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THE PICKY CONSUMER

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ABSTRACT

We live in an age of a “picky pandemic.” Consumers are now more demanding of products, services, and brands than ever before. Reports indicate that while global consumers have more disposable income and are generally more willing to spend money than ever before, many consumers feel as if there are not enough choices that fit their exact preferences (Hendriksz 2016). The state of consumer pickiness is becoming a relevant topic to marketers and consumer researchers; hundreds of consumer-generated online discussions are documenting feelings of pickiness and the challenges for agents making decisions for picky people (e.g., Freeman 2014). Yet despite the construct’s relevance and ubiquity, no research in the marketing literature has rigorously defined what it means for a consumer to be “picky” or explored the implications of consumer pickiness for decision making. While pickiness is related to high preference and choice selectivity, existing constructs such as a maximizer or perfectionist don’t fully encompass what people mean when they identify a picky consumer. My research begins the conversation of how to identify picky consumers and what such pickiness means for decision making for both agents and the self. This dissertation’s main focus is to discuss what pickiness is and is not as well as uncover the relationship between pickiness and its related constructs.

In the first essay, I explore how consumers view picky others in a giver-recipient context. In this essay, I investigate how other people perceive picky gift recipients and how expectations of recipient pickiness lead givers to alter their gift giving behavior. I find that pickiness is seen as a negative trait when used as a label for a gift recipient. I show that gift givers uniquely expect picky recipients to be dissatisfied with their gifts and thus less likely to keep them. This in turn triggers agent decision makers to want to invest less thought, effort, and money into gift giving
for picky people. All in all, my findings show how consumers negotiate the burden of shopping for someone whom they anticipate will not like their choice. It also helps us to develop an initial understanding of how picky people are perceived by others. This essay has implications for how people view and interact with picky individuals and uncovers possible resolutions in agent decision making situations when one player is picky.

To shift the focus from the “other” to the “self” perspective, in the second essay, I define the picky shopper and detail the development of the “Picky Shopper Scale,” a scale designed to measure pickiness as an individual difference using standard scale development techniques. I establish that pickiness is determined by two major factors: precise preferences and flaw sensitivity. I show that both factors (measured in the scale) uniquely contribute to the latent construct of pickiness. Furthermore, I confirm that pickiness (captured by the scale) is associated with several downstream consequences, such as forming smaller consideration sets and placing higher importance weights on a wider range of product attributes.

In the third essay, I test the relationship between pickiness and the rejection of promotional activities, particularly the rejection of “free” appeals. New to this essay, I establish evidence that people who are primed to feel “picky” in experimental settings feel more psychologically burdened by consumption. Picky people perceive psychological costs in consuming things that are given out with various promotions but which may not be exactly what they want. This triggers them to reject these free items, pay a premium for preference-matching items, and dispose of free items at a faster rate. It appears that picky people, who have precise attribute preferences and are hypersensitive to negative features, see potential consumption costs associated with a larger range of attributes (those rankable and unrankable by levels), which diminishes the weight of a zero price to purchase.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Need for Research on Consumer Pickiness

Do you know a “picky” consumer? Whether relatable to the self or someone else, the picky consumer is ubiquitous. Pickiness describes a consumer trait across a diverse range of contexts, and people seem to have a good grasp on identifying picky behavior and identifying picky people. For example, Match.com experts recently declared that daters are currently in a “picky pandemic” (Harris 2015). “Picky” has been used to describe investors selecting stocks (Stansberry Research 2006) and to companies selecting new recruits (USA Today 2010). While product quality and assortment is better than ever, Catalina Marketing (2012) categorized shoppers as extremely picky about what items they consider and purchase. In May 2015, based on an Accenture report consisting of 24,000 respondents in 33 countries, researchers found that there are differences in consumer pickiness levels across countries. Further, pickiness has influence on ease of entry for international retailers into these markets (Gassman 2015). Generally, “picky people” represents an emerging profile that is piquing the interests of marketers, business leaders, and consumers.

But how exactly is the picky consumer defined? While pickiness may be colloquially well understood, there is no single definition of what it means to be picky, especially in the context of marketing and product consumption. As I believe the core of pickiness is about preferences and choices, my dissertation focuses on construct development and the effects of pickiness on consumer decision making.
Available definitions of pickiness come primarily from the literature on picky eating (and picky eaters) and pickiness as a clinical condition. This suggests that while pickiness is recognized as a construct, it has not yet been tailored to specifically describe a general consumer and there is still a need to fine-tuning this construct. Certain components of current definitions of pickiness cannot fully extrapolate to describe picky consumers in general as they are irrelevant to shopping and decision making. That stated, the extant clinical literature serves as a good starting point to my dissertation as it provides cues to how consumer pickiness ought to be defined. First, the extant literature describes picky eaters as those with selective preferences which are often shaped by biological factors. For example, some individuals carry a gene which makes them very sensitive to certain tastes and textures (Dovey et al. 2008; Guo and Reed 2001; Jacobi et al. 2003; Pliner and Hobden 1992). This reaction triggers the picky person to be selective and uncompromising in articulating preferences. Dovey et al. (2008) defined pickiness as the rejection of a large proportion of the familiar as well as the novel. Common to most definitions of pickiness is a focus on narrow preferences which results in consuming a lower variety of items and/or consumption that is limited in both amount and type (e.g., Boquin et al. 2014; Nicholls et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2005). Previous literature often uses the terms “selective” and “picky” interchangeably (e.g., Fisher et al. 2014; Williams, Gibbons, Schreck 2005) and claims that picky people have difficulty in accepting items that do not fit their a priori preferences.

