

## The Effect of Social Exclusion on the Tendency to Engage in Unethical Consumer Behavior: An Experimental Study

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### Abstract

Engaging in an unethical consumer behavior on one's own is different from doing it for making a connection with a group. Thus, the effect of social exclusion on unethical consumer behavior may vary for different cases. Hence, the study aims to analyze the individuals' responses to social exclusion in an unethical consumer issue with two experiments. The first experiment measures the excluded individuals' willingness for engaging in unethical consumer behavior on their own. The second experiment analyzes the excluded individuals' willingness for engaging in unethical consumer behavior for reconnection. Both studies include a control (non-excluded) and an experimental (excluded) group. A ball toss game called Cyberball manipulates social exclusion. Unethical consumer behavior is measured by "returning a used product as it is unused." The results indicate that only excluded men tend to engage in unethical consumer behavior on their own. However, the results show that excluded individuals are less likely to engage in unethical consumer behavior for reconnection.

**Keywords:** Social Exclusion, Ethical Decision Making, Unethical Consumer Behavior, Experimental Study

**JEL Classification Codes:** M31, M39

### Sosyal Dışlanmanın Etik Olmayan Tüketici Davranışı Gösterme Eğilimi Üzerindeki Etkisi: Deneysel Bir Çalışma

#### Öz

Etik olmayan bir tüketici davranışını kendi başına gerçekleştirmek, onu bir grupta yakınlık kurmak için gerçekleştirmekten farklıdır. Dolayısıyla, sosyal dışlanmanın etik olmayan tüketici davranışı üzerindeki etkisi farklı durumlara göre değişiklik gösterebilir. Buradan yola çıkarak, bu çalışma etik olmayan bir tüketici davranışı meselesinde, bireylerin sosyal dışlanmaya karşı tepkilerini ölçmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla, farklı katılımcılarla iki ayrı deneysel çalışma yapılmıştır. İlk çalışmada, bireylerin bireysel olarak etik olmayan tüketici davranışı gösterme eğilimleri ölçülmüştür. İkinci çalışmada, bireylerin bir grupta yakınlık kurmak için etik olmayan tüketici davranışı gösterme eğilimleri ölçülmüştür. Her iki deney de bir kontrol (dışlanmayan) ve bir deney grubu (dışlanan) ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Sosyal dışlanma manipülasyonu Cyberball adındaki top atma oyunu ile verilmiştir. Etik olmayan tüketici davranışı "kullanılan bir ürünü kullanılmamış gibi iade etmek" davranışı üzerinden ölçülmüştür. Sonuçlar, dışlanan bireylerin (yalnızca erkeklerin) etik olmayan tüketici davranışını kendi başına gerçekleştirmek konusunda istekli olduklarını göstermiştir. Ancak dışlanan bireylerin bir grupta yakınlık kurmak için etik olmayan tüketici davranışı göstermek konusunda isteksiz oldukları tespit edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Sosyal Dışlanma, Etik Karar Verme, Etik Olmayan Tüketici Davranışı, Deneysel Çalışma

**JEL Sınıflandırma Kodları:** M31, M39

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the evolution process, to support and continue their lineages, people have had to act with various social groups, and those who were excluded from social groups have often failed to survive. In modern times, the need to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships has a strong influence on human behavior, feelings, and thoughts. Therefore, this need called “*need to belong*,” refers to “need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 499). Although the identification and fulfillment of the need to belong may differ according to the individual characteristics and culture, it is a fundamental and universal need. Moreover, the threat of it has a strong influence on the physiological, psychological and behavioral processes of individuals (Buss, 1990; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). One of the cases that threatens the need to belong is “*social exclusion*,” which refers to be ignored, excluded and left alone by others (Williams, 2007). Social exclusion has salient physiological, psychological, and behavioral effects on the individuals. Even though the physiological and psychological effects of social exclusion are negative, when it comes to behaviors, social exclusion may produce both positive and negative outcomes. Excluded individuals may exhibit pro-social, affiliative and anti-social behaviors.

The effects of social exclusion are a frequent subject of study in sociology, psychology, and social psychology. Nevertheless, there are very few studies (e.g., Mead et al., 2011; Lee & Shrum, 2012; Naderi, 2013; Wan et al., 2014) about its effects in the field of marketing. Also, they are limited to address the impact of social exclusion on the consumption preferences of the individuals. However, regarding the other consumer issues, one of which is ethical decision making, there is a gap related to this subject that the current paper aims to fill. It is a common fact that as a consumer, the individuals encounter some ethical issues where they should decide to show ethical or unethical behavior and this decision may depend on the situational factors (Trevino, 1986; Street et al., 2001). One of these situational factors is the psychological state of the individuals, and the other one is the motivation for the behavior. Psychologically, social exclusion produces ill effects that lead individuals to show negative responses (e.g., Warburton et al., 2006; Chow et al., 2008). Whereas, excluded individuals are also motivated to seek affiliation and tailor their behaviors according to the affiliative sources (i.e., social reconnection hypothesis). In this context, the psychological state and the motivation of the excluded individuals may differ for engaging in an unethical consumer behavior on their own and for doing it to reconnect with a group.

Unethical consumer behavior is a negative behavior that harms the companies and the other consumers directly or indirectly (Muncy & Vitell, 1992). Thus, for the excluded individuals: to show unethical consumer behavior on their own is a way of releasing the negative psychological state that the exclusion causes, however,

to exhibit unethical consumer behavior for affiliation re-threats their social identity that the exclusion already threatened. Based on this reasoning, this paper hypothesizes that (1) excluded individuals are more likely to exhibit unethical consumer behavior if they do it on their own; however, (2) they are less likely to follow the unethical behavior of a group to reconnect with them. For this purpose, the authors conduct two experimental studies. The results reveal that the excluded individuals (only men) are more likely to engage in unethical consumer behavior on their own. However, the excluded individuals are less likely to follow the unethical consumer behavior of a group for affiliation. Based on these findings, this study introduces social exclusion as a brand new antecedent of unethical consumer behavior. From this aspect, the current paper provides a significant theoretical contribution to the consumer ethics literature. Moreover, it holds real implications for the practitioners as well.

