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When Brands Push Us Away: How Brand Rejection Enhances In-Group Brand Preference

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Abstract: Every interaction between a brand and its consumers can shape their brand attitudes and purchase decisions. Brand rejection is the rejection or neglect that consumers experience when trying to connect with a brand, and it may have far-reaching effects on consumer psychology and behavior. Against this backdrop, consumer response to brand rejection has become a concern in interactive marketing. This study investigated how consumers cope with brand rejection by satisfying their need to reduce uncertainty based on the uncertainty–identity theory. This study examined the effect of brand rejection on consumers’ in-group brands (e.g., local brands) preference and the corresponding mediating mechanism and boundary condition through four experiments. The results demonstrated that consumers who experienced brand rejection were less likely to purchase products from that brand and showed a greater preference for other in-group brands than out-group brands (foreign brands). This relationship was mediated by consumers’ sense of control. Moreover, brand familiarity moderated the relationship between brand rejection and sense of control, affecting consumers’ in-group brand preference. These findings expand the research area of brand rejection and in-group brand preference and provide a practical reference for the development of local brands.



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1. Introduction

In the contemporary commercial landscape, a brand represents more than merely a product or service; it also represents an emotional and trust-based bond between a company and its consumers. However, during actual market operations, brand rejection occurs frequently and has a significant impact on consumer brand preference. Brand rejection refers to consumers receiving messages or actions of rejection from the brand during the purchasing process, such as salespeople ignoring or rejecting consumers’ in-store requests or brands’ arrogant slogans making consumers feel excluded from their target audience. This rejection may stem from the brand’s service attitude or from marketing strategies that create a psychological gap for consumers. Effective interactive marketing can help brands promptly identify and resolve issues encountered by consumers during the purchasing process. For instance, Grégoire found that, when consumers received positive responses and effective solutions in brand interactions, their trust and loyalty toward the brand significantly increased [1]. Conversely, a brand neglecting or mishandling these interactions could exacerbate consumers’ negative emotions, leading them to turn to other brands.

Based on the social identity theory, brands can be categorized into in-group and out-group categories. An in-group brand is closely related to the group to which it belongs, such as gender and ethnicity, whereas an out-group brand is not related to the group to which it belongs [2,3]. Previous research has suggested that consumers are more likely

to favor in-group than out-group brands when purchasing products; this tendency is known as consumer in-group brand preference. This preference occurs because in-group brands can help consumers convey personal messages regarding the type of person they are, who they are, and what group they belong to [3,4]. Previous studies have revealed that certain types of consumers, such as those with an independent self-concept [3], high uniqueness-seeking motives [5], and high power distance belief [6,7], tend to prefer in-group brands. Studies have found that external events evoke consumers' in-group brand preference. For instance, social identity threats drive consumers with high collective self-esteem to purchase corresponding identity-related in-group brand products to strengthen their social identity [8]. Mortality salience drives consumers to buy local brands by evoking their cultural worldview defense mechanism [9]. However, studies on the effects of certain events that occur in consumption scenarios, such as brand exclusion, on consumers' in-group brand preference are lacking. Therefore, this study explored the impact of brand rejection on consumers' in-group brand preference from the perspective of interactive marketing, aiming to provide insights for corporate brand management.

1.1. The Effects of Brand Rejection

Humans have a need to belong [10]; therefore, situations that imply rejection or lack of acceptance can create a sense of threat [11]. Williams' model of rejection reveals that rejection affects individuals' responses and behaviors [12]. However, previous studies on rejection have mainly focused on the sources of rejection, either personal or social, and have paid little attention to rejection that consumers face from brands [13]. Some recent studies have combined the concept of social rejection with the brand dilution theory and defined brand rejection as a social situation in which a brand explicitly rejects a consumer's use of the brand; this definition was used to examine consumers' emotional and behavioral responses to brand rejection [14]. We further define brand rejection as rejection messages or behavior that the brand conveys to the consumer, such as not acceding to the consumer's request, refusing to provide services or products, and other behaviors that make the consumer feel unwelcome. Hu suggests that the brand, brand salesperson, and target consumer can be sources of brand rejection [15]. Previous studies have suggested that arrogant brands or brands with arrogant slogans convey a sense of arrogance, narcissism, and rejection, threatening consumers' self-perception and changing consumers' psychology [16]. For instance, brands' arrogant slogans (e.g., Mercedes's slogan, "The best or nothing") may cause consumers to feel rejected by the brand, which may affect their engagement with the brand [17]. Brand salespersons are in direct contact with consumers in the process of brand information transfer [18]. They often convey the brand's value to consumers [19], and their attitude represents the brand's attitude conveyed to consumers [20]; therefore, salespersons with arrogant attitudes cause consumers to perceive brand rejection [21]. Finally, the brand's target consumers constitute the brand community; brands such as Harley, Apple, and others use target consumers to establish the brand community, and the brand community members limit the number and type of consumers who enter the brand community to protect the brand's uniqueness [22]. Thus, rejection by the target consumers causes other consumers to perceive brand rejection. Thus, in the following empirical studies, we employ corresponding scenarios as the manipulations of brand rejection.