While the idea of selective consumption helps describe pickiness and could be extrapolated to describe the general broadly defined picky consumer, I believe that pickiness cannot be entirely explained by the core features described in picky eating. I believe that other, more nuanced dimensions of pickiness exist and the marketing literature would benefit from a more thorough examination of what pickiness means when applied to the general consumer.
Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to systematically define what pickiness means and how it uniquely contributes to consumer behavior. Therefore, I investigate how people perceive picky others as a first step to my research. This relates to how agent decision makers make decisions on behalf of picky people (Essay 1). To more rigorously identify the central factors of consumer pickiness, I create a scale to measure pickiness as an individual difference and reveal the downstream consequences of each factor on consumer behavior (Essay 2). I hope that this work is a first step to insert the construct of “the picky shopper” into academic conversations concerning preferences and consumer behavior. Finally, I explore methods to manipulate and prime “pickiness” as a state of mind, further showing the downstream effects of being picky (Essay 3). These essays aim to thoroughly understand the definition and boundaries of pickiness and how it intersects with consumer decisions and related constructs. The next section summarizes the three essays.

1.2 Overview of Three Essays

The first essay entitled, “Picking Gifts for Picky People,” explores how consumers navigate the challenges of making purchases for picky others in a gift giver-recipient dynamic. I believe this is an important question because 1) gift giving is a $600 billion dollar industry that relies on one person’s judgments of the preferences of another, and 2) because consumers reported that an entire 39% of their holiday purchases were for people they described as “picky” in a recent survey (NPD 2014), and 3) because consumers who are unhappy with their gifts create a large amount of deadweight loss in our economy (even in the instances of closed-loop gift cards) (Waldfogel 1993). This research is in collaboration with Margaret Meloy from The Pennsylvania State University and Evan Polman from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
While gift giving is a challenging task for various reasons, I find that consumers uniquely associate picky gift recipients with “dissatisfaction” with gifts. Then, because pickiness is associated with negative expectations of gift satisfaction and retention, gift givers are highly demotivated to shop for picky people (even close others), which then leads them to reduce the resources (e.g. effort; money; “thought”) they put into gift selection. This pattern emerges irrespective of how socially close givers are to recipients. At the extreme, these expectations also lead gift givers to prefer skipping giving a gift altogether. Only when a picky person explicitly reassures a gift giver that s/he will not spurn a gift will a gift giver put in a higher amount of resources into the gift. This research hopes to begin a conversation about how “pickiness” affects gift giving and other agent decision making tasks. One marketing implication of pickiness is that firms should work on making recipients’ preferences and satisfaction easier to communicate with those tasked with making purchases on their behalf so that “pickiness” does not interfere with gift giving motivations.

The second essay, “The Picky Shopper Scale,” fills a gap in the existing literature in rigorously defining the picky construct outside the clinical domain. While the idea of consumer pickiness seems to be understood at a colloquial level, to date, no research in marketing has systematically defined the construct nor provided the means by which to assess relative degrees of pickiness among shoppers. In this essay, I conduct a series of studies that assess the internal structure, reliability, and discriminant validity of the underlying dimensions of the “picky shopper scale” in relation to a variety of other related constructs, such as maximizing and expertise. I theorize, describe, and create items for two central factors: precise preferences and flaw sensitivity and show how both uniquely contribute to the latent construct of pickiness. Upon creating 10 “Picky Shopper” scale items, I examine the downstream consequences of being a
picky shopper in a series of application studies and demonstrate the types of consumer behaviors associated with each of the underlying factors. I find that people who score higher on the Picky Shopper Scale describe their ideal products in more detail, are more critical of products advertised, and exhibit less switching behavior. In addition, they are also more likely to return and complain about imperfect products. Finally, pickier people have smaller consideration sets and care more about a wider range of attributes. The second essay of my dissertation is the first to define pickiness in the context of the general consumer and discusses the need for identifying and measuring this individual difference in the marketplace. The theoretical and managerial implications of this scale are discussed. Future research in marketing can use the scale to further explore the relationships between pickiness and other consumer behaviors as well as how pickiness moderates existing relationships in experiments.