After all, the study presents the concept of social exclusion, ethical decision-making, and the relationship between them in the theoretical background. Then, it gives the research design and method including pre-experimental and experimental processes. After that, a discussion section addresses the findings and the contribution of the study. Finally, the limitations, future research, and managerial implications conclude the paper.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1. The Concept of Social Exclusion**

Social exclusion is defined in both macro and micro levels. In macro level, “an individual is socially excluded if (a) he or she is geographically resident in a society but (b) for reasons beyond his or her control he or she cannot participate in the *normal activities* of citizens in that society and (c) he or she would like to so participate.” (Burchardt et al., 1999, p. 230). Moreover, normal activities mentioned in the definition represents consumption activity, saving activity, production activity, political activity and social activity. This widely acclaimed definition considers social exclusion as a societal issue.

On the other hand, psychology and social psychology fields analyze the social exclusion in micro level with *rejection* and *ostracism* terms that explain similar cases and have same effects on individuals (Naderi, 2013; Williams, 2007). Rejection refers to an individual’s perception of a decrease in his social acceptance, group inclusion or his feeling of belonging (Knowles & Gardner, 2007). Rejection may be both active and passive. If others express negative opinions about an individual or say that the individual's presence is not welcome or desired, then the individual is actively rejected. However, if others are paying little attention to the same individual or ignoring him, then that individual is passively rejected. In fact, this type of rejection refers to ostracism and is defined as being ignored and excluded by others (Williams, 2007; Williams & Carter-

Sowell, 2007). Lastly, social exclusion refers to the situation in which others exclude, isolate or leave alone the individual (Williams, 2007). As in the literature, this study considers the concepts of social exclusion, rejection, and ostracism as interchangeable.

The current literature presents that social exclusion produces salient physiological, psychological and behavioral consequences for the individuals. Physiologically, it activates the physical pain-sensitive regions of the brain (Eisenberger et al., 2003; Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; MacDonald & Leary, 2005) and increases the pain threshold and pain tolerance (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006). In addition, it influences cortisone hormone release (Dickerson et al., 2004; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004).

Besides its physiological effects, social exclusion also has various psychological consequences for the individuals. In the social exclusion theory of anxiety, Baumeister & Tice (1990) state that the main reason for anxiety is the perceived exclusion from significant social groups. The authors also argue that social exclusion reduces the satisfaction that individuals receive from life, the meaningfulness of life, and the hope. Furthermore, jealousy, loneliness, depression (Leary, 1990; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), unhappiness and guilt (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) are the psychological effects of social exclusion as well.

Moreover, according to the ostracism model of Williams (1997), social exclusion threatens the four fundamental needs, which are *belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence*. The excluded individual's sense of belonging is damaged since the others avoid building a relationship or bond with that individual. Besides, the excluded individual feels that he is excluded because he has done something wrong and his self-esteem is diminished. Also, the personal control perceived by the excluded individual on the interaction with the others decreases. Lastly, since social exclusion refers to being ignored, the excluded target may feel that his existence is meaningless even disappears. Another psychological effect of social exclusion is to decreasing self-regulation, defined as the individual's capacity of controlling and changing his reactions to exhibit adaptive and socially desirable behavior (Baumeister et al., 2005). Besides, social exclusion may result in anger and resentment as well (Zadro et al., 2004).

Even though the physiological and psychological effects of social exclusion are negative, the behavioral consequences of social exclusion can be both positive and negative. In the positive side, the excluded individuals are more likely to build social bonds to meet their threatened need to belong again (Williams, 1997; Williams & Zadro, 2001; Williams & Nida, 2011). For example, Maner et al. (2007) find that excluded students want to make new friends more than non-excluded groups do and wish to use the student service more to make new friends. Also, the excluded group has a higher desire to work with others for an additional

work after the experiment. Besides, Lakin et al. (2008) find that social exclusion causes individuals to act unconsciously as others to establish a new bond. Also, Williams & Sommer (1997) confirm that social exclusion causes women, but not men, to show a significant contribution to a group study after the experience of exclusion.

In the negative side, the excluded individuals are more likely to show aggressive behaviors. In their experimental study, Warburton et al. (2006) find that excluded students give more hot sauce to a person even if the participants know that this person does not like hot sauce and has to consume all the provided hot sauce. In a similar study, Ayduk et al. (2008) confirm that rejected participants give more hot sauce to the participants, who have rejected them. Moreover, another study reveals that excluded participants want to give more unsavory snacks to the participants by whom they think that they are excluded (Chow et al., 2008). Furthermore, in the study of Smith & Williams (2004), the participants, who could not find an answer to their text messages from the confederates, write more provocative text messages to express their aggressiveness.

Furthermore, the excluded individuals are more likely to make negative evaluations about the others, especially the ones who exclude them. For instance, in Williams et al.'s (2002) study the excluded participants report the other individuals in the conversation room as less friendly, compassionate, creative, sincere but more boring, dishonest, selfish and insensitive. Besides, Williams & Sommer (1997) confirm that some of the excluded participants attribute contemptuous qualifications (e.g., being arrogant, immature) to the confederates who excluded them. Moreover, in their experimental study Twenge et al. (2001) ask students to evaluate the participants, who have appraised their essays on abortion, for a so-called research assistant position in the psychology department. As a result, the excluded participants give a lower evaluation rating to the individual who provided negative feedback to their abortion article. In another study, researchers make the participants believe that a team captain selects them either first or last for a laboratory team. The individuals who think that they are chosen last for the team, rate the team captain more negatively compared to the participants who are selected first. (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001). Additionally, social exclusion also affects the helping behavior negatively. Twenge et al. (2007) determine that socially excluded participants donate less money to a student fund, are less likely to work as a volunteer for a further laboratory experiment and are unwilling to help a person after a mishap. Therefore, social exclusion seems to reduce the prosocial behavior.