Previous studies have found that brand rejection may have both negative and positive impacts on brands. Brand rejection can be perceived as a personal threat, resulting in affective responses similar to those of social rejection. In such situations, consumers may exhibit negative attitudes and lower purchase intentions toward the brands to cope with the negative affective state caused by the brand rejection [14]. Conversely, brand content strategies have differing impacts on consumer attitudes toward the brand [23]. For instance, some studies have found that brand rejection can increase consumers' perceived status and purchase intention toward high-status luxury brands and consumers' desired brands [21]. This is because, after the rejection, the consumer tries to establish affinity with that brand by purchasing the product and reduces the dissonance of the purchase by elevating their

brand attitude. Some researchers have attempted to determine the boundary conditions for the positive and negative effects of brand rejection by introducing moderating variables, such as the legitimacy of brand rejection [15].

However, the above studies have mainly focused on how brand rejection affects consumers' attitudes toward brands that exhibit rejection and have not yet explored the effect of rejection from one brand on consumers' attitudes toward other brands. As brand rejection often leads consumers to switch to other brands [24,25], the types of brands that consumers prefer after experiencing brand rejection must be investigated. Therefore, this study categorized brands into in-group and out-group ones based on the relationship between brands and consumers' social identity and explored the effect of brand rejection on consumer preference.

This study expands on the existing literature in several ways. First, previous research on brand rejection has mainly focused on luxury brands [21]. Mass brands differ from luxury brands in that they are generally inclusive, affordable, and accessible [26]. Thus, consumer responses to rejection from mass brands may differ from their responses to rejection from luxury brands; therefore, this study explored the impact of brand rejection from mass brands on consumer behavior. Second, previous studies have mainly focused on how brand rejection affects consumers' purchase intention toward the brands that rejected them [15], whereas the effect on consumers' purchase intention toward and preference for other similar brands has not been explored. Therefore, this study investigated the impact of brand rejection on consumers' purchase intention toward other brands in the same category, aiming to provide a reference for future brand rejection research. Finally, previous studies have mainly examined the effect of social rejection on consumer behavior [27], overlooking the differences in consumer responses to brand rejection. Previous studies have shown that social rejection prompts individuals to compensate for the lack of a sense of belonging through consumption [28], prompting a broad range of general compensatory consumption behaviors [29]. Conversely, brand rejection stems more from negative experiences in brand interactions, which may exert a unique impact on consumers' purchase behaviors toward specific brands [24,25]. The key difference is that social rejection tends to lead to changes in an individual's consumption behavior across multiple domains, whereas the impact of brand rejection causes changes in attitudes toward the specific brand, which may shift to other brands. Therefore, this study examined the psychological and behavioral changes and coping mechanisms among consumers following brand rejection.

1.2. Low Sense of Control Following Brand Rejection

Brand rejection is a negative event that causes consumers to feel rejected and triggers various psychological responses, such as angry feelings and aggressive behaviors [30], anxiety and depression [12], and a reduced sense of self-worth [31]. This study investigated the impact of brand rejection on consumer in-group brand preference from the perspective of sense of control. Sense of control refers to the extent to which an individual perceives, predicts, interprets, and influences the occurrence and development of external events [32]. An individual's sense of control is typically reflected in two aspects: personal mastery, which is the perceived ability to control the occurrence of events, and perceived constraints, which is the perceived degree of restriction by the external environment [27]. We propose that brand rejection reduces consumers' sense of control, as experiencing brand rejection has various effects on the sense of control. First, brand rejection can lead to identity damage. Consumers expect to express themselves or enhance their identity by consuming a particular brand [33]. However, brand rejection prevents this behavior from occurring. Self-expression is a key method for consumers to maintain their self-identity and social connections. When this process is inhibited, consumers may feel a loss of control over social situations and self-image, resulting in a weakened sense of control over the environment [31]. Second, brand rejection infringes upon consumers' freedom of choice in the marketplace, and consumers lose the opportunity to control their consumption experience by freely choosing brands. The self-determination theory indicates that individuals who

