Ignored or Rejected: Retail Exclusion Effects on Construal Levels and Consumer Responses to Compensation

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Among the top customer complaints regarding retailers are experiences of exclusionary treatment in the form of explicit condescension or implicit disregard. However, little is known about how consumers respond to different instances of exclusion in retail or service settings. This research focuses on how customers respond cognitively and emotionally when frontline staff reject or ignore them and on how retailers can recover from such service failures. Findings from six studies using exclusion as a hypothetical scenario or a real experience demonstrate that direct negative feedback leads customers to feel rejected and to form concrete low-level mental construals, while a lack of attention leads customers to feel ignored and to form abstract high-level construals. Explicit rejection (implicit ignoring) causes consumers to form more (less) vivid mental imagery of the exclusionary experience and to activate a concrete (abstract) mindset, resulting in preferences for tangible (intangible) and visual (textual) compensation options. Retailers are advised to align their compensation with construal levels to increase post-recovery customer satisfaction, customer reviews, intended loyalty, and brand referral behavior.

Keywords: construal level, matching compensation, retail exclusion, service failure recovery

Imagine that you are shopping at a retail store to buy a nice handbag for your mother's birthday. You ask the salesperson to enroll you in a premium membership program with exclusive benefits. The salesperson scrutinizes your casual jeans, raises an eyebrow, and condescendingly replies that your purchase must be worth a certain amount to qualify for the application. Now visualize a second scenario: no one greets you or acknowledges your presence when you enter the store. Shoppers often experience such exclusionary treatment in the form of explicit condescension or implicit disregard in service encounters. In fact, a top customer complaint about retailers is that frontline service employees are rude or fail to provide sufficient in-store sales attention (Guillory 2016; Spangler 2017).

Social exclusion research has aptly documented negative effects on emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Baumeister et al. 2007; Bernstein 2016); yet little is known about how consumers respond to specific types of exclusion in retail or service settings (called *retail exclusion* in our research). Interactions between frontline retail employees and customers are known to greatly influence customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth (WOM) communications (Gremler and Gwinner 2008). However, retail exclusions

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are inevitable. Indeed, we conducted a pilot test and found that approximately 58.7% (84.9%) of American consumers reported being rejected (ignored) in retail/service settings (see web appendix A for details). In this research, we examine how consumers form mental construals when they are explicitly rejected or implicitly ignored in service encounters. We further seek to understand what recovery efforts are most effective under a rejected or ignored service failure condition.

Building on the few studies exploring reactions to explicit and implicit exclusion (Lee and Shrum 2012; Molden et al. 2009), we propose and support a theoretically novel, practical, and relevant hypothesis that rejected (ignored) consumers in retail contexts are likely to form concrete, low-level (abstract, high-level) mental construals. We reveal the underlying mechanism: directness of interaction with the source of exclusion and consequential imagery vividness drive the retail exclusion effects on construal levels. Moreover, we show that the mental abstraction effect carries over to preferences for compensation featuring pictures versus words, and tangibility versus intangibility. We demonstrate that recovery effectiveness depends on the type of compensation—ignored (rejected) consumers who receive compensation at a high-level (low-level) construal exhibit greater post-recovery satisfaction with the retailer, higher repurchase intentions, and more positive brand referrals. Our research provides practical implications for retailers: when service failures occur in the form of explicit rejection or implicit ignoring, aligning the compensation or marketing communications with the respective construal level is an effective way to win back customers.

We first review the literature regarding the distinction between explicit and implicit exclusion experiences making customers feel rejected or ignored in service encounters. To develop our conceptual framework and hypotheses, we draw on construal-level theory (Trope and Liberman 2003, 2010). We then document construal-level effects in consumer compensation choices and recovery effectiveness across six studies. We conclude by addressing our contributions and managerial implications.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Retail Exclusion Experiences: Being Rejected or Ignored

In retail and service contexts, shoppers may experience exclusionary experiences in which they receive signals that they do not belong. Perhaps a frontline staff representative directly and vocally rejects or fails to respond to their requests. Our definitions of rejected and ignored retail exclusion experiences are consistent with previous interpersonal social exclusion research that has focused on the directness of exclusion communications. Direct communications cause customers to feel explicitly rejected; indirect communications make them feel implicitly ignored (Molden et al. 2009). Rather than addressing pleasant autonomous shopping experiences, we focus on (1) *retail rejection*, in which customers feel rejected after frontline staff explicitly, interactively, and directly deny or reject their requests, and on (2) *retail ignoring*, in which customers feel ignored after frontline staff withhold attention.

Both exclusionary experiences commonly occur in retail settings, but consumer research has paid little attention to effects of retail exclusion on consumer judgments and decisions, except Ward and Dhar (2012), who showed that retail rejection can cause consumers to strongly affiliate with the rejecting brand, to increase brand attitudes, and to be more willing to pay for the brand. In addition, by examining rejected versus ignored interpersonal exclusions, Lee and Shrum (2012) demonstrated that rejection threatens need to belong and self-esteem and increases prosocial behaviors, whereas being ignored threatens needs for power, control, and meaningfulness, and increases conspicuous consumption. Extending the literature, we distinguish between implicit and explicit retail exclusion and propose that rejection activates concrete, low-level construals, while being ignored evokes abstract, high-level construals. Thus, to enhance recovery effectiveness and restore customer patronage, retailers should align their post-exclusionary compensation offers or communications with the activated mental construal.

Retail Exclusion Type, Psychological Distance, and Mental Construal

Construal-level theory posits that subjective psychological distance is formed according to egocentric reference points in space, time, social, and hypothetical distance dimensions (Trope and Liberman 2003, 2010). More specifically, when objects or events seem psychologically proximal, individuals use relatively contextualized, concrete, low-level, and feasibility-related construals; however, when objects or events seem psychologically distal, they use relatively decontextualized, abstract, high-level, and desirability-related construals (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2010; Vallacher and Wegner 1989).

We suggest that consumers will perceive rejection experiences as psychologically closer and ignored experiences as psychologically distant. This premise is based on the focal distinction between being rejected and being ignored with regard to having direct or indirect interaction with the source of exclusion. Direct or indirect interaction with the source of exclusion affects the richness of perceptual and sensory contextual details, the extent to which vivid images come to consumers' minds, and the perceptions of psychological distance. For instance, when frontline staff directly or interactively decline customer requests, customers form rich perceptual and sensory details including sight, hearing,

and touch memories. In contrast, being ignored involves little or no physical interactions and limited concrete and contextual details for rumination. Indeed, when people mentally simulate events, rich image-eliciting details enhance the vividness of the associated mental imagery (Chandran and Menon 2004; Kisielius and Sternthal 1984; Reyes, Thompson, and Bower 1980). Events that evoke vividly recalled mental imagery containing sensory and contextual details feel psychologically closer (D'Argembeau and Linden 2004; Jia et al. 2017; Mrkva, Travers, and Van Boven 2018). Furthermore, building on the well-established reciprocal effects of psychological distance on construal level (Fujita et al. 2006; Henderson et al. 2006; Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2010), we propose that rejected (ignored) retail shoppers will adopt low-level, concrete (high-level, abstract) mental construals.

Mental Construal Carryover Effects on Preferences for Compensation

Consumers tend to prefer products that match their activated construals. For instance, they may favor a gift voucher for one CD at a nearby store because the close psychological distance causes them to focus on the gift's low-construal feature, feasibility. In contrast, they may prefer a gift voucher of 10 CDs at a faraway store because the distant psychological distance causes them to focus on the offer's high-construal feature, desirability (Liberman and Trope 1998; Todorov, Goren, and Trope 2007). Similarly, messages are more persuasive when they are aligned with consumers' mental construals (Ein-Gar and Levontin 2013; Fujita et al. 2008; MacDonnell and White 2015; White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011). For example, researchers manipulated construal level by varying the specificity of a donation target, and found that temporally or socially distant donation appeals evoke greater willingness and actual donations to abstract charitable organizations rather than to specific victims (Ein-Gar and Levontin 2013).

Building on construal-level theory regarding information processing, persuasion, and product evaluation, we theorize that rejected (ignored) retail exclusion experiences are systematically associated with lower (higher) construal levels. Thus, different types of compensation directed at various levels of construal are differentially effective when a particular retail exclusion experience happens. Indeed, customers are more satisfied when they are properly compensated for service failures (Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999), whether through discounts, free merchandise, coupons, or gift certificates. To test our predictions, we observe whether visual or verbal depictions of coupons and tangible or intangible free merchandise are the best remedies when customers feel rejected or ignored.