As it is abovementioned, regarding its behavioral consequences on individuals, social exclusion has both a good and an evil side. However, when it comes to its behavioral outcomes in a consumer ethics context, will excluded individuals intend to engage in the ethical or the unethical behavior? Which side will

activate? The following section addresses consumer ethics, ethical decision-making process and the link between social exclusion and unethical consumer behavior.

## 2.2. Consumer Ethics and Ethical Decision Making

In a general manner, ethics is a concept that related to the rightness of the behaviors among the parties in any situation (Runes, 1964). According to Barry (1979), ethics state what is good or bad, what is right or wrong, and therefore what we should or should not do. Thus, the ethical behavior is a proper behavior that never harms anyone (Caza et al., 2004). The unethical behavior, on the other hand, is considered to be illegal or morally unacceptable behavior for the society (Jones, 1991) and harmful to others (Beu & Buckley, 2001; Caza et al., 2004).

In consumer behavior context, the concept of ethics refers to the rightness or the wrongness of particular actions performed as a consumer and consumers themselves determine the magnitude of the rightness or the wrongness of a possible consumer action (e.g., from definitely right to definitely wrong) (Fullerton et al., 1996). Therefore, whether a consumer action is ethical or not relates to how right or wrong it is. Besides, more specifically, Mitchell et al. (2009) define ethical/unethical consumer behavior as direct or indirect consumer actions that do not cause/cause firms or other consumers to lose money or reputation. Moreover, to understand how consumers give ethical or unethical decisions, the various models (e.g., Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986; Dubinsky & Loken, 1989; Jones, 1991) have explained ethical decision-making process of the individuals. Of these models, the current study addresses the Rest's model (1986), which is a widely used one.

Rest (1986) suggests an ethical decision-making and behavior model that consists of four stages. The individual: (1) recognizes that the situation comprises an ethical dilemma, (2) makes an ethical judgment, (3) decides on his/her intention and (4) acts. Therefore, to behave ethically/unethically firstly depends on to recognize that there is an ethical dilemma related to the current situation. However, this model acknowledges that ethical dilemmas, in other words, what is ethically wrong or right, are uncertain and that most individuals are not aware of the existence of ethical dilemmas. According to Kelman & Hamilton (1989) when there is a demand or order from a legal authority, the individuals do not consider it as a situation in which they have a choice to do or not to do. Therefore, in such a case, individuals cannot perceive that they are in an ethical dilemma or even in a decision-making process (Pillutla & Thau, 2009).

The ethical awareness also relates to the cognitive effort of the individual in the decision-making process, and this cognitive effort depends on the individual's interest and accountability regarding the situation (Street et al., 2001). The more interest and responsibility an individual feel for the ethical issue, the more he puts

the cognitive effort into the decision-making process. In the ethical judgment stage of the model, Kohlberg's (1969) cognitive moral development plays a significant role. For instance, according to Rest (1986), individuals with high moral development are more likely to judge bribery as an unethical act. The reason for it is that individuals with high moral development trust the universal principles rather than the expectations of others.

After making an ethical judgment, individuals decide on their intentions. The point to note here is that the intention of the individual does not have to be parallel with his ethical judgment. Even though the individual decides that the action is unethical, he may intend to act because there might be some reasonable grounds, which might become more important than the ethical concerns and affect the individual's intention (Pillutla & Thau, 2009). For instance, an individual may think that returning a used product as it is unused and having a refund is unethical, but at the same time, he may intend to return it since he may need that refund to pay a debt. This case is valid not only for the judgment-intention link but also for the intention-behavior link. Each intention may not turn into a likewise behavior.

### 2.3. Social Exclusion and Unethical Consumer Behavior

As mentioned before, social exclusion has negative consequences for individuals. For example, socially excluded individuals are more likely to have physical and mental disorders, commit a suicide and involve in crime (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Also, they tend to show aggressive (Warburton et al., 2006; Ayduk et al., 2008) and provocative (Smith & Williams, 2004) behaviors towards the people who exclude them. Moreover, excluded individuals are more likely to make negative evaluations about the personality of exclusionary sources (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001; Williams et al., 2002). They also attribute contemptuous qualifications to the excluders (Williams & Sommer, 1997) and give lower evaluation ratings for their so-called job applications (Twenge et al., 2001). These results show that excluded individuals may bear hostility towards the person/people who exclude (Pillutla & Thau, 2009). On the other hand, excluded individuals act in a way that can cause negative consequences for themselves as well. For instance, Twenge et al. (2002) confirm that excluded individuals tend to take risks that could harm themselves and select more unhealthy food to eat. These examples of undesired behaviors are the result of a decrease in self-regulation caused by social exclusion (Baumeister et al., 2005).

Additionally, the excluded individuals may have a rare interest in the normative expectations of the situation they are in. In other words, the individual may lose his sensitivity to show the proper or acceptable behavior. For instance, excluded individuals exhibit aggressive responses to the exclusionary people and are even more aggressive against an innocent person (Twenge et al., 2001). Also, they tend to donate less, are less willing to work as a volunteer and less likely to help someone after a mishap (Twenge et al., 2007).

In sum, social exclusion causes aggression against to the exclusionary people even to the innocents; increases risk-taking behavior that may lead to negative consequences (increases risk tolerance); makes people ignore the normative expectations; and reduces self-regulation (Pillutla & Thau, 2009). From this point of view, we claim that the social exclusion may also increase the tendency to engage in unethical consumer behavior in a way that is discussed below.