perceive that their behavioral choices are restricted experience psychological resistance, which is accompanied by a reduced sense of control [34]. Finally, brand rejection can weaken consumers' sense of control by triggering feelings of emotional powerlessness. Brand rejection creates negative emotions, such as frustration, shame, and anger [35], which cause consumers to perceive an inability to influence the brand's behavior or change the status quo and consequently feel psychologically helpless.

Therefore, we argue that brand rejection undermines consumers' sense of control through identity damage, limiting their free choice, and provoking feelings of powerlessness.

1.3. Pursuing In-Group Brands to Compensate for Threat to Control Following Brand Rejection

Studies have shown that the lack of a sense of control leads consumers to adopt a variety of behaviors to compensate psychologically, such as restoring a sense of control over their environment by impulse shopping or choosing brands that have a higher social status or are more expressive of their self-identity [36]. The lack of a sense of control may lead consumers to pursue in-group brands. The psychological significance of a sense of control for an individual lies not only in the fulfillment of the individual's sense of agency and competence but also in the alteration of outcomes and situations to counteract internal uncertainty [37]. According to the compensatory control theory, when sense of control is threatened, individuals seek a variety of methods to restore their sense of control, such as pursuing certainty [38]. As brand rejection is a form of social rejection, it poses a threat to the consumer's social identity; thus, the consumer restores their sense of control by seeking certainty in terms of social identity. The uncertainty–identity theory states that identity-related uncertainty motivates people to identify with social groups and that group identification and social categorization of self and others satisfy the need to reduce uncertainty. Previous research based on the uncertainty–identity theory has shown that in-group identity provides individuals with the resources to reduce uncertainty caused by external threats, as in-groups provide a sense of belonging and security [39,40]. Consumers engaging with an in-group brand may feel a sense of relationship formation [41]. Therefore, we propose that consumers who face a lack of control due to brand rejection switch their preference to in-group brands that provide greater identity certainty than out-group brands.

In summary, we propose that consumers who experience brand rejection perceive a lack of control associated with identity uncertainty, which drives them to pursue identity certainty to restore their sense of control. As in-group identity provides resources to reduce uncertainty and restore sense of control [40], consumers who experience brand rejection seek brands associated with their in-group identity. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Brand rejection increases consumer preference for in-group brands rather than out-group brands.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Sense of control mediates the effect of brand rejection on consumers' in-group brand preference.*

1.4. The Moderating Role of Brand Familiarity

Consumers experience brand rejection in daily consumption situations in multiple scenarios. They may experience rejection from both familiar and unfamiliar brands. Brand familiarity may moderate the relationship between brand rejection and consumer reactions. Brand familiarity is not only reflected in consumers' knowledge of the product but also in their affective associations with the brand [42,43]. Higher brand familiarity is associated with stronger emotional intimacy with the brand, greater importance of the brand to the consumer, and greater trusts toward the brand [44,45]. Consequently, consumers with high brand familiarity are less likely to anticipate experiencing brand rejection. Being rejected by a familiar brand disrupts the original stable relationship between the consumer and brand. In such situations, consumers are self-doubtful and unlikely to accept the rejection [46],

causing them to experience uncertainty and deficiency in their sense of control [47]. Thus, they exhibit a higher preference for in-group brands to repair their sense of control. In contrast, consumers rejected by an unfamiliar brand experience less self-doubt and threat to their sense of control, as their emotional connection to the brand is weak. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Brand familiarity moderates the effect of brand rejection on sense of control and in-group brand preference. Specifically, consumers who experience rejection from familiar brands perceive a lower sense of control and show a stronger in-group brand preference than those who experience rejection from unfamiliar brands.*

The theoretical framework of this study is presented in Figure 1. To test the hypotheses, this study designed four experiments: Studies 1 and 2 examined the main effect of brand rejection on in-group brand preference, Study 3 examined the mediating role of sense of control, and Study 4 examined the moderating role of brand familiarity.