Pictures and words evoke different abstraction and construal levels. Individuals think in terms of concrete physical resemblances when they visually represent objects, but think in terms of abstract essences when they verbally represent objects (Amit, Algom, and Trope 2009a; Amit et al. 2009b). Study participants responded faster to pictures (words) when identifying spatially, temporally, and socially near (distal) objects (Amit et al. 2009a). Similarly, they preferred to communicate verbally with distal others and visually with proximal others (Amit, Wakslak, and Trope 2013). Thus, psychological distance influences construal levels, and visual versus verbal processing plays a key intermediary role in the effects of psychological distance on construal levels (Yan, Sengupta, and Hong 2016). Additionally, money is a tangible asset that evokes concrete mindsets; voluntary time is intangible and evokes abstract mindsets. Consequently, donors were more persuaded to give tangible cash donations in response to concretely framed ads or chronically low construal levels, but to donate intangible voluntary time in response to abstractly framed messages or chronically high construal levels (MacDonnell and White 2015).

Drawing on prior research showing that consumers construe visual-verbal, tangible-intangible modalities differently and that customer satisfaction depends on alignment between service failure and recovery effort, we conceptualize that retail rejection (ignoring) activates concrete (abstract) mental construal so that consumers will prefer tangible (intangible) or visual (verbal) compensation. Consequently, postrecovery customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions are enhanced when the compensation aligns with mental construal.

Alternative Explanations for the Retail Exclusion Effect on Construal Level

Several alternatives could explain how retail exclusion affects construal levels, beyond extent of interaction with the source of exclusion and consequent mental imagery. First, negative (positive) moods tend to increase concrete (abstract) construals (Labroo and Patrick 2009). Being rejected is more active, explicit, and direct than being ignored and is likely to evoke greater negative moods and concrete thinking (Van Boven et al. 2010). In addition, visual, pictorial representations rather than verbal, linguistic representations are more emotionally salient and evoke stronger emotional responses (De Houwer and Hermans 1994; Holmes, Mackintosh, and Dalgleish 2008). Given that construal level is linked with psychological distance and verbal versus visual mental representations, emotional intensity may determine how retail exclusion indirectly affects construal level.

Rejection indicates lost social connection; activates prevention-focused motivations concerned with security; and leads to agitation, anxiety, and social withdrawal. In contrast, being ignored indicates failure to gain social connection; activates promotion-focused motivations concerned

with advancement; and leads to dejection, sadness, and efforts to socially reengage (Molden et al. 2009). Furthermore, the regulatory construal-fit hypothesis posits that promotion-focused individuals tend to represent tasks more abstractly to satisfy advancement and growth goals and will find abstract messages to be more persuasive. However, prevention-focused individuals focus on concrete details to secure safety and security goals and are better persuaded by concrete messages (Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010; Liberman et al. 1999). Consequently, retail rejection (ignoring) may elicit prevention-focused (promotion-focused) orientation and thus activate concrete (abstract) mental construal.

We rule out those competing accounts by empirically testing our study participants regarding general mood, emotional intensity, and regulatory focus. We propose and demonstrate that retail rejection (ignoring) and direct (indirect) interactions with frontline staff will evoke more (less) vivid imagery, leading to perceptions of psychological proximity (distance) and low-level, concrete (high-level, abstract) construals.

The Current Research

We conducted six studies to test our hypotheses. Figure 1 provides an overview of our conceptual model and the operationalization of the constructs. The findings provide empirical evidence documenting the effects of rejected and ignored retail exclusion on consumer mental construals and their carryover effects on compensation preferences, along with the consequential recovery effectiveness. Study 1 demonstrates that being rejected (ignored) evokes concrete (abstract) mental construals and preferences for visual (textual) coupons. Studies 2a and 2b unveil the underlying mechanism: explicit rejection (implicit ignoring) involves more (less) direct interaction with the source of exclusion, leading to more (less) vivid mental imagery, and concrete (abstract) mindsets. Furthermore, study 2b demonstrates how exclusion type affects construal levels and preference for tangible or intangible free merchandise. Studies 3a–3c address how companies can win back customers following a rejected or ignored retail exclusion, by examining the effectiveness of matched compensation on service recovery. Study 3a examines how matching retail exclusion type with compensation tangibility affects repurchase intentions, customer ratings, and reviews. Study 3b demonstrates the matching effects on postrecovery customer satisfaction and intended loyalty, after we control for prerecovery customer satisfaction and recovery expectations. Study 3c examines actual coupon choice and brand referral behavior (i.e., sharing coupons with friends). Across the studies, we successfully manipulate the retail exclusion type with a service encounter scenario or real exclusion experiences. Pretests of exclusion scenarios verified manipulations of all independent variables (see the web appendix for details). We demonstrate the underlying mechanism by measuring and manipulating the mediator and ruling out several alternative accounts. Table 1 summarizes the scale items used to measure the mediating and recovery outcome variables.

STUDY 1: EFFECTS OF EXCLUSION TYPE ON CONSTRUAL LEVELS AND PRODUCT PREFERENCES

In study 1, we sought initial evidence for the hypothesis that being rejected (ignored) leads to low (high) construal levels and the well-established carryover effects of construal level on preferences for visual or verbal representations. Specifically, participants imagined hypothetical retail scenarios of being rejected or ignored. We also included an acceptance condition and a no-scenario baseline control condition to compare with the rejected and ignored conditions, but made no a priori predictions. Next, participants imagined receiving an email containing a visual or textual coupon code. We presumed that rejected (ignored) consumers would think more concretely (abstractly) and would prefer the visual (textual) coupon option.

Participants and Methods

Participating in exchange for course credit, 204 undergraduate students from an American university (48.5% women, $M_{age} = 22.17$) were randomly assigned to the rejected, ignored, accepted, or no-scenario control experimental condition. We manipulated the type of exclusion by using pretested clothing retail scenarios (see web appendix B for details of the research stimuli). Participants in the rejected condition read a scenario in which the salesperson explicitly rejected their request to join an exclusive membership program. Participants in the ignored condition read a scenario in which the salesperson paid no attention when they needed help with information about the membership program. Participants in the accepted condition read a scenario in which the salesperson explicitly accepted their request to join the program. Participants in the control condition read no scenario. We asked participants to visualize and write sensory details about how they felt after reading the scenarios.

Next, participants responded to a modified version of the BIF questionnaire. Specifically, they indicated their relative preference between high-level and low-level descriptions for 10 behaviors on a four-point scale (web appendix B; for a similar approach, see Alter, Oppenheimer, and Zemla 2010). Then participants imagined receiving a mobile phone email from the clothing store described in the scenario. Participants in the control condition were told that the email was from a clothing store they liked. The email contained a coupon code in visual, QR code format (format X) or textual code format (format Y). Participants

FIGURE 1

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF KEY CONSTRUCTS ACROSS STUDIES

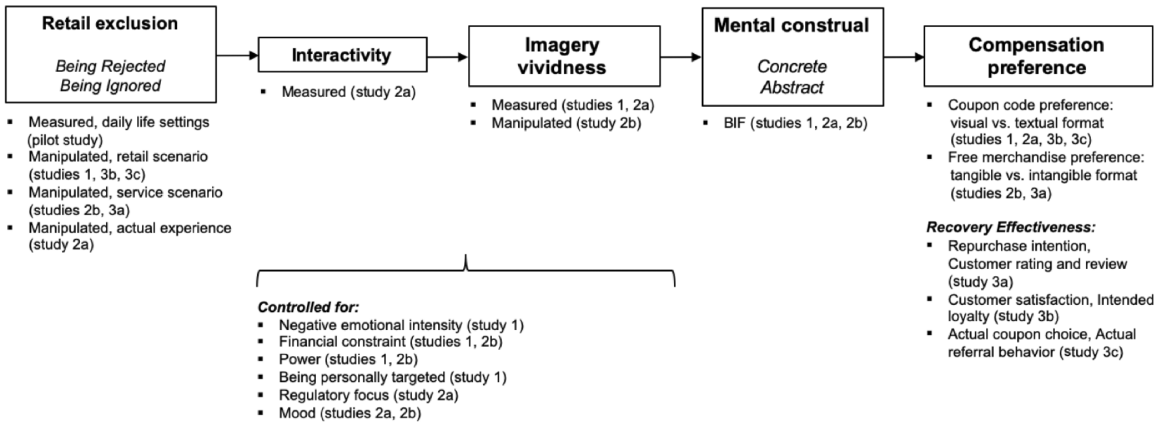


TABLE 1

SCALE ITEMS USED IN STUDIES 1, 2A, 3A, AND 3B

Study 1

Vividness of mental imagery (1= not at all, 7 = very much) (r = .88)

1. To what extent does this participant's thought protocol as a whole convey allusions to a visual image?
2. To what extent do any vivid images come to mind when reading the thought protocol?