According to Rest's (1996) ethical decision-making model, the individual firstly recognizes that the situation he is in has an ethical dilemma. Then, he makes an ethical judgment related to the situation and gives a decision on his intention. Lastly, he shows the ethical or the unethical behavior. Pillutla & Thau (2009) apply the findings mentioned above to the Rest's model (1996) and state that an individual, who experience social exclusion, since he may ignore the normative expectations, will not be able to perceive the situation in question as an ethical issue. Even if the individual sees the action as unethical, he will realize it because social exclusion damages his self-regulation and increases his risk-taking tendency. Also, the aggressive attitude toward exclusionary people or innocent others caused by social exclusion may justify the unethical behavior. Therefore, by this approach, here we argue that if a socially excluded individual has to decide on an ethical issue in a consumer context, he will tend to engage in the unethical consumer behavior. In this manner, we suggest the H1 hypothesis as below:

*H1: Excluded individuals tend to engage in unethical consumer behavior.*

#### 2.4. Social Exclusion and Unethical Consumer Behavior for Making Reconnection

Social exclusion threatens the need to belong as mentioned before. For regaining this need, the excluded individuals tend to establish social bonds with others (e.g., Williams, 1997; Williams & Zadro, 2001; Maner et al., 2007; Williams & Nida, 2011). If the excluded individual believes that there are real sources to reconnect, he will effort to build an interpersonal relationship. This situation, regarded as social reconnection hypothesis, depends on the motivation, deprivation and goal attainment link. Exposure to social exclusion gives a signal that the need for social connection is not satisfied. Thus, the excluded individual may have a strong desire to build a social bond to fulfill that need just like a hungry person who makes an effort to find food to assuage his/her hunger (Maner et al., 2007).

Various studies have supported social reconnection hypothesis. For instance, Williams & Sommer (1997) finds that excluded women (but not men) are more likely to make an effort for a group work. The authors consider this effort as the reflection of the need to gain acceptance by the group. Another study (Williams et al., 2000) presents that the excluded individuals tend to follow the ideas of others. The authors admit this conformity behavior as a strategic initiative for making friends. In their experimental study, Gardner et al. (2000) confirm that excluded



individuals are more likely to recall the social events in their memories. In addition, they find that the higher the feeling of exclusion, the higher the level of recalling social events. Moreover, Xu et al. (2015) analyze the effect of social exclusion on attention and show that excluded individuals pay more attention to the social acceptance cues (smiling face) instead of the social exclusion cues (angry faces) and neutral faces. This result indicates that after social exclusion, the desire for social reconnection raises, so the attention to social acceptance cues grows.

Besides the studies above, social reconnection hypothesis is analyzed in consumer behavior field. For instance, Mead et al. (2011) investigate whether social exclusion makes people spend or consume strategically to make a reconnection. Therefore, they conduct four experimental studies. The first experiment reveals that socially excluded individuals are more likely to buy products that symbolize group membership and loyalty. The second experiment confirms that socially excluded individuals tend to change their product preferences according to the preferences of the people they see as a source of affiliation. The third and the fourth experiments test whether the excluded participants will make negative consumption decisions to increase their chance of acceptance. The third experiment presents that socially excluded individuals tend to spend money on an unappealing food item that is favored by the interaction partner. In the fourth experiment, the excluded individuals report that they could try an illegal drug - cocaine-, but only if they will do so together with others.

In their theoretical study, DeWall & Richman (2011) state that social reconnection need may motivate individuals to show undesirable behaviors; for instance, loneliness stimulates smoking behavior especially in the environments where smoking is socially acceptable. However, smoking, like cocaine use, is a negative but a pleasure-inducing activity that may be welded by addiction.

In the current literature, there is an insufficient number of studies examining social reconnection hypothesis regarding negative or socially unacceptable behaviors (DeWall & Richman, 2011). From this gap in the literature, this study tests the social reconnection hypothesis through the intention to show negative behavior; more specifically through the intention to exhibit unethical consumer behavior. Even though smoking and cocaine use are negative behaviors, they are not evaluated in the scope of ethics because the individual does not experience an ethical dilemma about realizing or not realizing these activities. Thus, in the frame of social reconnection hypothesis, the effect of social exclusion on the unethical consumer behavior should be considered as a different problem.

Since social exclusion causes aggression, an increase in risk tolerance, ignoring normative expectations and a decrease in self-regulation, the excluded individuals tend to engage in unethical behavior in a consumer case. However, if it is to

engage in unethical consumer behavior of a group to affiliate with them, the response of the excluded individuals will be different.

Social exclusion induces negative feelings such as loneliness, depression (Leary, 1990; Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and anxiety (Baumeister & Tice, 1990). In other words, the excluded individuals may find themselves in many negative feelings. Therefore, they are expected to avoid actions, which may put them in different negative emotions once again. Thus, when it comes to intention to engage in unethical consumer behavior for affinity with a group, excluded individuals are predicted to avoid it. Being excluded from a group already makes the individual feel unhappy and lonely. However, if the group that the excluded individual has a chance to make a connection is acting unethically, the individual may refuse to act like them because accepting to behave unethically only for affinity with a group may mean that the excluded individual has almost no chance to reconnect with another group. This situation may give the individual a message as “you are excluded and alone; but, there is a way to get rid of it: to reconnect with a group that acts unethically and show unethical behavior for this.” This message may cause the individual to feel helpless who are already feeling excluded and unhappy. Therefore, the excluded individual is expected to avoid an affinity behavior, which may put him into more feelings that are negative. More specifically, the excluded individual is predicted to avoid engaging in unethical consumer behavior for reconnecting with a group that acts unethically in a consumer case.

Furthermore, social exclusion threatens the individual’s self-esteem (Williams, 1997). Therefore, for an excluded individual, behaving unethically to reconnect with a group that shows unethical behavior may thoroughly decrease the excluded individual’s self-esteem. Social identity theory assumes that our belongingness to social groups explains a part of self-concept. (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 3). Thus, the groups we belong to, or we are a member of play a significant role on expressing who we are (Hogg et al., 1995) because people classify themselves and the others according to their belongingness to social groups and evaluate these classifications (Tajfel, 1979). Also, a group membership, besides the meaning attributed to the group by the individual, is defined as the individual’s social identity. Therefore, individuals want to develop a positive social identity to enhance their self-esteem (Trepte, 2006). From this viewpoint, it is estimated that the individual whose self-esteem is damaged by social exclusion would not engage in unethical consumer behavior to reconnect with a group that acts unethically in a consumer case. The reason is that exhibiting a similar behavior with an unethical group may impose a negative social identity, which may re-threaten the self-esteem of the excluded individual. Hence, we expect that the excluded individual will refuse to engage in unethical consumer behavior of a group that he has a chance to make a connection.