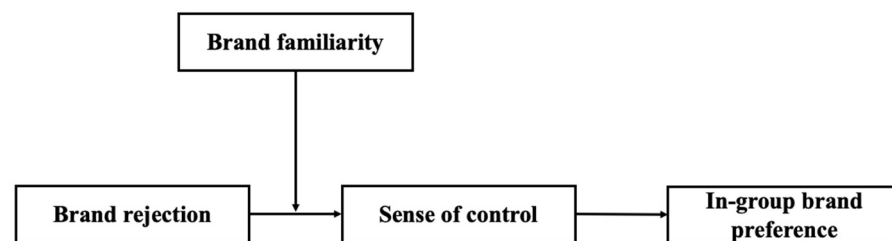


Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

2. Materials and Methods

Previous studies have shown that consumers who belong to multiple in-groups and different in-group brands represent different in-group identities, such as regional in-group brands that represent the characteristics of a certain region [5], community in-group brands that provide products that members of the community identify with [48], and local in-group brands that represent the same cultural and national in-groups. Local brands have developed in local markets and are often closely associated with local culture, traditions, and consumer needs [49]. They tend to evoke a sense of belonging to a group among consumers and are closely associated with their national identity, which is often considered an in-group [50]. This study focused on local brands as in-group brands because national in-group identity is more widely representative and suitable for randomly selected samples than regional and community in-group identities, and the findings could be generalizable and practical for marketing practice.

2.1. Study 1

Study 1 addressed H1 by asking consumers to imagine a brand rejection situation caused by a brand salesperson and then measuring their preference for in-group and out-group brands.

2.1.1. Pilot Study

Study 1 used purchasing a computer as the experimental scenario. As Study 1 was conducted in China, we chose Lenovo, a typical local brand in China, as the in-group brand, whereas Apple and Dell were used as out-group brands. The Pilot Study aimed to test whether computers from Apple, Dell, and Lenovo could be used as products in Study 1 and evaluated whether the three brands differed in terms of quality, reputation, and status. We recruited 84 participants from the same sample as in Study 1 and asked them to rate the quality, reputation, and status of Apple, Dell, and Lenovo computers on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = very low; 7 = very high). A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) found no statistically significant differences in quality ($M_{Apple} = 6.04$,

$M_{Dell} = 5.86$, $M_{Lenovo} = 5.80$, $F(2, 81) = 1.629$, $p = 0.199$), reputation ($M_{Apple} = 5.38$, $M_{Dell} = 5.08$, $M_{Lenovo} = 5.18$, $F(2, 81) = 1.871$, $p = 0.157$), or status ($M_{Apple} = 4.60$, $M_{Dell} = 4.50$, $M_{Lenovo} = 4.27$, $F(2, 81) = 2.183$, $p = 0.116$) between Apple, Dell, and Lenovo computers. Therefore, we chose these three brands as the experimental materials for Study 1.

2.1.2. Main Study Participants and Procedure

Study 1 used a one-way between-subjects design (brand rejection: rejection group vs. control group). We recruited 130 participants from the Credamo survey platform in China ($M_{age} = 30.58$ years, $SD = 3.76$; 44.6% of the participants were male). The participants were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and received the corresponding manipulations.

All participants imagined a situation in which they needed to purchase a computer and entered an Apple retail store to obtain information about the products. Participants in the brand rejection group were asked to imagine that no salesperson provided voluntary help and that when they asked a salesperson for help, their response was arrogant and perfunctory. Participants in the control group were asked to imagine that an Apple salesperson actively asked about their needs, helped them find their desired computer, and answered their questions in detail. Subsequently, we measured the participants' willingness to buy an Apple computer by asking, "How likely are you to buy an Apple computer?" Responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very likely).