Because marketers often can’t administer scales to prospective consumers, in the third essay, “Picky Consumers and the Psychological Cost of Consumption: When Free Loses its Appeal,” I explore how pickiness manifests itself in response to promotional activities firms may undertake. Specifically, I examine the role of pickiness in how consumers respond to high transaction-utility promotions that tap into the construct of “free” or “zero price”. Building off the finding that picky people are sensitive to negative attributes (e.g., flaw sensitivity described in Essay 2), I propose that people in a picky state of mind are more likely to experience heightened psychological costs of consuming “free” items (e.g., SWAG products that contain a logo; basic versions of products that cost money to upgrade) despite incurring no monetary cost to obtain the item. In this essay, I discuss why pickiness is associated with high psychological cost of consumption and how this cost mediates the relationship between the picky frame of mind and resistance to “free” promotions. This essay is the beginning of a conversation of
whether pickiness buffers against promotional activity and persuasion tactics and highlights the marketing strategies that might be optimal to use in attracting picky consumers.

This dissertation makes theoretical contributions to consumer behavior and marketing literature by introducing the construct of pickiness and its downstream correlates and behavioral consequences. Next, I present my three essays.
Chapter 2

ESSAY 1: PICKING GIFTS FOR PICKY PEOPLE

2.1 Introduction

Imagine that someone’s birthday is coming up and you are about to choose a gift for him/her. If you had to describe this person, you would call him/her “picky.” Considering this judgment, how might you choose a gift for this person? With the proliferation of extensive options across categories, finding a gift that delights a picky person is likely to be challenging at best and impossible at worst. Even if s/he has asked for something specific such as a black sweater, s/he could mean a licorice sweater, a jet black sweater, or an onyx-colored black sweater. With so many possible options, the challenge of choosing a gift for someone considered to be picky (about the color black, for example), is a problem of contemporary interest. The current work is a first step in understanding how consumers cope with making choices for picky others. My research has important implications for the resources people invest in gift giving, and improves the understanding of how consumers approach a decision for someone whom they feel fairly certain will not like their choice.

To establish the scope of this issue, and determine the relative prevalence of perceived pickiness in gift giving, I partnered with a marketing research firm and asked 7,466 shoppers which of their purchases during the 2013 Black Friday weekend (the biggest shopping weekend in the United States) were intended as a gift for someone they perceived to be “picky.” Across 38 shopping categories (e.g., apparel, toys, electronics), consumers reported that 39% of their purchases were indeed intended for someone picky. I believe that this proportion is non-trivial: almost four out of ten gifts were for someone picky. Yet, no research has examined consumers’
perceptions of picky others, much less how consumers choose gifts for picky recipients. As such, research in decision making and in gift giving will remain incomplete until scholars understand this unique yet widespread challenge.

In 2016, a search on Google Trends showed that the keyword “picky” is an increasingly popular term that appears more and more in the news, with twice as many hits as 10 years prior. Though pickiness has been linked clinically with selective eaters, colloquial usage of the term “picky” has been gaining momentum in different areas. In finance, the judgment “picky” has been used to describe investment firms like American Capital Strategies that only close on a small portion (1.4%) of their investments (Stansberry Research 2006). In management, companies hiring new recruits are called “picky” when they hold out for too long before making a hiring decision (Petrecca 2010). And in marketing, a survey conducted by Accenture reported country-level differences in consumer pickiness – an effect that has downstream consequences on the ease of entry for retailers accessing new, international markets (Gassman 2015). Generally speaking, “pickiness” is an emerging profile that is piquing the interests of marketers, business leaders, and consumers. As noted by a recent Gallup poll (Adkins 2016), millennials have been found to be the pickiest consumers in the United States, across a range of industries from banking to hospitality to airlines.

Although consumers’ pickiness influences the choices they make (Schwartz 2004), it also creates unique challenges for consumers making choices for picky people. This is particularly true in the context of gift giving where consumers choose gifts for others they perceive to be picky. As noted by The New York Times, “the biggest challenge for gift givers is shopping for picky people” (Hoffman 2014). So how do consumers cope with this challenge? To address this question, I use the gift giving domain as the context in which to study this phenomenon and
examine how consumers approach the choice process when choosing a gift for something they perceive to be picky.

In this regard, the present work makes three theoretical contributions. First, there is currently no standard definition of what it means to be viewed as picky by others. While my Black Friday survey shows that many people choose gifts for picky others, the perception of what makes someone picky has not yet been articulated in the academic literature. Thus, I explore what makes a gift recipient “picky” in the minds of gift givers. Second, I investigate how givers approach choosing gifts for recipients they perceive as picky. My research shows that perceived pickiness is particularly demotivating for gift givers and triggers givers to spend fewer resources (e.g., effort, money, or “thought”) in gift giving. Thus, my research illuminates how consumers negotiate the burden of shopping for someone picky – and in broader terms, how consumers approach making a choice for someone they anticipate will not like their choice. Importantly, I show that this is an unexplored challenge that is related to but distinct from what makes gift giving simply difficult. Third, I provide insights into two antecedents (expected dissatisfaction and expected re-gifting/returning) that elucidate when gift givers spend less effort, money, or thought in choosing gifts for picky versus difficult others; and I investigate a boundary condition concerning the effects of perceived pickiness, by highlighting a case where givers increase (rather than decrease) the resources they spend on the gifts they choose for perceptibly picky others.

