance by their rejecters. We qualify these findings and show that not all people are equally affected by social rejection and identify several factors that moderate the relationship between consumption and affiliation after social rejection.

The contribution of this article is centered on understanding why some consumers are more vulnerable to rejection from a brand and how their self-concepts influence their response to these threats. We add to the literature in three distinct ways. First, we show that the aspirational nature of the brand under consideration for purchase moderates consumers' reactions to rejection. Specifically, in study 1 we show that rejection from a brand representative is especially threatening when it comes from an aspirational luxury (vs.

a less aspirational mass) brand and that such a rejection drives spurned individuals to attempt to affiliate by improving their attitudes toward the brand and their WTP for the brand's products.

In study 2, we build on this finding and hypothesize that one reason people may be more vulnerable to rejection from aspirational brands is that these brands are more closely related to an individual's less secure, ideal self-concepts. Thus, a rejection from these brands may leave individuals open to threat. Supporting this reasoning, we show that all consumers are not equally sensitive to rejection from luxury brands, but rather, those consumers who relate the brand to their ideal self-concept are most likely to engage in affiliative behaviors after a rejection from the brand. Next, we offer insight into why these moderating factors have such an influence. In our third study, participants experience an actual rejection from a luxury salesperson, and we show that by buttressing individuals' self-concept before rejection, we can mitigate the effects of this rejection. Thus, we establish in this study that it is people's uncertainty in their self-concept relative to the brand that leaves them vulnerable to the threat of brand rejection.

Finally, in study 4 we show that another important factor in how effective rejection is in driving consumers to affiliate is how well the salesperson reflects the brand. Salespeople are seen as conduits of the brand, and consequently, individuals who appear to fit the brand are more effective in sending brand signals to consumers. Our final study reveals that after a rejection by the salesperson, consumers demonstrate affiliation behaviors only when the salesperson appears to be an authentic representative of the brand. Interestingly, we provide evidence that consumers' elevated brand perceptions after being rejected may be only short term; after a time lapse, rejection appears to lead those who aspire toward the brand to feel negatively toward it.

We suggest that the downstream effects of rejection may vary on the basis of consumers' response to rejection, product category, and prior experience with the brand. Specifically, in these studies the participants do not actually make a purchase. We conjecture that if, after the rejection, the consumer has actually purchased the product in order to affiliate with the rejecting brand, s/he may be more motivated to reduce the dissonance of the purchase by elevating his/her brand attitudes. Furthermore, consumers' relationship with a brand is developed over time. A single rejecting experience in the context of many other positive experiences will not be as detrimental as it would if the rejecting experience were the only contact the consumer had with the brand. Finally, these results are likely to be brand specific. We predict that a reversal may be more likely if the brand is perceived as unfriendly or aloof (e.g., The Ritz-Carlton, Jaguar) versus one that has a more friendly reputation (e.g., Apple, The W), as consumers' attitudes will be reinforced or weakened by public opinion.



## Substantive Implications

Traditionally, aspirational products were synonymous with luxury product domains. However, in an economy in which lower- and middle-income consumers increasingly have access to luxury items, traditional luxury products may be less effective in signaling cultural capital. Thus, individuals who are motivated to differentiate themselves from the masses may signal their aspirational self-concepts via new product domains, such as intellectual, value-laden, or expertise-related product categories. For instance, consumption of travel to obscure locations, graduate degrees from elite universities, and the possession of knowledge and preferences in esoteric product domains are less universally accessible and are costly to attain and thus are effective signals of cultural capital. For instance, Griskevicius et al. (2010) show that "green" products demonstrate to others that their owners are voluntarily willing and able to incur the cost of owning a product that benefits the environment (and society) but that may be inferior for personal use and is consequently an effective domain for conspicuous consumption. Our fourth study provides evidence that the phenomenon identified has application in such a context.

This research sheds some light on a potential explanation for why an increasing percentage of aspirational products are purchased online rather than in intimidating retail stores designed to display these products. While many consumers may purchase online for convenience, shopping online also may enable customers to avoid threatening encounters with intimidating salespeople. Indeed, online shopping may provide a form of protection, wherein consumers may be more able to form attitudes about brands without being influenced by their interpersonal experience with the salesperson.