We then asked the participants to imagine two alternative brands (i.e., Lenovo and Dell) and informed them that they could choose and rate their preference between these two brands on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = explicitly wanting to purchase a Dell computer; 7 = explicitly wanting to purchase a Lenovo computer). Subsequently, to test whether brand rejection was successfully manipulated, the participants answered a manipulation test question ("How strongly do you feel rejected by Apple?"). Responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). When the participants completed the task, we explained that the above scenarios were simulated and convenient for the experiment and did not represent the true service attitude of these brands.

2.1.3. Results

Manipulation Check. The participants in the rejection condition reported a higher feeling of rejection in the experimental scenario than those in the control condition ($M_{brand\ rejection} = 4.34$, $M_{control} = 2.72$, $t(128) = 5.186$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the validity of the brand rejection manipulation.

Main effects. The results showed that the participants in the brand rejection group showed a lower willingness to purchase the Apple computer than those in the control group ($M_{brand\ rejection} = 3.33$, $M_{control} = 4.89$, $t(128) = -5.109$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that brand rejection decreased their willingness to purchase the brand from which they felt rejected. Moreover, the results showed that participants in the brand rejection group showed a higher preference for the in-group brand (i.e., Lenovo) than the out-group brand (i.e., Dell) compared to those in the control group ($M_{brand\ rejection} = 4.52$, $SD = 1.30$, $M_{control} = 3.86$, $SD = 1.39$, $F(1, 128) = 7.85$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, H1 was supported.

2.1.4. Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that brand rejection reduced the participants' purchase intentions for the brand that rejected them and increased their preference for another in-group brand rather than an out-group brand. However, this study had several limitations. In Study 1, the brand that rejected the participants was an out-group brand, as Apple is not a Chinese brand. Thus, the reason for the participants' preference for a national rather than foreign brand may be due to rejection by a foreign brand, and the results may differ if they were rejected by a local brand. Therefore, in Study 2, we used a local brand as the source of rejection to address this limitation.

2.2. Study 2

Study 2 changed the brand rejection scenario to include a local brand instead and examined whether this increased consumers' preference for another local brand over a foreign brand.

2.2.1. Participants and Procedure

Study 2 employed a one-way between-subjects design (brand rejection: rejection group vs. control group). We recruited 178 MBA students from a Chinese University and randomly assigned them to two groups ($M_{age} = 30.15$ years, $SD = 4.67$, 44.9% of the participants were male). The participants were given a small gift as a token of appreciation after completing the study.

The participants were asked to imagine that they needed to buy a cell phone and entered a local Huawei retail store. The brand rejection manipulation situation and the measure of the dependent variable were the same as in Study 1, except that the two alternative brands were changed to the local Xiaomi brand as the in-group brand and the foreign Samsung brand as the out-group brand. A Pilot Study with 64 participants found no statistically significant differences in quality, reputation, or status between Huawei, Samsung, and Xiaomi. Subsequently, the participants were presented with the same manipulation question as in Study 1 (with the brand names revised) and informed that the scenario was an experimental manipulation.

2.2.2. Results

Manipulation Check. The experimental data indicated that participants in the brand rejection group reported significantly higher exclusion scores than those in the control group ($M_{brand\ rejection} = 4.86$, $M_{control} = 2.76$, $t(176) = 3.13$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the brand rejection manipulation was successful.

Main effects. The results demonstrated that the brand rejection group showed a lower willingness to purchase Huawei, which was the source of brand rejection, than the control group ($M_{brand\ rejection} = 3.75$, $M_{control} = 5.26$, $t(176) = -10.98$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, participants in the brand rejection group exhibited a higher preference for the in-group brand (Xiaomi) than the out-group brand (Samsung) compared with those in the control group ($M_{brand\ rejection} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.43$, $M_{control} = 3.32$, $SD = 1.45$, $F(1, 176) = 5.77$, $p < 0.05$).

2.2.3. Discussion

Study 2 revealed that the participants were more likely to purchase in-group than out-group brands despite experiencing brand rejection from another in-group brand. The results of Studies 1 and 2 suggest that brand rejection from both in-group and out-group brands has a robust impact on consumers' in-group brand preference.

2.3. Study 3

Study 3 examined the mediating role of sense of control and presented a different brand rejection scenario, in which brand rejection was from a brand slogan rather than a salesperson.