2.2 Pickiness

How is “pickiness” defined in general? While there is no research in marketing that has defined this construct, literature on pickiness and food consumption, conducted from a clinical
psychological perspective, sheds light on this construct. For example, some individuals have been identified as being sensitive to certain tastes and stimulations that impact their consumption preferences. This heightened sensitivity leads to high rates of food rejection, which some scholars have equated to pickiness (Dovey et al. 2008; Guo and Reed 2001; Jacobi et al. 2003; Nederkoorn, Jansen and Havermans 2015; Pliner and Hobden, 1992). As Mallinger (2009, p. 119) writes, picky people “are inordinately troubled” by perceived imperfections (which he terms “flaws”) such that “they may be compelled to dwell upon until they correct it [them] – or at least obtain the relief of mentioning it [them].” This sentiment is echoed in the gift giving literature by Wooten (2000, p. 89) who observed that some individuals “are selective [and] combine careful inspection with exacting standards.”

As this clinical literature suggests, in the context of gift giving, a picky gift recipient may be perceived as someone who is likely to adamantly dislike his/her gift if even a small component of it varies from a preferred reference point. The focus on relatively selective, uncompromising judgment that recurs throughout the extant literature on pickiness may be troubling for those who are trying to make gift purchases for picky others.

In the present work, I am interested in understanding how choosing for someone deemed to be picky affects the gift giving choices givers make. Before I address this question, however, I first investigated what thoughts are salient when a gift giver is faced with a gift recipient whom they believe is picky. To understand associations with picky in this context-specific setting, I conducted a pretest and asked 31 undergraduate business students at a large northeastern university to generate specific words and phrases that they associated with a “picky gift recipient.” In all, I received 93 phrases. I counted the occurrence of each phrase and found that the most frequent was “unappreciative” (10.4%), followed by “snobby” (7.4%), “hard to please”
I then asked two independent coders to code every phrase to determine whether they had a positive, neutral, or negative connotation when used to describe someone (α = .92). I found that 65.0% of the phrases were categorized as negative, 24.7% were categorized as neutral, and 10.3% were categorized as positive.

These results suggest that people’s judgments of a picky person as a gift recipient tend to be negatively laden (i.e., pickiness is related with negative perceptions of the other, such as unappreciative or snobby), and the results highlight picky recipients’ penchant for dissatisfaction. Taken together, it seems that picky gift recipients are viewed by others as individuals who are likely to be unhappy with the gifts they receive. Because of this particular association, I believe that recipient pickiness poses a challenge in gift giving that is unique from other challenges such as general gift giving “difficulty,” a topic to which I now turn.

2.3 Pickiness and Difficulty

In the original work on gift giving difficulty, Otnes and colleagues (1992; 1993) suggested that there are specific circumstances that lead givers to perceive their gift recipients as “difficult” or “easy.” Providing a social roles interpretation to categorize recipients, Otnes, Lowrey and Kim (1993, p. 229) wrote that “almost without exception, the perception of recipients as easy or difficult stems from some aspect of the particular relationship between giver and recipient.”

Extending this theorizing, Otnes, Kim and Lowrey (1992) specified some of the reasons why a recipient might be viewed as difficult. This list included contextual constraints (e.g., giver-recipient dissimilarity) and giver limitations (e.g., financial constraints). In later work, scholars added more gift giving situations that heighten the difficulty that sometimes accompany gift
giving, such as a mismatched construal level between givers and recipients; occasions of high importance and formality (e.g., shopping for a rare occasion); gifting to multiple recipients; fear of negative comparisons with other givers; and expectations of reciprocity (Baskin, Wakslak, Trope and Novemsky 2014; Lowrey, Otnes and Robbins 1996; Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1993; Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014; Wooten 2000).

Although scholars have identified what makes gift giving difficult, I propose that giving a gift to someone picky is a theoretically unique form of gift giving difficulty that fundamentally alters how givers approach the gift giving process. First, recipient pickiness does not stem from the giver-recipient relationship. For example, consider a gift giver who has a special relationship with his/her recipient (e.g., an in-law, or a boss). The giver may feel heightened gift giving difficulty because of the added need for impression management, but this concern may occur irrespective of whether the recipient is seen as picky or not. Second, the difficulty that tends to emerge when gift giving is difficult is situational (and therefore malleable). Yet, pickiness is a person-judgment (and therefore less malleable). As such, gift givers can make difficult gift choices easier by adopting the recipients’ perspective, changing their construal level, or making adjustments for social projection and egocentric errors (Zhang and Epley 2012); it is less easy, however, to change judgments of others because judgments of others tend to persist and remain the same over time (Ross and Nisbett 1991). The gift giver can only acknowledge the recipient’s pickiness; s/he cannot alter it. As such, I locate pickiness as being part of the family of effects that make gift giving difficult, but that poses a unique set of challenges.