Study 2A

Regulatory focus emotions (1= not at all, 7 = very much) (Molden et al. 2009)

1. Prevention-focused agitation emotions: agitated, on edge, uneasy, tense
2. Promotion-focused dejection emotions: disappointed, discouraged, low, sad

Vividness of mental imagery (1 = to a very small extent/few or no images, 7 = to a very great extent/lots of images) (r = .88) (Yan et al. 2016)

1. While thinking about the experience regarding your interaction with the Starbucks brand representative, to what extent did any image come to your mind?
2. While thinking about the experience regarding my interaction with the Starbucks brand representative, I experienced. . .

Fluency of mental imagery (1 = very easy, 7 = very difficult)

How easy or difficult is it for you to imagine the experience with the Starbucks brand representative?

Interactivity with the SR (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) (r = .87)

To what extent did you feel you had any interaction/communication with the salespersons described in the scenario?

Study 3A

Compensation liking (1= not at all, 7 = very much)

Do you like the compensation?

Store revisit intention (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely)

Are you likely to visit the restaurant again?

Study 3B

(adapted from Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003*; Maxham and Netemeyer 2002)*

Pre- (post-) recovery overall store satisfaction (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied)

How satisfied are you (right now) about your overall experience with the store?

Recovery expectation (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (r = .65)

1. I expect the store will do whatever it takes to guarantee my satisfaction about my shopping experience in the store.
2. I expect the store to try to make up for the unprofessional conduct of the salespeople.

Recovery satisfaction (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) (r = .78)

1. To what extent do you like the compensation?
2. How satisfied would you be with the store's handling of the problem regarding this particular event?

Intended loyalty (1 = not at all/strongly disagree, 7 = very much /strongly agree) (α = .94)

1. How likely are you to spread positive word of mouth about the store?
2. If my friends were looking for a grocery store, I would tell them to try the store.
3. In the future, I intend to purchase groceries from the store.

indicated their preferences by dividing 100 points between the two formats.

Then participants responded to several measures pertaining to perceived psychological distance to the experience, a manipulation check of retail exclusion, and alternative explanations (web appendix B). Overall, the results supported our premise that rejected (ignored) participants would perceive the experience as closer (further). The results also ruled out negative emotional intensity, feelings of power, financial constraint, and being personally targeted as plausible alternative explanations. Finally, participants reported their demographics.

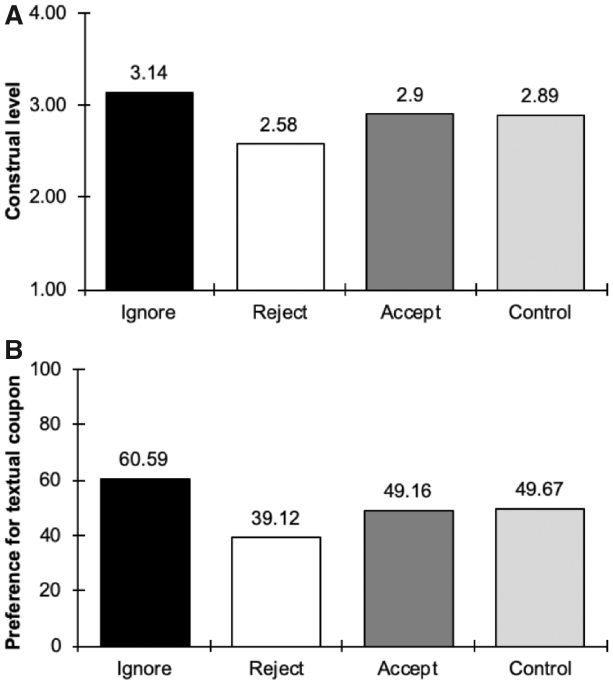
Results and Discussion

Construal Level. We averaged responses to the 10 items ($\alpha = .80$) to form a construal-level index, with higher scores indicating higher construal levels. A one-way ANOVA showed a main effect of retail exclusion type ($F(3, 200) = 5.82$, $p = .001$). As predicted, participants in the ignored condition ($M = 3.14$) reported significantly stronger preferences for high-level action identification than did those in the rejected condition ($M = 2.58$; $F(1, 200) = 16.16$, $p = .000$; $d = .79$). The ignored group also exhibited marginally significantly stronger preferences for high-level identification than the accepted ($M = 2.90$; $F(1, 200) = 3.88$, $p = .078$; $d = .40$) and control ($M = 2.89$; $F(1, 200) = 4.33$, $p = .069$; $d = .42$) groups. The rejected group reported significantly lesser preference for high-level action identification, compared with the accepted ($F(1, 200) = 4.46$, $p = .018$; $d = .43$) and control ($F(1, 200) = 4.67$, $p = .021$; $d = .42$) groups. Participants in the control and accepted conditions had similar construal-level scores ($p = .95$) (figure 2).

Coupon Code Preference. For the analysis of coupon code preferences, we used only points allocated to the coupon code format Y (textual format) because the points allocated to both options had to equal 100. As predicted, a one-way ANOVA showed a main effect of retail exclusion type ($F(3, 200) = 4.70$, $p = .003$). The mean number of points allocated to format Y in the ignored condition ($M = 60.59$) was significantly greater than those in the rejected ($M = 39.12$; $F(1, 200) = 15.31$, $p = .000$; $d = .77$), and accepted ($M = 49.16$; $F(1, 200) = 3.99$, $p = .047$; $d = .40$) conditions, and marginally significantly greater than those in the control condition ($M = 49.67$; $F(1, 200) = 3.58$, $p = .058$; $d = .37$). The rejected group was marginally significantly different from the accepted ($F(1, 200) = 3.13$, $p = .081$; $d = .35$), and control ($F(1, 200) = 3.39$, $p = .067$; $d = .36$) groups. The control group did not differ significantly from the accepted group ($p = .93$) (figure 2). The results indicate that the rejected (ignored) retail experience evoked greater preference for the visual (textual) representation of discount information.

FIGURE 2

STUDY 1: (A) CONSUMER CONSTRUALS (1 = LOW-LEVEL, 4 = HIGH-LEVEL) AND (B) PREFERENCE FOR TEXTUAL COUPON (FORMAT Y) AS A FUNCTION OF RETAIL EXCLUSION TYPE



We performed a mediation analysis using the bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates to test the causal path: retail exclusion type (X; rejected = –1, ignored = 1) → construal level (BIF) (M) → coupon code preference (Y) (PROCESS model 4; Hayes 2013). As expected, construal level mediated the effects of exclusion type on coupon preference ($\beta = 3.30$, SE = 1.41, 95% CI = .8942 to 6.4439).

Vividness of Mental Imagery. Two independent judges blind to the experimental conditions answered two questions about participants' overall thought protocols to assess imagery vividness (table 1). A third judge resolved disagreements. Interjudge reliability was highly significant ($r = .88$, $p = .000$), so we averaged evaluations to form a single vividness index. An independent-samples t-test showed that rejected (ignored) participants had significantly more (less) vivid mental imagery ($M = 3.51$ vs. $M = 2.99$; $t(100) = 2.25$, $p = .027$; $d = .44$).

Sufficient details are needed for vivid images to be formed (Lee and Qiu 2009; Reyes et al. 1980). Thus, we expected that the thought protocol of rejected (ignored) participants would contain more (fewer) words. As predicted, rejected participants wrote slightly more words than

ignored participants ($M = 42.94$ vs. $M = 36.71$; $t(100) = 1.85$, $p = .068$; $d = .37$).

Discussion. Study 1 supports the proposition that rejected (ignored) retail exclusion is perceived as more proximal (distant), activates lower (higher) construal levels, and carries over to preferences for visual (textual) coupon codes. Comparisons with the no-scenario control and acceptance groups suggest that both types of exclusion drive construal-level effects. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that rejected consumers form more vivid mental imagery. Both experiences evoke similar feelings of negative emotional intensity, power, being personally targeted, and being financially constrained, which rules out alternative accounts. Particularly, the finding of similar feelings of power seems to conflict with suggestions that being ignored threatens control and power needs (Lee and Shrum 2012). However, that power construct indicates power over others, while our power construct indicates purchasing and financial power, perhaps explaining the contradiction. Web appendix B provides a more detailed explanation.

STUDY 2: UNDERLYING MECHANISM

Studies 2a and 2b empirically examine the causal relationships underlying the retail exclusion effects on construal level: rejected (ignored) exclusion entails direct (indirect) interaction and is more (less) vivid in mental imagery, generating concrete (abstract) mental construals and consequentially produces differential compensation preferences.