In addition to the above, the excluded individuals desire to show uniqueness when it is socially profitable (Maslach et al., 1985) so they would prefer to differentiate themselves from a group that exhibits unethical consumer behavior instead of confirming them for affiliation. This expectation depends on the identity signaling approach of Berger and Heat (2007), which states that people usually seek uniqueness to ensure that others make desired inferences about them. Being identified with a group that exhibits unethical behavior is socially unprofitable, so the excluded individuals will not conform them.

Consequently, the excluded individual may tend to engage in unethical consumer behavior but not follow the unethical consumer of a group for affiliation. Therefore, we suggest the H2 hypothesis as below:

*H2: Excluded individuals tend to avoid engaging in an unethical consumer behavior of a group for reconnecting.*

### **3. Research Design and Method**

This research aims to test the effect of social exclusion on the tendency to exhibit unethical consumer behavior and on the tendency to exhibit unethical consumer behavior for reconnection. For this purpose, we conduct two experimental studies. Before the experiments, ethics approval of the study is received from Hacettepe University Ethical Commission. In addition, we give one (1) dollar (\$) to each participant for his attendance to the study. After all, the following section presents the pre-experimental and experimental processes respectively.

#### **3.1. Pre-Experimental Process**

##### **3.1.1. Sampling Procedure**

This study picks the participants from the people who reside in the USA via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Since the social exclusion studies are mostly conducted in the USA, the subjects are selected from that population. Therefore, the current study considers that the selection of the subjects living in the USA would provide an advantage for the comparability and the reliability of the results. Another reason is that the population of the USA comprises of individuals from various cultures and ethnic origins. This situation strengthens the representation power of the population and a sample selected from this population has the advantage regarding diversity. Besides, the members of MTurk are willing to respond quickly to the surveys. Thus, the researchers can both access to the people from different demographics and save time.

### 3.1.2. Selection of the Unethical Consumer Behavior

To determine the unethical consumer behavior, 83 business administration students, (graduate and undergraduate) selected by convenience sampling method, are asked to write examples of unethical consumer behavior. Here, we aim to reveal the most common unethical consumer behavior according to the participants. Thus, we want them to give as many unethical consumer behavior examples as they desire. Table 1 exhibits the most repeated five unethical consumer behavior examples and their frequency values.

**Table 1. Unethical Consumer Behavior Examples and Frequency Values**

<b>Unethical Consumer Behavior</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Returning a used product as it is unused</b>	<b>20</b>
Mistreating the employees of a firm	17
Giving harm to the products in a store	15
Smuggling the product, using it without paying and leaving the store	13
Returning a misused product by reporting it as defective product	7

As Table 1 shows “returning a used product as it is unused” is the most frequently mentioned unethical consumer behavior. This behavior fits well with the actively benefiting dimension of the Vitell & Muncy’s (1992) consumer ethics scale that the consumer itself is performing and actively benefiting from the behavior at the expense of the company. Besides, the American National Retail Federation considers “returning a used product as it is unused” as a refund fraud. Therefore, it is appropriate to use this behavior for the American sample. Finally, we build two different scenarios through this behavior: one for the tendency to show unethical consumer behavior and the other for the tendency to show unethical consumer behavior for reconnection. Both scenarios are presented in the experimental process.

### 3.1.3. Determination of Manipulation Technique

Researchers use several techniques for social exclusion manipulation. For instance, participants may play a ball tossing game (Williams, 1997) and a computer-based ball tossing game called Cyberball (Williams et al., 2000; Williams & Jarvis, 2006). Also, researchers make them think that they will end up alone in life (Twenge et al., 2001; Baumeister et al., 2002; Baumeister et al., 2005; Twenge et al., 2007). Besides, coming together/meeting (Nezlek et al., 1997) and past social exclusion experience (Pickett et al., 2004; Williams & Fitness, 2004; Molden et al., 2009; Lee & Shrum, 2012) are the other techniques to manipulate social exclusion. Of all, this study prefers the Cyberball game for the social exclusion manipulation in both experiments. The reason is that many

research (241 studies<sup>1</sup>) have used this technique and confirmed its reliability. Moreover, for the researchers, it is convenient to apply.

Cyberball is a computer-based ball tossing game played with 3 or 4 people. The player in the middle represents the main player (the subject) in the game. The player can throw the ball to the desired person using the icon. The total number of shots in the game can be 30 or 40. The participants in the control group (in non-excluded condition) are given an equal number of throws with other players. However, in the experimental group (in excluded condition), the participants are given just two throws at the beginning of the game, and there is no right for more throws until the end of the game. Therefore, the excluded participants think that the other players do not want to throw the ball to them.

Furthermore, there is an explanation section describes how to play the game and states that this game is for activating mental visualization skills of people. Therefore, the participants think that they play the game for another reason, so the exclusion manipulation succeeds. Moreover, even if the participants and the researcher are not in the same environment, they can obtain the necessary information about the game from this explanation before the game begins.

Before the experiments, we make some adjustments to the Cyberball game. Firstly, we set the number of player to 3, and the number of throws to 30. Then, we remove the anonymous photographs and chatting area and code the name of the main player (the subject) as “you.” Lastly, we arrange the game for the excluded and non-excluded conditions. After all, the experiments are conducted. The following section explains the implementation process of the experiments, analyses, and findings.

## 3.2. Experimental Process

### 3.2.1. Experiment 1

This experiment tests the H1 hypothesis, and 83 people participate in the study. Table 2 gives the demographics of the participants.