2.4 Pickiness and Motivation
In general, the purpose of gift giving is to improve social ties (Belk, 1979). With foreseeable social rewards associated with successful gift choices, the typical gift giver willingly invests considerable personal resources (i.e., effort; money; “thought”) in gift selection, with the hope that their efforts will pay off and the giver-recipient relationship will be strengthened (or at least maintained) through their gift (Belk 1979; Belk and Coon 1993; Cheal 1986). As a result, gift giving is frequently called a “labor of love” (Cheal 1988). Gifts are deemed more “perfect” when the gift giver relinquishes something valuable in order to obtain the gift (Belk 1996). Komter (2005, p. 190) echoed this sentiment – an “important element in gift giving is the concept of sacrifice” – suggesting that effortful gifts that are difficult for the giver to obtain can make gifts feel more meaningful and increase the likelihood that the giver-receiver relationship will be enhanced. Moreover, gift givers in western cultures have been found to give more expensive gifts to their socially-close recipients (i.e., friends) vs. socially-distant recipients (i.e., acquaintances) because they can reinforce their more meaningful ties through more financially costly gifts (Caplow 1984; Joy 2001; Ward and Broniarczyk 2016). Finally, gift givers generally strive to put in a lot of thought into the actual gift choice as they want to give gifts that uniquely celebrates their gift recipient (Belk 1996).

While situations that may thwart choosing ideal gifts have been carefully documented (Otnes, et al. 1992; Wooten 2000), it is not entirely clear whether choosing for someone picky triggers givers to put more or fewer resources into gift giving. Otnes and colleagues (1993), for instance, observed mixed evidence of resource-exertion when people were giving gifts to difficult others. Similarly, Wooten (2000) observed that high-stakes gift giving situations that trigger the most negative affect (e.g., anxiety) can demotivate some givers while “fueling” the efforts of others. Overall, there is no consensus for when or why people will work harder versus
restrain their resource input when they are faced with gift giving difficulties – there is evidence of both. Consistent with this view, research has shown that some people choose to work harder to overcome difficult obstacles (put in more resources) while others give up in defeat (put in fewer resources) (Dweck and Molden, 2000).

Following the logic that an individual’s decision to pursue an action depends on the perceived likelihood that its pursuit will result in success (Bagozzi 1992), I posit that gift givers will be less motivated to put resources into choosing a gift when they believe their gift itself will *not* produce successful results (Adams 1965, Bandura 1997, Pritchard 1969, Vroom 1964, Weiner 1980). Moreover, consumers often make judgments about whether desirable results are “possible” before they begin to work on difficult tasks (e.g., Averill, Catlin and Chon 1990; Higgins 1987). When consumers believe that a desirable outcome is not possible, they feel resigned, and invest little effort in the focal task from the outset (de Mello and MacInnis 2005).

Thus, I contend that choosing for a picky recipient will be relatively demotivating, even when compared against the conservative baseline of choosing for a “difficult” recipient. Recall that the top phrases from the pretest for a picky gift recipient were “unappreciative” and “dislikes everything.” There is clearly a relatively high level of expected recipient dissatisfaction when choosing for picky others. As such, gift givers may believe that the probability of choosing a gift for a picky person that s/he will like is relatively low. Thus, although many forms of gift giving difficulty can be managed by givers exerting more effort, money, or thought into choosing a gift, I propose that givers will prefer these solutions less when choosing for picky others.

Formally, I hypothesize that perceptions of recipient pickiness will lead gift givers to exert fewer resources in their gift giving because pickiness is associated with expected dissatisfaction with gifts. By this logic, however, if givers feel certain that picky others will
definitely like their gifts, they may buy those gifts with more gusto (e.g., by “breaking the bank” and spending more money on them). In sum, the goal and focus of this essay is to examine consumers’ beliefs about picky people, and how consumers cope with choosing gifts for picky people, precisely the people who (are perceived to) rebuff their gifts.