In study 2a, we measured mental imagery vividness, the proposed mediator, against regulatory focus, another alternative account. To reiterate, being rejected (ignored) tends to induce prevention- (promotion-) focused responses (Molden et al. 2009), and prevention- (promotion-) focused individuals tend to construe information with low-level (high-level) construals (Lee et al. 2010). Thus, a plausible alternative underlying mechanism is that exclusion type affects regulatory focus and thus activates different construal levels. Consequently, in study 2a, we followed Molden et al. (2009) and assessed prevention- and promotion-focused emotions before and after the exclusion manipulation. We build on research regarding social exclusion effects in which prevention (promotion) motivations elicit agitation and anxiety (dejection and sadness) (Higgins et al. 1997; Shah and Higgins 2001), and rejected (ignored) interpersonal social exclusion leads to prevention- (promotion-) focused emotions (Molden et al. 2009). Thus we measured regulatory focus emotions to test whether retail or service contexts are similar to interpersonal contexts. Furthermore, we used a brand representative to manipulate actual experiences and examine the robustness of the proposed construal-level effects.

Study 2b is a process-by-moderation study (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005) to further investigate the underlying mechanism. Cognitive demands inhibit the formation of mental imagery (Jia et al. 2017; Petrova and Cialdini 2005; Shiv and Huber 2000). If vividness of visual imagery mediates the effect of retail exclusion on construal level, interference with the construction of mental imagery should attenuate or eliminate the effect. To test how mental imagery formation affects construal level, we used a restaurant dining context and manipulated the opportunity to imagine a rejected or ignored dining experience. Aligned with earlier studies, we expected that without cognitive load, rejected (ignored) exclusion would activate concrete (abstract) mental construals and preferences for tangible material goods (intangible experiences) as compensation. However, increased cognitive load would discourage mental imagery and cause rejected and ignored consumers to exhibit comparable mental construals and compensation preferences.

Study 2a

Participants and Methods. In exchange for course credit, 100 undergraduate students from an American university participated (54% women, $M_{age} = 21.03$). We devised a cover story explaining that we were partnering with Starbucks to seek enthusiastic, motivated, and well-connected college students as representatives of the Starbucks Student Ambassador Program to conduct marketing activities on or around campus.

We tested only two participants at a time. When they arrived in the lab, a Starbucks brand representative (SR) confederate gave them a booklet containing the cover story and a screening survey asking for basic information about the requirements to become a Starbucks ambassador (see web appendix C). We randomly assigned one participant to the rejected condition and one to the ignored condition. Both participants remained in the main lab where they could see each other, but were not allowed to communicate. After they completed the screening survey, the SR collected their answers, pretended to read them for about two minutes, and then escorted the rejected participant to a small room adjoining the main lab, where the participant received a handbook containing rejection feedback. The SR then returned to the main lab, pretending to be busy arranging papers and writing notes while occasionally glancing up without speaking to the ignored participant remaining in the lab. If the participant tried to get the SR's attention, the SR used hand gestures, without speaking, to signal an order for the participant to wait. The SR then left the room, returned about five minutes later, and gave both participants a booklet containing the exclusion manipulation checks used in study 1 and a series of items measuring the proposed underlying mechanism and alternative explanations.

Specifically, participants reported four prevention-focused agitation emotions and four promotion-focused dejection emotions (Molden et al. 2009) twice: once right after they completed the screening survey, and again after they received the rejection or ignored manipulation from the SR. To examine the proposed underlying mechanism, we assessed the vividness and fluency of their mental imagery, and perceived interactivity with the SR (table 1 shows the detailed measurement). Participants also indicated their perceptions about the psychological distance of the exclusion experience (see web appendix C for the detailed results).

Finally, participants responded to the BIF measures (α = .70) and imagined receiving a mobile phone email from Starbucks containing a coupon code to be used at their next visit. Similarly to study 1, they received a visual (format X) and a textual (format Y) code, and indicated their preferences by dividing 100 points between the two options. After participants reported their demographics, they were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

Main Results: Construal Level and Coupon Code Preference. An independent-samples *t*-test on the construal-level index showed that participants in the rejected (ignored) condition reported a weaker (stronger) preference for high-level action identification (M = 2.64 vs. M = 3.26; $t(98)$ = –5.75, p = .000; d = 1.15). As in study 1, we used only points allocated to the textual format Y to analyze coupon code preference. Another *t*-test on points allocated to format Y showed that a lesser (greater) mean number of points were allocated to format Y in the rejected (ignored) condition (M = 43.78 vs. M = 56.60; $t(98)$ = –2.69, p = .008; d = .54), indicating that the rejected (ignored) experience led to greater preference for visual (textual) information.

The Underlying Mechanism: Interactivity and Imagery Vividness. As predicted, participants in the rejected (ignored) condition perceived greater (lesser) interactivity with the SR (M = 4.38 vs. M = 2.06; $t(98)$ = 7.78, p = .000; d = 1.56) and perceived the experience as being more (less) vivid in mental imagery (M = 4.80 vs. M = 2.91; $t(98)$ = 5.63, p = .000; d = 1.13). Next, a serial multiple mediation analysis (PROCESS model 6; Hayes 2013)—exclusion type (X; rejected = –1, ignored = 1) → interactivity (M1) → imagery vividness (M2) → construal level (M3) → coupon preference (Y)—revealed a significant indirect effect (β = .32, SE = .25 CI = .0389 to 1.1751). As in study 1, the indirect effect via construal level (exclusion type → construal level → coupon preference) was significant (β = 6.41, SE = 3.04, 95% CI = .4070 to 12.3117). The indirect effects via interactivity and construal level (i.e., exclusion type → interactivity → construal level → coupon preference; β = –1.66, SE = .98, 95% CI = –4.0421 to –.1792), and via imagery vividness and construal level (exclusion type → imagery vividness → construal level → coupon preference; β = –1.29, SE = .91, 95% CI = –3.9436 to –.1189), were also significant. No other paths of indirect effect were significant. Overall, the results support our prediction that directness of interaction with the source of exclusion and consequential imagery vividness drive effects on construal levels and subsequent coupon preferences.

More vivid events are easier to imagine (Alter and Oppenheimer 2009). Thus we presumed that rejected rather than ignored participants would find it easier to mentally simulate their experience with the SR. Indeed, a *t*-test on imagery fluency showed a significant main effect of exclusion type (M_{reject} = 4.38 vs. M_{ignore} = 3.10; $t(98)$ = 3.28, p = .001; d = .65).

Alternative Account: Regulatory Focus. Using the eight regulatory-focus emotions measured after the exclusion manipulation, we created an index of postpromotion-focused emotions by averaging the four dejection items (α = .88) and an index of postprevention-focused emotions by averaging the four agitation items (α = .82). We calculated the mean ratings of the same emotions measured before the exclusion manipulation (dejection: α = .88; agitation: α = .89) and followed previous research to include them as a covariate in the following analyses (Molden et al. 2009; Strauman and Higgins 1988). A one-way ANCOVA on postpromotion-focused emotions revealed a significant main effect of exclusion type: participants in the rejected (ignored) condition experienced significantly lesser (more) promotion-focused emotions (M = 3.81 vs. M = 4.47; $F(1, 97)$ = 4.71, p = .032; d = .43). Prepromotion-focused emotions had a nonsignificant effect ($F(1, 97)$ = .66, p = .42). Another one-way ANCOVA on postprevention-focused emotions also showed a significant main effect: participants in the rejected (ignored) condition reported higher (lower) prevention-focused emotions (M = 4.98 vs. M = 3.21; $F(1, 97)$ = 44.14, p < .001; d = 1.35). Preprevention-focused emotions had a nonsignificant effect ($F(1, 97)$ = .25, p = .62). Overall, the findings aligned with prior research suggesting that rejected (ignored) interpersonal experiences induce prevention-focused (promotion-focused) emotions (Molden et al. 2009).

We tested a parallel mediation model (PROCESS model 4; Hayes 2013) with exclusion type as the independent variable (X) and construal level as the outcome variable (Y), and simultaneously included postpromotion and postprevention emotions, interactivity, and imagery vividness as the mediating variable (M). The result revealed only a significant indirect effect via interactivity (β = –.14, SE = .04, 95% CI = –.2393 to –.0766) or via imagery vividness (β = –.08, SE = .04, 95% CI = –.1873 to –.0141). The mediation effects via promotion-focused emotion (β = –.01, SE = .01 95% CI = –.0422 to .0096) and via prevention-focused emotion (β = .03, SE = .03, 95% CI = –.0352 to

.0994) were not significant. The results support the proposed underlying mechanism and rule out regulatory focus emotions as a plausible explanation.