## Limitations and Future Research

The current research has a number of limitations that may facilitate future research on the topic. A current strength of this research is that the manipulations are precise in how they vary the rejecting and neutral scenarios. However, we do not actually have consumers interact with a rejecting salesperson when they are intending to make a purchase, and thus they do not feel the pain of rejection in an actual retail context. For this reason, we contend that the results we report are quite conservative. Because participants are not subjected to the full extent of rejection in a retail context, we conjecture that they may not experience the threat as intensely and thus do not show the inclination to reciprocally penalize the brand. Future research might test these findings in an actual retail context and validate the conclusions reported here. For instance, it may be interesting to investigate the question of whether a "backlash" effect could result for some consumers such that they would punish rejecting

brands by immediately revising their attitudes and purchase intentions.

Furthermore, research on the topic might examine the specific emotional outcomes of rejection that drive these effects. Pretests confirm that participants feel rebuffed and rejected, but it would be interesting to determine what specific feelings these situations might elicit. For instance, determining whether consumers experience embarrassment, shame, or feelings of personal fraudulence when they are rejected by salespeople might give us more understanding of whether they elevate their brand attitudes as a personal defense or in order to win over their rejecters. Future research also might consider how the nature of the threat may elicit different responses from consumers. For instance, condescension may feel belittling to consumers, driving them to affiliate and attempt to regain social status, while shaming or embarrassing a consumer may cause him/her to abandon the brand because they do not feel deserving of the social status it confers.

Moreover, examining the downstream effects of self-concept threat in a retail context is also a rich field for study with many potential avenues of investigation. For example, how would threat affect consumers' perceptions of other consumers who consume the brand? Do feelings of threat from one brand carry over to other comparable aspirational brands? Do consumers seek other aspirational brands to self-affirm when they have been rejected? Finally, the studies in this article focus on a negative interchange between consumer and salesperson. Future research might examine how overt the rejection must be in order to threaten the consumer and drive him/her to elevate his/her perceptions of the product. For instance, many luxury retail stores located on busy streets lock their doors rather than allow everyone to enter. Thus, when a consumer wants to enter a store, s/he faces a locked door. Further, once the consumer enters the store, products are often displayed in locked cases. Is it possible that the physical properties of the store may implicitly reject the consumer and ultimately have the same effect on consumers' perceptions as a rejecting interaction with a salesperson? Our research seeds a number of interesting questions that await additional investigation.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