2.5 Overview of Experiments

In the five studies that follow, I examine perceived pickiness and how it affects gift giving behavior. Throughout, I compare recipients whom gift givers believe are picky against recipients whom gift givers believe are difficult (as a conservative baseline). Specifically, in Study 1, I find that giver-participants believe that picky recipients will dislike and not keep their gifts. This, in turn, increases the extent to which participants decide to forgo giving a gift altogether. However, because forgoing gift giving is not always an acceptable solution in real life, in Study 2, I show that participants’ beliefs that picky recipients are unlikely to keep their gifts attenuate the amount of effort gift givers are willing to exert and the amount of money they are willing to spend on picky recipients. In Study 3, I replicate how (little) participants are willing to spend on gifts for picky others, and find the effect to be consistent and robust (i.e., the same) for both acquaintances and close friends. In Study 4, I demonstrate that when gift givers are told that their picky recipients will not rebuff their gifts (i.e., when consumers are given assurances that picky others will like their gifts), participants’ willingness to pay “rebounds” to the same level willingness to pay for difficult recipients. Finally, in Study 5, I show that gift givers prefer to hedge their bets and give broad-appeal gift cards (in lieu of traditional gifts) to picky recipients. This results in gifts that may seem less personalized and less “thoughtful.”
As mentioned above, all of the studies use a difficult recipient as the control against which to compare the specific effects of gift recipient pickiness. This provides a more conservative and informative test than comparing a choice for a “picky” recipient versus a “neutral” recipient because it isolates the specific effects of pickiness that are un-confounded with the effects of general gift giving difficulty. Starting off, the pretest that follows verifies that pickiness is not simply a more extreme version of gift giving difficulty, and is therefore unique unto itself.

2.6 Pretest

To provide support for the idea that a picky gift recipient poses a unique challenge, and to highlight its juxtaposition with a recipient that is difficult to shop for, I conducted a pretest. I asked 479 undergraduates at a large university in the Midwest (52.8% female; mean age = 20.2 years), who participated in exchange for extra credit, to imagine they were shopping for a gift for someone. I included three conditions (in a between-subjects design) that changed the character of the gift recipient, such that I indicated that the person in the scenario “happens to be picky;” “happens to be difficult;” or “happens to be difficult to shop for.” I included the two latter conditions, which appear similar, because describing a person as “difficult” vs. “difficult to shop for” might foster different feelings, as the former is a person-judgment and the latter could be interpreted as a situational judgment. In all conditions, I asked two questions: “How picky is this person?” and “How difficult is this person?” Participants responded from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great extent). To both of these questions, there were no differences between the “difficult” and “difficult to shop for” conditions, \( p = .99 \) and \( p = .74 \), respectively; therefore I combined these conditions into one condition, the “difficult” condition. Comparing this “difficult” condition with the “picky” condition, I found that participants in the “picky” condition rated their gift recipient
as significantly more picky ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.34$ vs. $M = 4.78, SD = 1.69$), $t(475) = 2.17, p = \cdot03$; however, they did not rate their gift recipient as more difficult ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.63$ vs. $M = 4.47, SD = 1.69$), $t(477) = 0.54, p = .59$ (I note that this pattern of results is the same when I compare the “picky” condition with each of the two “difficult” conditions separately, rather than in aggregate).

Altogether, this pair of findings suggests that picky recipients are not simply “more difficult” to buy a gift for, but rather, that they pose a unique challenge to gift givers. Thus, in the studies that follow, I compared participants choosing for someone picky with a conservative baseline of participants choosing for someone difficult (versus a more lenient test of comparing someone picky with someone neutral). This allows me to show the unique contributions of perceived pickiness on gift giver behavior in a way that does not confound pickiness with difficulty.

### 2.7 Study 1: Choosing Not to Give

In Study 1, I first measured giver-participants’ expectations about how likely gift recipients are to be dissatisfied with the gifts they receive when they are picky versus difficult. I then tested the downstream consequences of expected dissatisfaction on expectations of gift return/re-gift intentions. I refer to this as predicted gift off-loading, which is a behavioral consequence of expected dissatisfaction – givers believe that recipients will dislike their gifts and hence be more likely to return or re-gift them. To the extreme, if expected recipient dissatisfaction leads to predicted gift off-loading, givers may choose to not give any gift. Thus, wanting to avoid giving a gift because of the picky recipient’s expected dissatisfaction and expected gift off-loading is the focus of Study 1.
2.7.1 Method

Two hundred and thirty-eight mTurk workers (44.1% male, median age = 32 years) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (recipient type: picky, difficult, neutral) in a between-subjects design. I note that for this first study, I included a neutral condition to further establish the focal effects. Participants were compensated for their participation.

Participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which they needed to buy a gift for someone for an upcoming social function. In the picky and difficult conditions, the recipient was respectively labeled as “picky” and “difficult to shop for”; in the neutral condition, I did not provide any qualifying information about the recipient.

After participants read about the gift recipient, I asked participants a series of questions regarding their predictions of how the recipient would feel upon receiving the gift (e.g., how likely the recipient would be “pleased,” “satisfied,” “dismissive,” “delighted,” “unimpressed”) on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely). These measures form the basis for expected dissatisfaction. Further, participants rated how frequently they believe their recipient returns or re-gifts (separately) the gifts that s/he receives, from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely frequently). These measures allowed me to understand how much participants expect picky (vs. difficult) recipients to not keep (i.e., off-load) their gifts. Next, I asked participants how much they would like to avoid giving the gift recipient a gift at all, from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely). Finally, as a manipulation check, participants rated the perceived pickiness of their recipient, from 1 (not picky at all) to 7 (very picky).