Discussion. In study 2a we manipulated actual exclusionary experience and had findings consistent with study 1, in which we used hypothetical scenarios to manipulate retail exclusion, suggesting robustness of the proposed effect. Moreover, study 2a provides a finer-grained view of the underlying mechanism. Higher (lower) interactivity with the SR in the rejected (ignored) exclusion condition created greater (lesser) imagery vividness, and resulted in concrete (abstract) mental construals and preferences for visual (textual) coupons. A test of regulatory focus demonstrated that rejected (ignored) brand exclusion elicited more prevention- (promotion-) focused emotions, but those emotions did not predict construal level, thus ruling out regulatory focus as a plausible alternative explanation.

Study 2b

Participants and Methods. In exchange for course credit, we recruited 200 undergraduate students from an American university and randomly assigned them to one of four conditions in a 2 (cognitive load: high vs. low) × 2 (retail exclusion: reject vs. ignore) between-participants designed study. We first manipulated cognitive load by asking participants to memorize an eight-digit (high-load condition) or a two-digit (low-load condition) number to recall later. Two participants could not recall the number and were dropped, leaving 198 participants for analysis (55.6% women, M_{age} = 22.03). Next, we manipulated retail exclusion using pretested dining experience scenarios: participants imagined (for about one minute) that they were dining out with a friend to celebrate a special occasion. In the rejected condition, the scenario explained that their server explicitly rejected several requests (e.g., for booth seating and for particular food preparations). In the ignored condition, the server implicitly ignored them (e.g., failed to acknowledge their presence or to ask whether they needed anything). We pretested the rejected and ignored scenarios and verified that they were similar in indicating intentionality or personal targeting (see web appendix D for the exclusion scenarios and pretest results).

After imagining the retail exclusion scenario, participants responded to the BIF measures (α = .74). Then they imagined that the manager heard their complaints, removed the charges, apologized, and offered additional compensation of a $50 gift certificate to purchase either material goods such as clothing and accessories (tangible option), or experiential goods such as tickets for a music festival (intangible option). We asked, "How would you like to spend your $50 gift certificate?" (1 = purchasing clothing/accessories, 7 = purchasing tickets for the music festival). We pretested the two options to verify that they were equally observable in consumption and indulgence (web appendix D).

Next, participants responded to the exclusion manipulation check and reported their feelings of power, financial constraint, and current mood, as in study 1. Their responses provided additional support discrediting the alternative explanations (web appendix D has the detailed results). Finally, participants reported the series of numbers they were asked to remember and their demographics, and answered manipulation-check questions regarding the material and experiential goods (web appendix D). Before leaving, participants were offered the opportunity to sign up via email to receive additional information about using the gift certificate to purchase clothing/accessories or music festival tickets. The email provision served as a behavioral measure of gift certificate redemption preference.

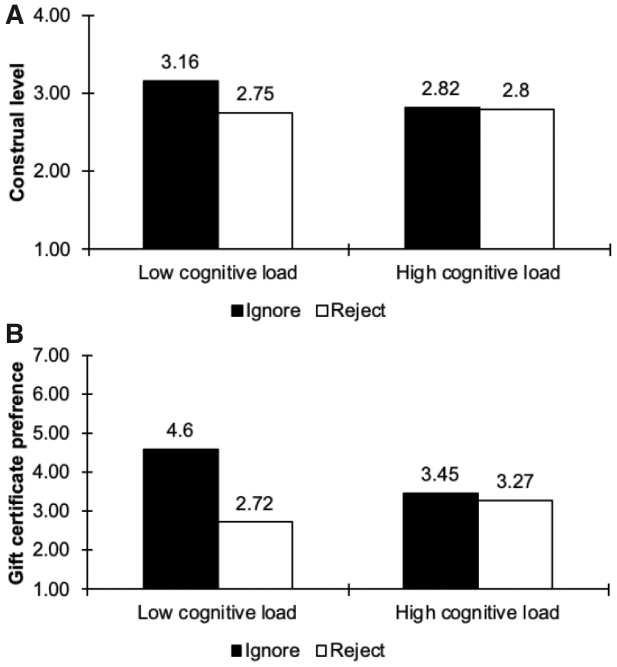
Construal Level. A two-way ANOVA on the construal-level index showed a significant main effect of exclusion type: rejected (ignored) participants exhibited lower-level (higher-level) construals (M = 2.77 vs. M = 2.99; $F(1, 194) = 6.25$, p = .013; d = .32). The main effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 194) = 4.92$, p = .028; figure 3): under low cognitive load, ignored participants reported higher-level construals than did rejected participants (M = 3.16 vs. M = 2.75; $F(1, 194) = 11.24$, p = .001; d = .71), but ignored and rejected participants under high cognitive load reported similar construal levels (M = 2.82 vs. M = 2.80; $F(1, 194) = .04$, p = .84). Cognitive load had a marginally significant main effect: the high-cognitive-load group reported higher-level construals (M = 2.96 vs. M = 2.81; $F(1, 194) = 2.93$, p = .09).

Gift Certificate Preference. A two-way ANOVA on gift certificate preference showed that exclusion type had a significant main effect: rejected (ignored) participants preferred to use the gift certificate to purchase clothing/accessories (tickets for a music festival) (M = 2.99 vs. M = 4.03; $F(1, 194) = 10.88$, p = .001; d = .47). A significant interaction qualified the main effect ($F(1, 194) = 7.35$, p = .007; figure 3): under low cognitive load, rejected rather than ignored participants reported stronger preferences to purchase clothing/accessories (M = 2.72 vs. M = 4.60; $F(1, 194) = 18.24$, p = .000; d = .87). Under high cognitive load, however, the difference between rejected and ignored participants was not evident (M = 3.27 vs. M = 3.45; $F(1, 194) = .17$, p = .68). Cognitive load had a nonsignificant main effect, $F(1, 194) = .94$, p = .33.

We performed a moderated mediation analysis using the bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates to test the causal path: retail exclusion type (X; rejected = –1, ignored = 1) → construal level (BIF) (M) → gift certificate preference (Y), moderated by cognitive load (W; low = –1, high = 1) (PROCESS model 7; Hayes 2013). As expected, the moderated mediation model

FIGURE 3

STUDY 2B: (A) CONSUMER CONSTRUALS (1 = LOW-LEVEL, 4 = HIGH-LEVEL) AND (B) GIFT CERTIFICATE PREFERENCE (1 = TANGIBLE OPTION, 7 = INTANGIBLE OPTION) AS A FUNCTION OF RETAIL EXCLUSION TYPE AND COGNITIVE LOAD



was significant (β = –.12, SE = .08, 95% CI = –.3206 to –.0018): construal level mediated the effects of exclusion type on gift certificate preference for the low-cognitive-load condition (β = .13, SE = .07, 95% CI = .0183 to .2791), but not for the high-cognitive-load condition (β = .01, SE = .041, 95% CI = –.0905 to .0932).

Email Signup. Regarding the email signup, we expected four possible actions: participants might sign up for additional information about (1) only clothing/accessories; (2) only the music festival; (3) both; or (4) neither. We found that 30.3% chose not to receive additional information; 21.7% wanted additional information for both; 22.7% wanted additional information only for the clothing/accessories; and 25.3% wanted additional information only for the music festival. Next, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression on the choice data of the clothing email signup (coded yes = 1, no = 0) with exclusion type (coded rejected = –1, ignored = 1) and cognitive load (coded low = –1, high = 1) as the independent variables. The analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction ($B = -1.75$, SE = .60, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 8.49$, $p = .004$). Another multinomial logistic regression on the choice data of the email signup for festival tickets also revealed a significant two-way interaction ($B = 1.34$, SE = .60, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.96$, $p = .026$). Specifically, under low cognitive load, rejected (ignored) participants were more willing to provide their email to receive additional information about clothing/accessories (the music festival). Differences in information search behaviors did not appear under high cognitive load (table 2). Overall, participants exhibited an email signup behavior consistent with their gift certificate redemption preference.

Discussion. Study 2b provides further evidence that mental imagery plays a role in the observed effects. Specifically, increased cognitive load interfered with the construction of mental imagery and attenuated the effect of exclusion type on construal level. The proposed effect was replicated in the absence of cognitive load. The study replicates and extends the earlier studies by using service exclusions and brand-unrelated compensation of varying tangibility. Studies 1 and 2 provide convergent evidence that rejected/ignored consumers exhibit different mental construals and prefer corresponding compensation. In the next set of studies, we demonstrate how recovery effectiveness depends on whether compensation matches construal levels.