The experimental group consists of 43 participants who play the Cyberball game in the excluded condition. The control group consists of 40 participants who play the game in the non-excluded condition. The participants are assigned to these groups randomly. After playing the game, they answer the manipulation check questions (Zadro et al., 2004) and then the question related to the unethical consumer behavior scenario given below. After the experiment, the participants are debriefed in person about the actual aim of the study via email.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of academic studies that have used Cyberball game for the social exclusion manipulation is available via the link: [http://www1.psych.purdue.edu/~willia55/Announce/Cyberball\\_Articles.htm](http://www1.psych.purdue.edu/~willia55/Announce/Cyberball_Articles.htm)

**Table 2: Demographics of the Participants**

	Frequency		Frequency		Frequency
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age</b>		<b>Education Level</b>	
Woman	39	18-24	5	High School	32
Man	44	25-34	38	University	40
Total	83	35-44	17	Graduate	11
		45-54	12	Total	83
		55-64	11		
		Total	83		

*Manipulation Check Questions:*

1. During the game, how much were you included by the other players? (7-point Likert type scale, 1: definitely not included, 7: definitely included)
2. What percent of the throws were thrown to you? (0-100)

*Unethical Consumer Behavior Scenario:*

Suppose that there is a peer group. One day, Jack, a member of this group, invites you to do something all together. You accept the invitation and meet them in a mall. After a while, Jack says that he bought a shirt two weeks ago, but now he wants to return it. Then, when you head for the store, Jack tells you: “I actually wore this shirt. But, I am going to tell the cashier that I have never worn it. Then, I will give the shirt and take my money back!” Right after this conversation, you enter the store, and Jack starts telling the cashier he has never worn the shirt, wants to return it and get a refund.

**In this situation, would you do the same thing like Jack?**

Most Probably No    1   2   3   4   5   6   7    Most Probably Yes

*Manipulation Check:*

The mean scores of the experimental and control groups are compared with independent samples t-test. For the first question, the mean score of the control group is 5.97, and the mean score of the experimental group is 1.86. The difference is significant at  $p \leq 0.05$  ( $=.000$ ). For the second question, the mean score of the control group is 42.32, and the mean score of the experimental group is 8.62, and the difference is significant at  $p \leq 0.05$  ( $=.000$ ). These results show that the social exclusion manipulation is successful.

After the manipulation check, to analyze the effect of social exclusion on the unethical consumer behavior, a linear regression analysis is conducted. Since social exclusion condition variable is categorical, converted into dummy variable

(1, 0). The experimental group is coded as 1 (one), the control group is coded as 0 (zero).

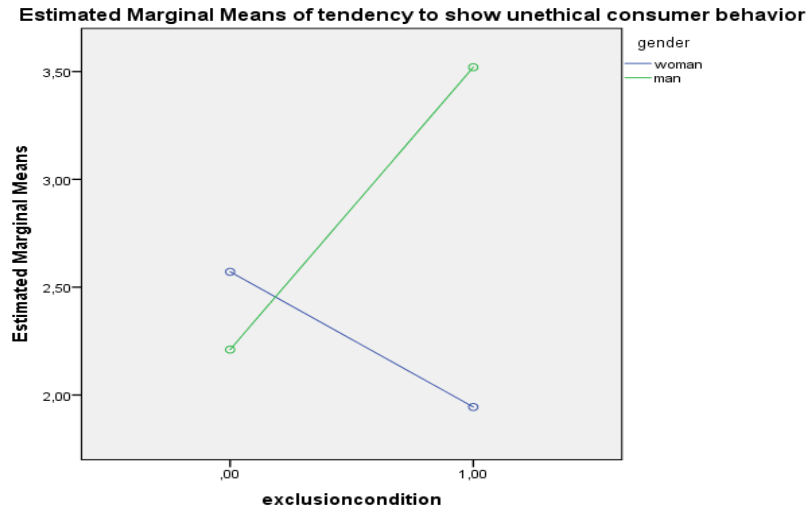
### 3.2.1.1. Analysis and Findings of Experiment 1

The results of regression analysis show that social exclusion does not have a statistically significant effect on the unethical consumer behavior ( $p \geq .05$ ,  $p = .262$ ). In other words, there is not a significant difference between the tendencies of excluded and non-excluded participants to show unethical behavior.

Previous studies (e.g., Williams and Sommer, 1997) have determined that the effect of social exclusion may vary according to the gender. Thus, the data is divided between the men and the women, and the effect of social exclusion is analyzed. However, before that, we do the manipulation check again for women and men separately. For both manipulation questions, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of excluded and non-excluded women at  $p \leq .05$  ( $p = .000$ ) and between the mean scores of excluded and non-excluded men at  $p \leq .05$  ( $p = .000$ ). These results indicate that the manipulation is successful for both men and women.

After the manipulation check, firstly the linear regression analysis is conducted for the women. There are 18 in the experimental group (excluded condition), 21 in the control group (non-excluded condition). Exclusion condition variable is converted into the dummy variable; 1 for the excluded, 0 for the non-excluded. The result of the regression analysis demonstrates that the effect of social exclusion on the tendency to show unethical consumer behavior of women is insignificant at  $p \leq .05$  ( $= .187$ ). However, for men (25 excluded, 19 non-excluded), it is confirmed that the regression model is significant at  $p \leq .05$  ( $= .040$ ). The tendency to show unethical consumer behavior of excluded men is 1.30 units more than the one of the non-excluded men. Figure 1 exhibits the gender role in the effect of social exclusion.

As Figure 1 shows, regarding the tendency to show unethical consumer behavior, approximately the mean score of excluded men is 3.52, and the mean score of non-excluded men is 2.21. However, there is a reverse situation for the women: the mean score is 2.57 for the excluded, 1.94 for the non-excluded but the difference is not statistically significant. Thus, the H1 hypothesis is supported only for men.



**Figure 1: Social Exclusion\*Gender Interaction Graph**

### 3.2.1.2. Discussion for Experiment 1

The results support the H1 hypothesis for men but not for women. Some studies have proved the gender difference in the effect of social exclusion. For instance, Williams and Sommer (1997) find that compared to non-excluded women, excluded women make more effort for a group work. Men, on the other hand, regardless of exclusion condition, are likely to loaf in the group work. Similarly, this study reveals that the gender plays a significant role in the reaction after social exclusion. Excluded men are more likely to exhibit unethical consumer behavior compared to non-excluded men. However, excluded women are less likely to do it compared to non-excluded women, but the difference is not statistically significant.

Betz et al. (1989) reveal that males tend to show unethical behaviors twice as often as females. Another study finds that women are more ethical than men are, in their perception of the situations related to business ethics (Ruegger & King, 1992). This finding indicates that women have a superior ethical understanding than men do. Besides, a study tests the gender role in the perception of how unethical some scenarios are. It confirms that the women tend to consider them as more unethical than the men do (Khazanchi, 1995). Additionally, Kavak et al. (2009) prove that the women have a higher ethical attitude than the men have.