2.7.2 Results
Manipulation check. There was a significant difference in perceived pickiness across recipient types, $F(2, 235) = 125.98, p < .001$. Participants in the picky condition rated their recipient as more picky ($M = 6.52, SD = 0.83$) than participants in both the difficult ($M = 4.85, SD = 2.32$), $t(235) = 5.96, p < .001, d = .78$, and neutral conditions ($M = 2.07, SD = 1.46$), $t(235) = 15.48, p < .001, d = 2.01$. The manipulation of recipient pickiness was successful.

Expected recipient dissatisfaction. To determine the expected dissatisfaction of recipients upon receiving their gift, I created an expected recipient dissatisfaction index by reverse coding the expected likelihood of positive recipient feelings and averaging them with the expected likelihood of negative recipient feelings ($\alpha = .95$). A higher score indicates greater expected likelihood of recipient dissatisfaction. I found that participants in the picky condition expected their recipients to have the highest level of dissatisfaction with their gifts ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.82$), relative to participants in both the difficult ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.87$) and neutral conditions ($M = 2.73, SD = 1.09$), $F(2, 235) = 39.02, p < .001$. The contrast between the picky condition and difficult conditions was significant, $t(235) = 2.45, p = .01, d = .31$, as was the contrast between the picky and neutral conditions, $t(235) = 8.48, p < .001, d = 1.10$. Further, the contrast between the difficult and neutral conditions was also significant, $t(235) = 6.64, p < .001, d = .87$. In sum, participants expected picky gift recipients to be more dissatisfied with their gifts than difficult or neutral recipients.

Predicted gift off-loading. I next indexed return and re-gift predictions ($\alpha = .70$) to create a variable that measured the extent to which participants predicted recipients would return or re-gift their gifts. I refer to the combination of returning and re-gifting as “off-loading” the gift.

I found that recipient type affected participants’ predictions about gift off-loading. Specifically, the predicted likelihood of off-loading the gift was higher for a picky gift recipient.
(M = 6.57, SD = 1.81) than for either a difficult (M = 5.33, SD = 1.96) or neutral recipient (M = 4.18, SD = 1.48). F(2, 235) = 11.75, p < .001. The contrast between the picky condition and the difficult condition was significant, t(235) = 2.48, p = .02, d = .32, as was the contrast between the picky condition and the neutral condition t(235) = 4.85, p < .001, d = .63. The contrast between the difficult condition and the neutral condition was significant as well, t(235) = 2.46, p = .02, d = .32. Thus, the results suggest that participants believe picky gift recipients are more likely to off-load their gifts than their less picky (i.e., difficult or neutral) counterparts.

Choosing not to give a gift. Since gift givers expect picky recipients to be dissatisfied and off-load their gifts, gift givers may decide to avoid buying a gift altogether. This was, in fact, the case. Participants significantly preferred to avoid giving a gift when their recipient was picky (M = 6.82, SD = 1.68), relative to both difficult (M = 5.88, SD = 2.12) and neutral participants (M = 3.56, SD = 2.26), F(2, 235) = 49.14, p < .001. The contrast between the picky and difficult conditions was significant, t(235) = 2.75, p < .01, d = .36, as was the contrast between the picky and neutral conditions, t(235) = 9.31, p < .001, d = 1.21. The contrast between the difficult condition and neutral condition was significant as well, t(235) = 7.45, p < .001, d = .97. In all, this shows that gift givers believe that picky others will be dissatisfied with their gifts, and suggests that gift givers may feel relatively unmotivated to spend resources on gifts for picky others, to the extreme that they are unwilling to buy picky people any gift.

Mediation. I next tested whether participants’ expectations that a picky recipient will be dissatisfied with their gift (and subsequently off-load it) leads participants to want to avoid buying a gift. I performed a bootstrapping mediation analyses with two serial mediators (expected recipient dissatisfaction and predicted gift off-loading) using the PROCESS Macro (Model 6; Hayes, 2012) with 5000 samples. Using a conservative test, I coded the picky
condition as 1 and difficult condition as -1. I found that participants’ *expected recipient
dissatisfaction* and *predicted gift off-loading* both mediated the relationship between recipient
type and the desire to avoid giving a gift. First, pickiness had a significant effect on expected
recipient dissatisfaction ($\beta = .41, t = 6.09, p = .05$). Second, participants who estimated higher
expected recipient dissatisfaction also expected higher levels of gift off-loading ($\beta = .31, t =
4.55, p < .001$). Third, participants with higher predicted gift off-loading reported a higher desire
to want to avoid giving a gift to their recipient ($\beta = .42, t = 4.89, p < .001$). A bias-corrected
95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of recipient pickiness on desire to avoid giving a
gift through expected recipient dissatisfaction and predicted gift off-loading was between .02 and
.32. My findings thus show that both expected recipient dissatisfaction and predicted gift off-
loading serially mediated the desire to avoid giving a gift when the recipient type was picky (vs.
difficult). Of note, the above indirect effect is magnified when the neutral condition (vs. difficult
condition) is compared directly with the picky condition in the mediation model.