STUDY 3: MATCHED COMPENSATION AND RECOVERY EFFECTIVENESS

In studies 3a–3c, we sought to provide managers with actionable tools to design compensation for effective service recovery. That is, we provided direct evidence that aligning compensation with the activated mental construal will enhance recovery effectiveness. To measure recovery effectiveness we observed compensation liking, store satisfaction, intended loyalty, actual compensation choice, and brand referral behavior, controlling for prerecovery compensation expectations and store satisfaction.

Study 3a

Participants and Methods. Study 3a was a 2 (retail exclusion: rejected vs. ignored) × 2 (gift card style: standard vs. virtual) between-participants design. In exchange for course credit, 188 undergraduate students from an American university (43.1% women, $M_{age} = 21.74$) were subjected to the same restaurant dining exclusion manipulation used in study 2b. After visualizing the scenario, participants received compensation to be used for a future visit to the restaurant, either a standard, plastic gift card delivered to a physical address, or a virtual, e-gift card delivered to an email address. They indicated their liking of the gift card and store revisit intentions (table 1), and responded to the manipulation check for gift card tangibility. We also conducted pretests to verify that the two gift card formats elicited the intended corresponding tactile

TABLE 2

STUDY 2B: LIKELIHOOD OF EMAIL SIGNUP FOR INFORMATION AS A FUNCTION OF RETAIL EXCLUSION TYPE AND COGNITIVE LOAD

Information regarding:	Low cognitive load		High cognitive load	
	Rejected	Ignored	Rejected	Ignored
Clothing/accessories	56% (28/50)	22% (11/50)	47% (23/49)	53% (26/49)
Music festival tickets	22% (11/50)	56% (28/50)	53% (26/49)	57% (28/49)

perceptions and similar general positivity. Finally, participants imagined receiving a Yelp.com invitation to rate their overall experience on a five-star scale (1 = very unsatisfied, 5 = very satisfied) and to review the restaurant (see web appendix E for the details of research stimuli and pretests). Last, participants responded to the exclusion manipulation check and attention check (Lu and Sinha 2017), and reported their demographics.

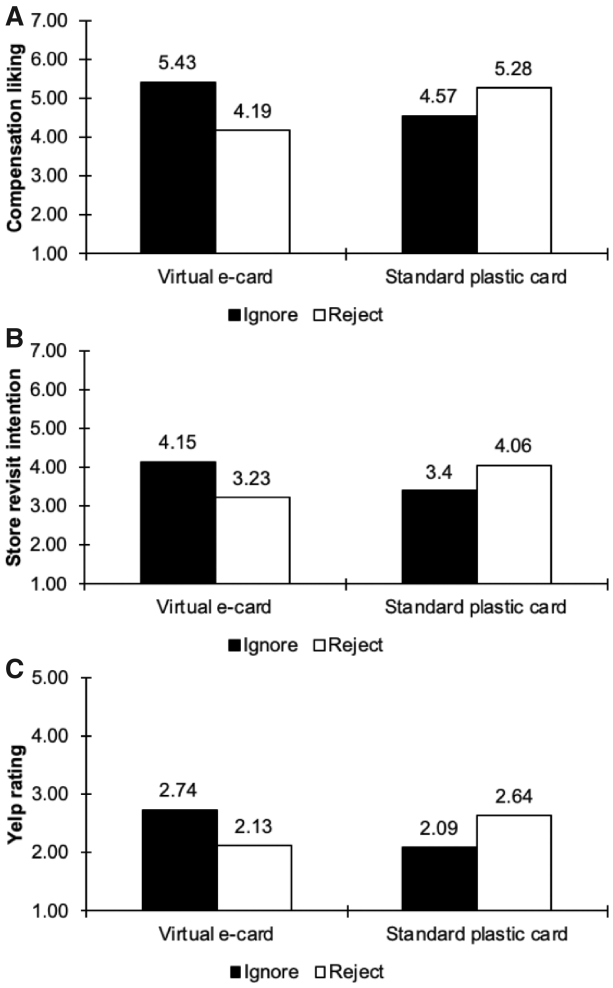
Compensation Liking. A two-way ANOVA on gift card liking yielded the predicted interaction ($F(1, 184) = 16.09$, $p = .000$; figure 4). Rejected participants reported greater liking of the standard gift card than the virtual gift card ($M = 5.28$ vs. $M = 4.19$; $F(1, 184) = 10.11$, $p = .002$; $d = .67$); ignored participants preferred the virtual gift card more than the standard gift card ($M = 5.43$ vs. $M = 4.57$; $F(1, 184) = 6.22$, $p = .01$; $d = .51$). Exclusion type ($F(1, 184) = 1.22$, $p = .27$) and gift card style ($F(1, 184) = .24$, $p = .63$) had nonsignificant main effects.

Store Revisit Intentions. A two-way ANOVA on restaurant revisit intentions showed a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 184) = 10.46$, $p = .001$; figure 4). Rejected participants reported being more likely to revisit the restaurant after they were compensated with the standard gift card rather than the virtual gift card ($M = 4.06$ vs. $M = 3.23$; $F(1, 184) = 5.81$, $p = .02$; $d = .54$); ignored participants reported being more likely to revisit the restaurant after they were compensated with the virtual gift card rather than the standard gift card ($M = 4.15$ vs. $M = 3.40$; $F(1, 184) = 4.68$, $p = .03$; $d = .42$). Exclusion type ($F(1, 184) = .28$, $p = .60$) and gift card style ($F(1, 184) = .03$, $p = .86$) had nonsignificant main effects.

Yelp Rating. Restaurant rating showed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1, 184) = 16.95$, $p = .000$; figure 4). Rejected participants rated the restaurant higher after being compensated with the standard gift card rather than the virtual gift card ($M = 2.64$ vs. $M = 2.13$; $F(1, 184) = 6.46$, $p = .01$; $d = .53$); ignored participants rated the restaurant higher after being compensated with the virtual gift card rather than the standard gift card ($M = 2.74$ vs. $M = 2.09$; $F(1, 184) = 10.77$, $p = .001$; $d = .66$). Exclusion type ($F(1, 184) = .05$, $p = .82$) and gift card style ($F(1, 184) = .28$, $p = .60$) had nonsignificant main effects.

FIGURE 4

STUDY 3A: (A) COMPENSATION LIKING, (B) STORE REVISIT INTENTION, AND (C) YELP RATING AS A FUNCTION OF RETAIL EXCLUSION TYPE AND GIFT CARD STYLE



Sentiment Analysis of the Yelp Review. Two independent coders blind to the experimental conditions rated the overall positivity of each written review using a five-point scale (1 = strongly negative, 2 = negative, 3 = neutral,

4 = positive, 5 = strongly positive). We averaged their evaluations to form a single positivity index (intercoder reliability: $r = .96$, $p = .000$). A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 184) = 7.32$, $p = .007$). Rejected participants gave more positive reviews after they were compensated with the standard gift card rather than the virtual gift card ($M = 2.57$ vs. $M = 2.17$; $F(1, 184) = 4.19$, $p = .04$; $d = .43$); ignored participants gave marginally more positive reviews after they were compensated with the virtual gift card rather than the standard gift card ($M = 2.62$ vs. $M = 2.27$; $F(1, 184) = 3.16$, $p = .077$; $d = .36$). Exclusion type ($F(1, 184) = .25$, $p = .62$) and gift card style ($F(1, 184) = .04$, $p = .85$) had nonsignificant main effects.

Discussion. Study 3a demonstrates that participants imagining a rejection (ignored) service experience favored compensation in the form of a tangible, standard gift card (intangible, virtual gift card). In addition, when compensation matched (mismatched) the activated mental construal, they reported greater (lesser) intentions to revisit the store and provided more (less) positive customer ratings and reviews. The findings suggest that aligning compensation with the corresponding consumer mental construal enhances recovery effectiveness. In the next study, we controlled prerecovery store satisfaction and compensation expectations and examined the matching effects on postrecovery customer satisfaction and intended loyalty.

Study 3b

Participants and Methods. Study 3b had a 2 (retail exclusion: rejected vs. ignored) × 2 (coupon code format: visual vs. verbal) between-participants design. In exchange for course credit, 200 undergraduate students from an American university (47.5% women, $M_{age} = 22.33$) were randomly assigned to the rejected or ignored experimental condition. We manipulated the type of exclusion by using pretested grocery shopping scenarios (web appendix F). After visualizing rejected or ignored scenarios, participants indicated prerecovery overall store satisfaction and recovery expectations. Next, they imagined receiving compensation of a visual QR coupon code or a textual coupon code to be used for a future purchase at the store and answered questions measuring recovery satisfaction, postrecovery overall store satisfaction, and intended loyalty (table 1). Last, participants responded to the attention check as study 3a and reported their demographics.