According to Rest (1986), the ethical decision making process of an individual consists of four steps; recognizing that the situation contains an ethical dilemma, making an ethical judgment, deciding on the intention and acting. The above-stated studies show that the gender plays a significant role in recognizing the



ethical dilemma, having an ethical judgment, and intention. Additionally, social exclusion causes the individuals to ignore the normative expectations of the situation they are in and prevents them from recognizing the case as an ethical issue (Pillutla & Thau, 2009). In that sense, since the men are less likely to perceive a situation they are in, as an ethical issue compared to the women and the social exclusion hinders the individuals to realize the ethical dilemma, the excluded men have a higher tendency to engage in unethical behavior in a consumer context.

In sum, the gender role in the effect of social exclusion may be due to the difference in the perception of men and women about the ethical issues. Compared to the women, the men are less likely to perceive an event, a situation or a scenario as an unethical issue. Thus, when they experience social exclusion, they are even less likely to recognize them as an unethical issue. On the other hand, for the women, because they have a stronger belief about a situation is ethical or not, their tendency to engage in unethical consumer behavior is low independent from the social exclusion condition. However, there is a need for the further empirical studies to validate the result of this experiment related to the gender role.

### 3.2.2. Experiment 2

This experiment tests the H2 hypothesis and 132 people participate in the study. There are 68 people in the excluded group and 64 people in the non-excluded group. The participants are randomly assigned to each group. Table 3 presents the information about the participants.

**Table 3: Demographics of the Participants**

	<b>Frequency</b>		<b>Frequency</b>		<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Age</b>		<b>Education Level</b>	
Woman	51	18-24	6	High School	42
Man	81	25-34	61	University	80
Total	132	35-44	41	Graduate	10
		45-54	15	Total	132
		55-64	9		
		Total	132		

As it is in the first experiment, participants play the Cyberball game and answer the same manipulation check question. Then, read a scenario about unethical consumer behavior for reconnection and respond to the related question. After the experiment, the researchers debrief the participants in person about the actual aim of the study via email.

*Unethical Consumer Behavior Scenario for Reconnection:*

Suppose that there is a peer group and you really want to be a member of it for a long time. One day, Jack, a member of this group, invites you to do something all together. You accept the invitation and meet them in a mall. After a while, Jack says that he bought a shirt two weeks ago, but now he wants to return it. Then, when you head for the store, Jack tells you: "I actually wore this shirt. But, I am going to tell the cashier that I have never worn it. Then, I will give the shirt and take my money back!" Right after this conversation, you enter the store, and Jack starts telling the cashier he has never worn the shirt, wants to return it and get a refund.

**Would you do the same thing like Jack just to show them you care about the membership of this group?**

Most Probably No    1   2   3   4   5   6   7    Most Probably Yes

*Manipulation Check:*

Control and experimental groups' mean scores for the manipulation questions are compared with independent samples t-test. For the first manipulation question control group's mean score is 6.01; experimental group's mean score is 1.86, and the difference is significant at  $p \leq 0.05$  ( $= .000$ ). For the second question control group's mean score is 41.81; experimental group's mean score is 9.26, and the difference is significant at  $p \leq 0.05$  ( $= .000$ ). These results show that the manipulation is successful. After that, we test the effect of social exclusion on the tendency to exhibit unethical consumer behavior for reconnection.

3.2.2.1. Analysis and Findings of Experiment 2

As it is in the first experiment, a linear regression analysis is conducted to test the H2 hypothesis. Social exclusion condition variable is converted into the dummy variable; 1 for the excluded group, 0 for the non-excluded group. The results show that the regression model is significant at  $p \leq .05$  ( $= .043$ ). The tendency to exhibit unethical consumer behavior of the excluded participants is .54 units less than the one of the non-excluded participants. The mean score of excluded participants' tendency to show unethical consumer behavior is 1.83, non-excluded participants' is 2.37, and the difference is significant at  $p \leq .05$ . Thus, this finding supports the H2 hypothesis.

3.2.2.2. Discussion for Experiment 2

The result of this experiment confirms that social exclusion decreases the tendency to engage in unethical consumer behavior. According to the social reconnection hypothesis, the excluded individual may try to reconnect with others

who are a potential source of affinity and shape his behavior according to them. However, this study shows that this may not be the case for an unethical affiliative behavior.

Social exclusion puts the individual into various negative feelings (Leary, 1990; Baumeister and Leary, 1995) An excluded individual already feels unhappy and lonely. Accepting to show unethical consumer behavior to reconnect with a group may make him feel helpless as well, because it may give the individual a message that this group is the only chance for the reconnection. Therefore, the excluded individual inclines to avoid affiliating with them.

Additionally, according to the social identity theory (Hogg and Abrams, 1988), individuals tend to make a connection with a group that provides him a positive social identity to boost his self-esteem (Trepte, 2006). Thus, for an excluded individual whose self-esteem is already threatened, showing a similar behavior with a group that acts unethically in a consumer context, may re-damage his self-esteem and impose a negative social identity. Thus, the excluded individual may tend to abstain from it as the current experiment supports. Furthermore, the excluded individuals want to be different from the others if it provides a social gain (Maslach et al., 1985). Being identified with a group that exhibits unethical behavior does not offer a social profit, so the excluded individuals do not conform their behavior.

#### **4. General Discussion**

For the excluded individuals, the underlying mechanism for exhibiting an unethical consumer behavior on their own is different from the underlying mechanism for exhibiting it to affiliate with a group. In the first case, showing unethical consumer behavior may be a way of expressing aggression caused by social exclusion. Whereas, in the second case, showing unethical consumer behavior to reconnect with a group may be a way of regaining relational needs threatened by social exclusion. Thus, in both cases, the excluded individuals react to social exclusion in different ways.