2.3.1. Participants and Procedure

Study 3 used a one-way between-subjects design (brand rejection: rejection group versus control group). We recruited 108 college students from a Chinese university ($M_{age} = 18.88$ years, $SD = 1.07$, 39.8% of the participants were male) and randomly assigned them to two groups. Based on a previous study, the brand rejection was manipulated using an arrogant advertising slogan [10,21]. Participants in the brand rejection group were presented with a picture of Nike-brand sneakers with a brief description containing the following arrogant slogan: "Nike sneakers, you don't deserve them". Participants in the control group were presented with a picture of Nike-brand sneakers with a brief description that did not contain the arrogant slogan. The participants were then asked to rate their willingness to purchase the Nike brand on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much).

To measure in-group brand preference, Li Ning and Converse were chosen as the in-group and out-group brands, respectively. A Pilot Study with 76 participants revealed no significant differences in quality, reputation, or status between Nike, Li Ning, and Converse sneakers. In the main study, we asked the participants to rate their preference between Li Ning and Converse sneakers on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = explicitly wanting to purchase Converse sneakers; 7 = explicitly wanting to purchase Li Ning sneakers). We then measured participants' sense of control using a three-item scale adapted from Fritsche [51]: "How helpless do you feel?", "How much do you feel that you have lost control of your surroundings?", and "How much do you feel powerless to control the occurrence of the above situations?" The scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.863$). Responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). Finally, the participants were asked to complete the manipulation question ("How strongly do you feel rejected by Nike?"). Responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). The participants were then informed that the advertisement was fake and was created as an experimental manipulation.

2.3.2. Results

Manipulation Check. The results showed that participants in the brand rejection group reported significantly higher exclusion scores than those in the control group ($M_{\text{brand rejection}} = 3.98$, $M_{\text{control}} = 2.39$, $t(106) = 4.636$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the brand rejection manipulation was successful.

Main effects. The results demonstrated that the participants in the brand rejection group showed a lower purchase intention for Nike sneakers than those in the control group ($M_{\text{Brand Rejection}} = 3.87$, $M_{\text{Control}} = 4.61$, $t(106) = -2.356$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, they had a higher in-group brand preference than those in the control group ($M_{\text{brand rejection}} = 4.94$, $SD = 1.39$, $M_{\text{control}} = 3.96$, $SD = 1.61$, $F(1, 106) = 11.45$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H1 was supported.

Mediation effect. To examine the mediating role of sense of control (H2), we performed a mediation analysis using Model 4 of the PROCESS developed by Hayes [51], with brand rejection (rejection group = 1; control group = 0) as the independent variable, in-group brand preference as the dependent variable, and sense of control as the mediator. The results revealed a significant mediation ($b = 0.216$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI: [0.04, 0.52]), indicating that sense of control mediated the effect of brand rejection on in-group brand preference. Thus, H2 was supported.

2.3.3. Discussion

Study 3 supported H1 and H2, indicating that brand rejection threatened the participants' sense of control and caused them to prefer in-group brands to restore their sense of control. In Study 4, we explored the boundary conditions of this effect by introducing brand familiarity as a moderator.

2.4. Study 4

Study 4 addressed H3. We predicted that brand familiarity would moderate the effect of brand rejection on consumers' sense of control and in-group brand preference. Specifically, consumers familiar with a brand were expected to experience a greater lack of control after rejection, thereby increasing their preference for in-group brands.

2.4.1. Participants and Procedure

Study 4 adopted a one-way between-subjects design (brand rejection: rejection group vs. control group). We recruited 104 college students ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.42$ years, $SD = 0.759$, 37.5% of the participants were male) from a Chinese university. The participants received a small gift as a token of appreciation after completing the study.

The UNIQLO brand was selected as the source of brand rejection. Before participating in the brand rejection task, participants were asked to rate their familiarity with UNIQLO on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = very unfamiliar; 7 = very familiar). These scores served as

moderating variables in Study 4. The participants were randomly assigned to two groups. Participants in the brand rejection group (vs. the control group) were told that UNIQLO was considering opening a store near their university; after conducting market research and analysis, UNIQLO found that the university students were unsuitable (vs. suitable) as target consumers and abandoned (vs. were about to push forward with) this plan.