Recovery Expectation. A two-way ANOVA showed a nonsignificant main effect of exclusion type ($F(1, 196) = .53$, $p = .47$), a nonsignificant main effect of coupon code ($F(1, 196) = 1.38$, $p = .24$), and a nonsignificant interaction effect ($F(1, 196) = 1.05$, $p = .31$). Participants in both the rejected and ignored conditions expected compensation: the overall mean score (4.73) was significantly higher than the scale midpoint, $t(199) = 5.47$, $p = .001$.

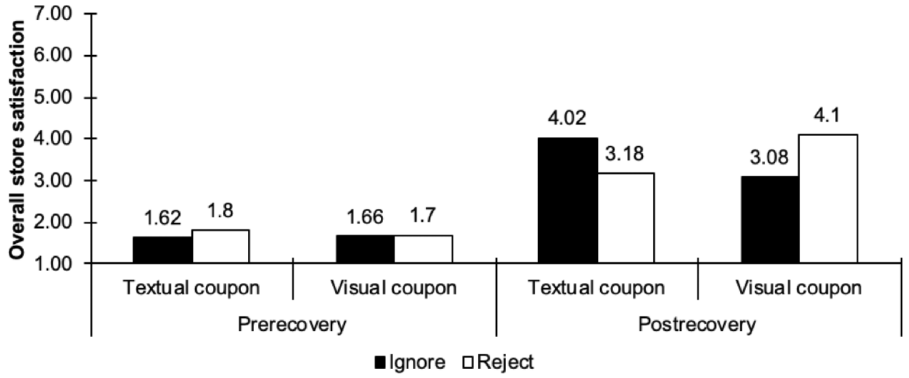
Pre- and Postrecovery Overall Store Satisfaction. We performed a three-way repeated-measures ANOVA to compare how retail exclusion interacted with coupon code format to affect overall store satisfaction before and after compensation. Postrecovery satisfaction was significantly higher than prerecovery satisfaction ($M = 3.60$ vs. $M = 1.70$, $F(1, 196) = 190.22$, $p = .000$; $d = 1.30$). The two-way interaction between retail exclusion and coupon code format was significant ($F(1, 196) = 8.47$, $p = .004$), qualified by a significant three-way interaction effect ($F(1, 196) = 13.17$, $p = .000$; figure 5). Pairwise comparisons revealed that rejected ($M_{visual} = 1.70$ vs. $M_{textual} = 1.80$, $F(1, 196) = .21$, $p = .65$) and ignored participants ($M_{visual} = 1.66$ vs. $M_{textual} = 1.62$, $F(1, 196) = .033$, $p = .86$) showed similar prerecovery satisfaction in response to coupon code conditions. However, rejected participants reported higher postrecovery satisfaction after receiving the visual coupon than after receiving the textual coupon ($M_{visual} = 4.10$ vs. $M_{textual} = 3.18$; $F(1, 196) = 7.35$, $p = .007$; $d = .50$), while ignored participants reported higher satisfaction after receiving the textual coupon code than after receiving the visual coupon code ($M_{textual} = 4.02$ vs. $M_{visual} = 3.08$; $F(1, 196) = 7.67$, $p = .006$, $d = .60$). Overall, the results suggest that compensation enhances customer satisfaction, but is more (less) effective when matched (mismatched) with the respective mental construals.

Recovery Satisfaction. A two-way ANCOVA, with prerecovery overall store satisfaction as a covariate, revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 195) = 11.92$, $p = .001$). Rejected participants reported greater satisfaction with the visual coupon than the textual coupon ($M = 4.5$ vs. $M = 3.69$; $F(1, 195) = 5.36$, $p = .022$; $d = .45$; ignored participants were more satisfied with the textual coupon than the visual coupon ($M = 4.62$ vs. $M = 3.72$; $F(1, 195) = 6.60$, $p = .011$; $d = .54$. Exclusion type ($F(1, 196) = .10$, $p = .76$), coupon code ($F(1, 196) = .03$, $p = .86$), and prerecovery satisfaction ($F(1, 196) = .02$, $p = .90$) had nonsignificant main effects.

Intended Loyalty. A two-way ANCOVA, with prerecovery overall store satisfaction as a covariate, showed a significant interaction ($F(1, 195) = 11.41$, $p = .001$). Rejected participants reported higher intended loyalty after receiving the visual coupon rather than the textual coupon ($M = 3.42$ vs. $M = 2.71$; $F(1, 195) = 5.24$, $p = .023$; $d = .40$); ignored participants reported higher intended loyalty after receiving the textual coupon rather than receiving the visual coupon ($M = 3.33$ vs. $M = 2.54$; $F(1, 195) = 6.20$, $p = .014$; $d = .55$). Exclusion type ($F(1, 195) = .25$, $p = .62$), coupon code ($F(1, 195) = .02$,

FIGURE 5

STUDY 3B: OVERALL STORE SATISFACTION BEFORE AND AFTER RECOVERY AS A FUNCTION OF RETAIL EXCLUSION TYPE AND GIFT CARD STYLE



$p = .89$), and prerecovery satisfaction ($F(1, 196) = .03$, $p = .87$) had nonsignificant main effects.

Discussion. In study 3b, we controlled for recovery expectations and prerecovery satisfaction and observed that customers who were rejected (ignored) would form higher customer satisfaction and intended loyalty in response to visual- (textual-) based compensation. The results provide additional support for the exclusion-compensation matching proposition. In study 3c, we assessed the impact of matched (mismatched) recovery efforts on consumers' real compensation choices and brand referral behaviors.

Study 3c

Participants and Methods. In exchange for course credit, 100 undergraduate students from an American university (54% women, $M_{age} = 22.1$) were randomly assigned to the rejected or ignored experimental condition. We manipulated type of exclusion using grocery-shopping scenarios similar to those in study 3b, but featured Publix, an actual retail brand. After visualizing rejected or ignored scenarios, participants reported overall store satisfaction as in study 3b. Next, they imagined filing a complaint to an online customer support representative in a live chat room, receiving an apology, and receiving a $10 off coupon for their next purchase of $50 or more at any Publix store, using either a textual (X) or a visual QR code (Y) format. Participants indicated liking toward format X or Y, respectively (1= not at all, 7 = very much). Then we offered a choice of coupon format in appreciation for participating in the research and recorded their actual choice. Next, participants responded to the exclusion manipulation checks, attention check, and Publix brand attitude questions, and reported their demographics. They reported similar Publix brand attitudes and prerecovery overall satisfaction (web appendix G). Before leaving, participants were informed that they could take any number of coupons to share with their friends (by providing their first names). We recorded how many different types of coupons each participant took to share with their friends as a measure of brand referral behavior. Finally, participants were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

Compensation Liking. An independent-samples t-test revealed that ignored participants exhibited greater liking toward the textual coupon (format X) than did rejected participants ($M = 5.18$ vs. $M = 4.12$; $t(98) = -2.88$, $p = .005$; $d = .57$). In contrast, another t-test showed that rejected participants liked the visual coupon (format Y) more than did ignored participants ($M = 5.30$ vs. $M = 4.44$; $t(98) = 2.22$, $p = .029$; $d = .44$).

Real Coupon Choice. We observed participants' selections of coupons. A binary logistic regression on coupon choice (textual coupon = 1, visual coupon = 0) with exclusion type as an independent variable (rejected = –1, ignored = 1) revealed a significant main effect of exclusion type ($B = -1.07$, SE = .42, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.62$, $p = .01$). Specifically, 66% (40%) of the rejected (ignored) participants chose the visual coupon. In contrast, 60% (34%) of the ignored (rejected) participants chose the textual coupon.

Real Referral Behavior. We measured brand referral behavior according to the number of visual or textual coupons that participants took to share with friends. A t-test revealed that rejected and ignored participants took a similar number of coupons ($M = 4.40$ vs. $M = 4.46$; $t(98) = -.09$, $p = .93$), but exhibited distinct sharing behaviors toward the two coupons. Specifically, a t-test indicated that ignored participants took significantly more textual

coupons to share than did rejected participants ($M = 2.26$ vs. $M = 1.34$; $t(98) = -2.06$, $p = .04$; $d = .57$). Another t-test showed that rejected participants took marginally significantly more visual coupons to share than did ignored participants ($M = 3.06$ vs. $M = 2.20$; $t(98) = 1.91$, $p = .06$; $d = .38$).