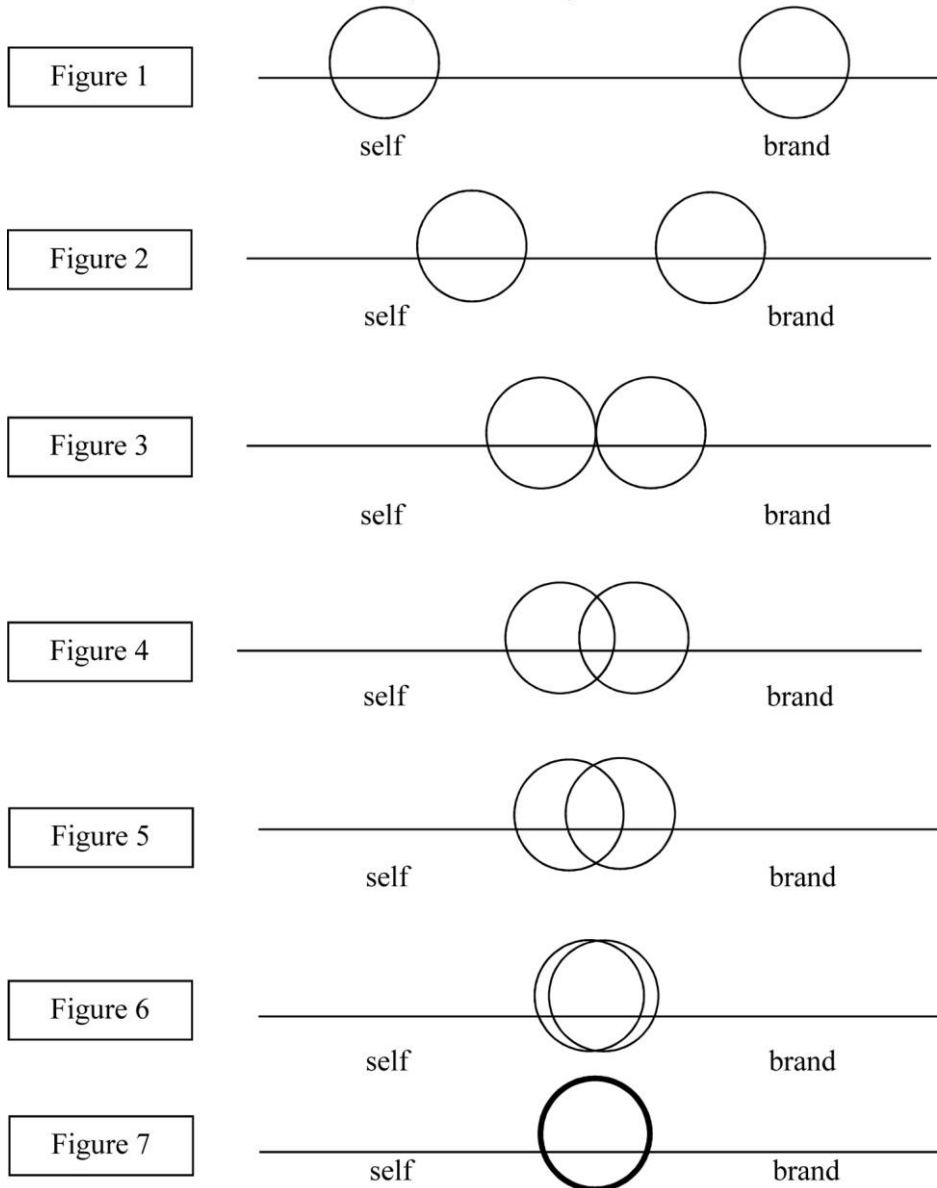
The first author supervised the collection of data for studies 3 and 4 with the aid of several research assistants at Southern Methodist University. These studies occurred between September 2012 and December 2013. The first author conducted studies 1 and 2 as well as the two pretests on Mturk in 2012 and 2013. The first author also did the analysis of all of the data and discussed the techniques and discussion of this analysis with the second author.

## APPENDIX A

FIGURE A1

IOS INSTRUMENT DEPICTING LEVELS OF IDENTIFICATION WITH BRAND

**Question:** Please indicate which of these figures best represents how you CURRENTLY RELATE TO / WOULD LIKE (OR ASPIRE) TO RELATE to the brand



SOURCE.—Aron et al. (1992).

## APPENDIX B

### SALES REPRESENTATIVE SCRIPT

#### Rejecting Condition

Participant directed to knock at the door.

(Come to the door and answer. Take a long look at the participant at the door. Appear unimpressed)

**Brand Rep:** (in an unfriendly, cold tone) Uhh. . . come in and take a seat. I'm here today on behalf of LV (Gucci) to get some feedback from consumers about our fall styles. I'll be showing you some pictures of the styles we've released or are releasing for fall.

Can you fill out some paperwork before we get started?

(give the paperwork. When complete, collect it back from participant)

**Brand Rep:** (take out lookbook) So here are some bag styles we are considering releasing or have released this fall. Are you at all familiar with the LV (Gucci) brand? (Look skeptical)

Participant: responds

**Brand Rep:** Like you've shopped in our stores or bought something from us? (Raise eyebrows—look skeptical)

Participant: responds

**Brand Rep:** mmkay. Well here are the bags I was talking about. Please look at each bag and answer the questions on this paper.

#### Neutral Condition

Participant directed to knock at the door.

(Come to the door and answer.)

**Brand Rep:** (Neutral smile). Please come in.

**Brand Rep:** Take a seat. I'm here today on behalf of LV (Gucci) to get some feedback from consumers about our fall styles. I'll be showing you some pictures of the styles we've released or are releasing for fall.

Can you fill out some paperwork before we get started?

(give the paperwork. When complete, collect it back from participant)

**Brand Rep:** (take out lookbook) So here are some bag styles we are considering releasing or have released this fall. Are you at all familiar with the LV (Gucci) brand?

Participant: responds

**Brand Rep:** Have you ever shopped in our stores or bought something from us?

Participant: responds

**Brand Rep:** Well here are the bags I was talking about. Please look at each bag and answer the questions on this paper.

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