The current study tests the effect of social exclusion on the willingness to show unethical consumer behavior individually and to do it for reconnection with two different experiments. The results of the first study indicate that excluded individuals (only men) are more willing to engage in unethical consumer behavior on their own. However, the second study reveals that excluded individuals are less likely to follow the unethical consumer behavior of a group to make a connection with them. These results confirm that the willingness of excluded individuals may vary for the same unethical behavior in different cases. In other words, social exclusion activates the evil side when it comes to the unethical consumer behavior on one's own, however, it activates the good side when it comes to the unethical consumer behavior for reconnection.

In the consumer ethics contexts, the study at hand is a pioneering one to examine the relationship between social exclusion and unethical consumer behavior. In this respect, it brings social exclusion as a new antecedent of unethical consumer behavior, which has been a gap in the current literature. When individuals feel excluded, their willingness for engaging in unethical consumer behavior may increase if they do it on their own. More specifically, men are more likely to return a used product as unused when they experience social exclusion. This result is congruent with the findings of some previous studies (e.g., Warburton et al., 2006; Twenge et al., 2007; Ayduk et al., 2008) related to the adverse behavioral outcomes of social exclusion. Distinctively in the current paper, the gender role seems to be effective on the response to social exclusion in an ethical decision making case.

On the other hand, the study confirms that when it comes to engaging in same unethical consumer behavior for reconnection with a group, the excluded individuals are more likely to avoid it. This result presents that excluded individuals may not consider unethical consumer behavior as a way of affiliating with a group. By definition, the unethical consumer behavior is “consumer direct or indirect actions which cause organizations or other consumers to lose money or reputation” (Mitchell et al., 2009, p. 396). Hence, it is a good example of anti-social behavior, which harms companies and other consumers. Therefore, in a general manner, this paper addresses the effect of social exclusion on an anti-social behavior for affiliation through unethical consumer behavior. In that sense, the current study is the pioneering one revealing that the excluded individuals are more likely to avoid affiliation if the affiliative behavior is anti-social. Moreover, the previous studies (e.g., Mead et al., 2011; Lee & Shrum, 2012; Naderi, 2013; Wan et al., 2014) on social exclusion in consumer behavior context show that excluded individuals may tailor their behaviors in line with the affiliative sources. However, these research fundamentally focus on the product choice of the individuals as an affiliative behavior after social exclusion. Thus, this paper brings this issue to the consumer ethics context and selects the unethical consumer behavior as an anti-social affiliative behavior, which the previous studies have failed to emphasize.

## **5. Limitations and Future Research**

The participants of this study are the members of MTurk residing in the United States. Although the selection of MTurk members provides a diversification regarding their demographic characteristics, the results of the study may vary for individuals from different countries and cultures, which may be the focus of further studies. Moreover, the researchers may test the effect of social exclusion with the groups from similar demographics (e.g., 18 to 24 years old people, only university students, etc.) so they would obtain more specific results and compare the similarities and differences among groups. Also, the current paper measures

the effect of social exclusion on unethical consumer behavior for one time. Therefore, there is a need for a longitudinal study to make a judgment as to whether the responses of same people will resemble each time after experiencing social exclusion. The failure to make a judgment that the results would be similar at different times appears to be a limitation of this study. In addition, a further study can survey with a broader sample to measure the social exclusion-unethical consumer behavior link and reveal the general tendency of people.

Furthermore, the subjects participate in the experiments by logging into the MTurk system from different environments (home, school, workplace, cafe, etc.). It gives an advantage regarding the generalizability of the experimental results, but it can be a disadvantage for controlling the different external factors the participants are exposed (e.g., weather, being at different times of the day-morning, evening etc.-, formal or informal environment, etc.). In this respect, it is another limitation of the study. Hence, a similar study in a same experimental environment (e.g., in a behavioral laboratory) can provide the control of the external factors to a certain extent.

Besides, the current paper tests the effect of social exclusion on the unethical consumer behavior through “returning a used product as it is unused, ” and the results of the experiments are limited to this behavior. Thus, the future studies may investigate the effect of social exclusion through a different unethical consumer behavior. In addition to this, the researchers may use other social exclusion manipulation techniques and find out whether they lead to different findings or not. Moreover, the study at hand empirically fails to refer to the underlying reasons of excluded individuals’ inconsistent responses for the same unethical consumer behavior in two different cases. Therefore, there is a need for a further study that would find empirical evidence related to the underlying mechanisms for this case, which only has a theoretical support here. Lastly, this research measures the effect of social exclusion on the intention for unethical consumer behavior not on the actual unethical consumer behavior. According to the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein, 1979) and theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the intention is the central factor to perform a given behavior. Whereas, some studies (e.g., Morwitz et al., 1993; Ajzen et al., 2004) suggest that the purchase intention does not usually turn into the actual behavior. For this reason, a future study may analyze the social exclusion-actual unethical consumer behavior link.

## **6. Managerial Implications**

This study confirms that a social exclusion experience even in a computer-based boll toss game is painful and it leads individuals to unethical responses in a consumer case. This result holds some significant practical inferences especially for the managers of service retailers. Retail environments are primary locations

for “feeling excluded” especially the service settings where customers interact with the service personnel in person.

*“They may forget what you said — but they will never forget how you made them feel.” — Carl W. Buehner (Evans, 1971, 244).*

If the customers feel excluded or ignored during a service encounter, they may want to release it by engaging in some improper behaviors, which in turn will do direct or indirect harm to the company. Thus, the companies should train their employees to treat customers in a way that feel valued and appreciated. Moreover, the companies should make their employees feel valuable first, so they can make the customers feel valuable in return, which will benefit customer equity and the value of the company in the long term.

On the other hand, even if the employees do not mean to exclude or ignore the customers, they may still feel excluded because what counts is not whether you exclude them, is how they feel. Thus, it is important for a company to remain in touch and accessible through various communication channels to its customers whenever they need. Also, the companies should take feedbacks from their customers constantly and come up with solutions to their concerns because happy and invested customers are the underlying reason for the success of the companies. Hence, an effective customer relationship management (CRM) strategy plays a significant role to obtain and evaluate customer feedbacks and respond effectively.

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