Discussion. Study 3c demonstrates that rejected versus ignored retail exclusion influences real compensation choices and brand referral behaviors. Rejected (ignored) participants were more likely to choose a visual (textual) formatted coupon for their own use and to share with friends. Taken together, studies 3a–3c suggest that recovery efforts are more effective when the compensation matches the corresponding mental construals.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Everyone experiences social exclusion at some time, whether indirectly and implicitly, or directly and explicitly. Although we know that social exclusion powerfully affects emotions, cognitions, and behaviors, we know little about how consumers respond to exclusion in retail and service settings, especially how they react to being rejected or ignored by frontline staff. In six studies focusing on retail exclusions as hypothetical scenarios or real experiences, we provide compelling support that rejected (ignored) consumers form low-level, concrete (high-level, abstract) construals. Concrete (abstract) mindset further predicts preferences for compensation in visual (textual) (studies 1, 2a, 3b, and 3c) and tangible (intangible) formats (studies 2b and 3a). Also, empirical evidence indicates that explicit rejection (implicit ignoring) activates concrete (abstract) mindsets via interactivity with the source of exclusion and the vividness of imagery regarding the exclusionary experience (studies 2a and 2b), rather than feelings of power, financial constraint, general mood, and negative emotional intensity (studies 1 and 2b) or regulatory focus (study 2a). To increase the robustness, generalizability, and direct managerial applications of our research, we further test how the type of retail exclusion determines the most effective type of postexclusion recovery and find that compensation options and presentations should match the activated concrete or abstract mental construals (studies 3a–3c).

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Our research makes several important theoretical contributions to the social exclusion literature in consumer contexts, which has built on the hypothesis of threatened human needs (e.g., belongingness, control) to show how socially excluded consumers attempt to regain social connection and protect future belongingness (Dommer, Swaminathan, and Ahluwalia 2013; Duclos, Wan, and Jiang 2013; Lu and Sinha 2017; Mead et al. 2011; Wan, Xu, and Ding 2014), but has overlooked subtle differences in types of social exclusion, except for Lee and Shrum (2012). Given that social exclusion generates wide-ranging and sometimes contradictory physical and psychological effects, social exclusion research has recommended moving beyond general social exclusion and considering the nuances and consequences specific to particular types of exclusion (Lee and Shrum 2012; Molden et al. 2009; Smart Richman and Leary 2009; Williams 2009). We build on the limited work distinguishing explicit and implicit exclusion and demonstrate that explicit rejection and implicit ignoring have distinct psychological and mental abstraction effects. As one of the first to examine exclusion in service encounters, we go beyond social exclusion threats to social connections and document theoretically interesting and novel findings regarding nuances among different types of retail exclusion.

Although our research focuses on different retail experiences, we make no a priori predictions regarding how rejected and ignored consumers react differently, compared to accepted consumers or the no-exclusion neutral group. Our findings in study 1 indicate that both rejected and ignored retail exclusionary experiences influence construal levels. We believe that different mechanisms might underlie the difference between the rejected and accepted groups versus the difference between the ignored and accepted groups. For instance, both rejected and accepted consumers interact directly with frontline staff; thus, the valence of the experience (exclusion vs. inclusion) and the resultant differences in mood valence, feelings of power, or financial constraint might explain the construal-level difference between the rejected and accepted groups. But ignored and accepted experiences differ not only in the valence of the experience, but also in the directness of interaction with frontline staff. The valence of the experience or the directness of interaction with the source of exclusion, thus, might explain the construal-level difference between the ignored and accepted groups. However, the speculations are inconclusive and require further validation.

Our findings provide useful guidelines for managers who must decide how to win back offended customers after they experience service issues in both brick-and-mortar and online retail settings. Firms spend significant resources to recover from service failures. Therefore, researchers and practitioners should help them understand which types of compensation are best (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002; Smith et al. 1999). Our research suggests aligning recovery management with corrresponding construal levels activated when consumers are rejected or ignored. Study 3 shows that consumers generally expect retailers to offer appropriate reparations and are most satisfied when compensation aligns with high-level (low-level) construal in response to being ignored (rejected). Although some indicators of post-recovery store loyalty remained below the scale midpoint (e.g., intentions to recommend in study 3b), the scenario-

based exclusion manipulation and weak social ties with the firm might explain the findings. Indeed, the strength of social ties between customers and service providers influences the degree to which customer complaints impact loyalty (Umashankar, Ward, and Dhal 2017).

In brick-and-mortar stores, frontline staff responses will determine whether consumers feel rejected or ignored. For example, Myer, an Austrian department store, has acknowleged that many customers have felt ignored and frustrated when frontline staff failed to offer assistance (Castles 2018). Likewise, most businesses solicit customer feedback through email, social media brand pages, or live chats on company websites. Failure to provide speedy or positive responses to customer feedback or requests might cause customers to feel neglected or rejected.

Our research provides helpful recommendations indicating that companies should provide tangible (intangible) compensation options presented visually (verbally) in response to complaints about being rejected (ignored). In addition, when companies listen to consumer complaints about being rejected (ignored) in person or online, a concretely (abstractly) framed conversation might reduce negative feelings. Marketers can easily manipulate and control nuances of recovery management. For instance, a concretely framed customer apology might focus on how the company will prevent similar service failures in the future and how their actions will benefit affected customers. An abstractly framed apology might explain why the mistake occurred and promote overarching benefits for future consumption. Finally, companies sometimes reject unprofitable customers through customer demarketing or abandonment (Kotler and Levy 1971; Lepthien et al. 2017). Our findings suggest that communication messages at low-level construal would be most effective to lessen the negative impacts of customer demarketing.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our results suggest several interesting future research directions building on the associations of construal level, social distance, and self-control (Trope and Liberman 2010). For example, people who make choices for socially distant others tend to focus on high-level rather than low-level features (Liviatan, Trope, and Liberman 2008). Similarly, increased social distance faciliates verbal, abstract—rather than visual, concrete—information processing (Amit et al. 2009a). Therefore, future research might examine whether the type of retail exclusion affects preferences for gift cards that benefit the self over gift cards for someone else. In addition, low-level construals have been shown to generate poor self-control, as manifested by preferences for small immediate rewards rather than larger delayed rewards (Fujita et al. 2006). If being rejected indeed activates low-level mental construals, and thus poor self-control, rejected people should prefer more immediate gift cards of smaller value rather than more valuable gift cards that will come later. They should also be more likely to buy impulsively.

Abstract rather than concrete mindsets have been shown to alleviate social exclusion experiences (Pfundmair et al. 2015), but the research has not distinguished among the various types of social exclusion and has conceptualized abstract/concrete thinking styles as individual differences or situational primes, independent of social exclusion. Instead, we propose that being rejected and being ignored generate different perceptions of psychological distance and mindsets. In other words, we focus on how types of social exclusion affect construal levels with downstream effects on consumer decisions and behaviors, rather than on how rejected versus ostracized individuals might buffer against social exclusion, depending on their concrete versus abstract mindsets, which points to an avenue of future exploration.

Consumers often feel excluded in luxury stores. Indeed, if they try to purchase an aspirational brand and are met with rejection, their desires for the brand tend to increase (Ward and Dahl 2014). Would experiences of being rejected or ignored affect reactions to an aspirational brand? If consumers feel ignored when trying to purchase an aspirational brand, would they think more abstractly and try to distance themselves from the brand? Additionally, would brand loyalty moderate the effects of exclusion types? These questions suggest that future research could further investigate boundary conditions for the retail exclusion effects on construal levels. In addition, future research might examine consumer reactions to positive, inclusive interactions with frontline staff, such as through direct recognition or indirect acknowledgment. We expect that explicit (implicit) positive inclusion signals would activate concrete (abstract) consumer mindsets because direct (indirect) positive interchanges should evoke close (distant) psychological distance perceptions.

Finally, across all studies, we relied mainly on college students, who might be unrepresentative of the general population. Future research could extend our findings for different population segments and across various cultures. Additionally, we used QR codes as a visual format of presenting compensation information for internet-savy young consumers, partly millennials and generation Z. However, the technology-mediated aspect of using QR codes might hinder other population segments such as baby boomers. Future studies might further examine how the construal-mediated effects on compensation preference depend on the perceived feasibility and ease of use of QR codes for various consumer segments.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

All studies were designed and analyzed jointly by the two authors. The first author collected the data for all main

studies (study 1: fall 2018; study 2a: spring 2018; study 2b, 3a, and 3b: fall 2018; study 3c: spring 2019) at Florida International University. The second author collected the data for the pilot study (summer 2016) and all the pretests (spring and summer 2017) on Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

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