After the manipulation through the brand rejection, participants were asked to rate their likelihood of purchasing UNIQLO on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = very unlikely; 7 = very likely). To measure in-group brand preference, Semir and H&M were chosen as the in-group and out-group brands, respectively. A Pilot Study with 60 participants revealed no significant differences between the UNIQLO, H&M, and Semir brands in terms of quality, reputation, and status. In the main study, we asked the participants to rate their preference between Semir and H&M on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = explicitly wanting to purchase H&M, 7 = explicitly wanting to purchase Semir). Subsequently, sense of control was measured using the same items as in Study 3, and the manipulation test item ("How much do you feel rejected by UNIQLO?") was presented, with responses on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much).

2.4.2. Results

Manipulation Check. The results showed that the participants in the brand rejection group reported higher brand rejection than those in the control group ($M_{\text{brand rejection}} = 4.23$, $M_{\text{control}} = 3.15$, $t(102) = 2.907$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the brand rejection manipulation was successful.

Main effects. The results revealed that the brand rejection group had a lower willingness to purchase UNIQLO than the control group ($M_{\text{brand rejection}} = 3.35$, $M_{\text{control}} = 4.71$, $t(102) = -5.813$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, they were more inclined to prefer the in-group brand (Semir) to the out-group brand (H&M) than the control group ($M_{\text{brand rejection}} = 5.08$, $M_{\text{control}} = 3.85$, $F(1, 102) = 13.83$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H1 was supported.

The moderated mediation effect. The moderated mediation was examined using Hayes' mediated moderation effects test model (Model 8) [52]. The results demonstrated that sense of control mediated the interactive effect of "brand rejection $\times$ brand familiarity" on in-group brand preference ($b = 0.164$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.37]). Furthermore, a simple slope analysis revealed that the mediating effect of sense of control was significant when consumers had high familiarity (+SD) with the rejected brand ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.27$, 95% CI: [0.34, 1.41]). However, when consumers' familiarity with the brand was low (−SD), the mediating effect of sense of control was not significant ($b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.20$, 95% CI: [−0.16, 0.60]). These results suggested that brand rejection threatened the participants' sense of control and increased their in-group brand preference only if they were familiar with the brand that rejected them. Thus, H3 was supported.

3. General Discussion

This study explored the effect of brand rejection on in-group brand preference using a local brand as an in-group brand and examined the underlying psychological mechanism and boundary conditions by introducing sense of control as a mediating variable and brand familiarity as a moderator. All hypotheses were supported.

3.1. Theoretical Contributions

Previous research on brand rejection has focused on luxury brands, and few studies have explored the impact of brand rejection from mass brands. Studies have shown that, after being rejected by a brand with luxury product, consumers are more inclined to purchase that brand [21]. However, this study found differing results compared to previous research in the study of brand rejection from mass brands; specifically, consumers who experienced brand rejection of mass brands had lower purchase intentions for mass brands and greater preference for similar brands in the in-group. These results imply that

brand rejection from ordinary brands and luxury brands may have different effects and underlying mechanisms.

Furthermore, previous studies on consumer switching behaviors have focused on the general switching behaviors due to social exclusion, with an emphasis on the ability to break the status quo constraints as a result of switching decisions or behaviors. For instance, Su et al. suggested that switching behaviors could help consumers regain control by reducing perceived constraints [27]. Conversely, this study focused on the specific effects of brand rejection, where consumers exhibited switching behaviors with a specific direction—a preference for other similar in-group brands—and consumers responded to brand rejection by purchasing in-group brands to increase their social identity and restore their control.

Finally, previous studies have focused on changes in consumer attitudes toward the rejecting brand after brand rejection [14,15,21]; however, they have failed to adequately explain how brand rejection affects consumers' attitudinal preference toward other brands. This study explored this research gap and found that brand rejection deprived consumers of their sense of control and that consumers tended to restore this sense of control by purchasing other brands within the cohort. Moreover, this study revealed the specific direction of such switching behavior in the field of brand rejection, that is, consumers responded to the rejection they faced by preferring in-group brands over out-group brands, providing a new psychological perspective on research about brand rejection.

3.2. Managerial Implications

Although consumption is a bilateral communication that emphasizes active consumer participation in the marketing process [53], our findings provide new practical implications and managerial perspectives. First, some brands use brand rejection to strategically improve their perceived status and consumer desire. However, by combining the findings of this study with existing literature, it can be seen that such a strategy may only be effective for luxury brands that consumers crave. For ordinary brands, this strategy reduces consumers' willingness to purchase and makes them switch to other in-group brands. Particularly for loyal consumers, avoiding situations in which consumers feel rejected by a brand is important. This is because consumers who are familiar with brands are more likely to be negatively affected by brand rejection. Our findings also provide positive information for local brands. Previous studies have suggested that Chinese consumers prefer foreign brands to domestic brands even if their quality remains unchanged [54]. Our findings indicate that local brands can improve consumers' preference for them through the following points. First, brands should enhance consumers' emotional identity and sense of belonging to the brand. By converting consumers into brand fans, brands can promote a strong identification of consumers with the brand [55]. Local brands should clarify their brand positioning, strengthen the emotional connection with consumers, and enhance the emotional resonance of consumers through storytelling and transmission of cultural values. Brands should strengthen the sense of consumer participation through online and offline activities, such as organizing local cultural festivals, social media interaction, and so on, to create a local brand community and enhance the sense of belonging and brand loyalty of the in-group [56–58]. Moreover, they should enhance the sense of control, providing highly customized product and service options, such as allowing consumers to design products based on local elements, and so on, to allow consumers to make choices based on their own needs and preference and feel in control of the brand. Brands should conduct interactive marketing to encourage consumers to participate in product development, design, or advertising creation so that they can feel a sense of influence over the brand, making consumers co-creators of the brand and enhancing their sense of control. Finally, they should strengthen brand familiarity and enhance brand loyalty. A unique brand memory point can be formed through consistent and easily recognizable brand symbols, slogans, and packaging (e.g., designing brand logos using local elements or designing advertising

ideas using local customs and habits) to allow consumers to develop a sense of cognitive familiarity with the brand after multiple encounters.

3.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study had some limitations. First, this study mainly used local brands as in-group brands. Whether brand rejection can improve consumers' preference for regional and community brands needs to be further explored. Furthermore, this study focuses on brand rejection of common daily necessities; however, the effects of brand rejection may vary significantly across different types of products. Future research could explore the effects of brand rejection on consumer behavior in other commodity categories, such as service products or high-tech products, to reveal the specific mechanisms by which commodity type plays a role in brand rejection responses.

Second, this study selected local brands as in-group brands; future research could further explore the differential responses of different types of in-groups in the face of brand rejection. Different in-groups, such as those based on interest, occupation, social class, or subculture, may exhibit different behavioral and attitudinal responses following brand rejection. Furthermore, this study focused on Chinese consumers; the impact of brand rejection on in-group brand preference may differ in countries where brand loyalty is low or where national identity is less prominent in consumer decision-making. Therefore, future research could explore the impact of brand rejection on consumer behavior in different cultural contexts through cross-cultural comparisons to more fully understand the global applicability of this phenomenon.

Third, this study proposed brand familiarity as a boundary condition that influences the entire process, and other boundary conditions are worth exploring, such as collective self-esteem, as previous studies have shown that consumers with high collective self-esteem will be more inclined to purchase in-group brands to maintain the consistency of the whole group [7]. Therefore, in the case of brand rejection, whether boundary conditions such as collective self-esteem affect consumers' intention to purchase an in-group brand deserves further investigation.

Finally, this study focused on short-term, situation-specific brand rejection, whereas long-term rejection may involve the accumulation of persistent negative emotions and a long-term break in the relationship with the brand. Future research could further explore the differences between the two and their different impacts on consumer behavior. Furthermore, this study used an experimental method to simulate the situation, and the consumer decision-making process in real environments tends to be more complex. Future research could adopt a more ecologically valid research method to further explore the dynamics of consumer decision-making in different situations to delve deeper into the impact of brand rejection in real consumption situations and to more accurately understand the behavioral and psychological responses of consumers in the actual decision-making process.

4. Conclusions

This study constructed a mediated moderation model that explained brand rejection, which led to an increase in consumer preference for an in-group brand from the perspective of the uncertainty–identity theory. When consumers experience brand rejection, their purchase intention toward brand-conducting rejection decreases, as does their sense of control; consumers recover their sense of control by increasing their preference for the in-group brand. Brand familiarity moderates the relationship between brand rejection and sense of control, and this moderating relationship further influences consumers' in-group brand preference through the mediating role of the sense of control.

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