### 2.7.3 Discussion

Study 1 found evidence that recipient pickiness is associated with giver expectations of
recipient dissatisfaction and gift off-loading. Subsequently, these beliefs led givers to prefer
skipping the gift choice by choosing to not give any gift. Though gift givers typically attempt to
find the right gift to please and delight their gift recipients (Belk 1996), this was not the case
with a picky recipient. Instead of believing that they could satisfy the picky gift recipient, givers
expected the picky recipient to dislike their gift to the point where they were more willing to
forsgo giving a gift at all.
Because perceived recipient pickiness may be inextricably linked to expectations of recipient dissatisfaction, giving a gift to a picky gift recipient may be particularly demotivating as givers have low expectations that their recipient will keep their gift. Because of the association between beliefs of pickiness and gift off-loading, gift givers are likely to feel less motivated to exert effort or to spend money on giving gifts to picky recipients because gift givers do not expect their recipients to keep their gifts. Study 2 aims to more directly test the proposed relationship between recipient pickiness and gift givers’ reduced willingness to expend resources on gift selection and payment.

2.8 Study 2: Effort and Willingness to Pay

In Study 2, I more systematically examine the dual effects of (a) the gift giver’s beliefs that a picky person will off-load the gift by re-gifting the item and (b) the giver’s willingness to exert effort and spend money on a picky recipient. I predict that when gift givers expect a recipient to off-load their gift, this will be demotivating for the gift giver and reduce the effort they will exert and the money they will spend on a picky recipient’s gift.

2.8.1 Method

Two-hundred six undergraduates (58% male, median age = 19 years) at a large Northeastern university received partial course credit in exchange for their participation in this and other surveys. I randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions in a between-subjects design (recipient type: picky vs. difficult). Participants imagined participating in a Secret Santa gift exchange, stated as follows:
It is right before the holidays and you agreed to participate in a Secret Santa event with a group of people. You have been asked to purchase a gift for someone who is very \textit{picky}/\textit{difficult to shop for}. Please take a moment to think of someone from your own life who is a \textit{picky}/ \textit{difficult to shop for} gift recipient.

I gave participants a few moments to think about a real person that fit the above description and then introduced 12 gift categories inspired by gifts.com. I asked participants to rank order each category of gift in terms of how likely they would be to choose an item from that category, and to describe a single gift from their first-ranked category in an open-ended response. This task ensured that participants imagined tangible gift possibilities for their recipients.

Following that, participants indicated (a) how likely the recipient would be to re-gift the gift (I focused solely on re-gifting in this study because returning a gift is less feasible in a Secret Santa context), from 1 (\textit{not at all}) to 9 (\textit{extremely likely}); (b) how much effort they would put into the process of choosing a gift for their recipient, from 1 (\textit{no effort at all}) to 9 (\textit{a lot of effort}); and (c) how much money they would be willing to spend on their gift, from $0 to $50. Participants then answered a binary manipulation check question that asked whether their gift recipient was picky or difficult.

\subsection*{2.8.2 Results}

\textit{Manipulation check.} Participants in the picky condition were more likely to report that their recipient was picky ($M = 93.3\%$) than participants in the difficult condition ($M = 16.7\%$), $\chi^2(1) = 122.26$, $p < .001$; thus the manipulation was successful.

\textit{Predicted re-gifting.} Participants rated a picky recipient as being more likely to re-gift the item they received ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 2.28$) than a difficult recipient ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.94$), $t(204)$
= 2.01, \( p < .05, d = .28 \). These results parallel the findings from Study 1 and suggest that when buying a gift for a picky recipient, gift givers believe the recipient will likely off-load the gift.

**Willingness to exert effort.** Participants reported wanting to exert less effort when they imagined choosing a gift for a picky gift recipient (\( M = 6.38, SD = 2.51 \)) compared to a difficult gift recipient (\( M = 7.16, SD = 2.25 \)), \( t(204) = -2.32, p = .02, d = .32 \). This aligned with my prediction that people purchasing a gift for a picky recipient would have lower intentions of exerting effort during gift selection.

**Willingness to pay.** Consistent with reported willingness to exert effort, there was also a significant difference between the picky and difficult conditions on participants’ willingness to pay for the gift. Participants choosing for a picky recipient reported they wanted to spend less money on their recipient (\( M = $31.04, SD = $11.59 \)) than participants choosing for a difficult recipient (\( M = $35.30, SD = $11.69 \)), \( t(204) = -2.63, p < .01, d = .37 \).

**Mediation analyses.** I next tested whether participants’ predictions that a picky recipient would off-load (re-gift) their gift would lead participants to reduce their effort and lower their willingness to pay for the gift. I performed two bootstrapping mediation analyses using the PROCESS Macro (Model 4; Hayes 2012) with 5000 samples. I coded the picky condition as 1 and the difficult condition as -1. Figure 2.1 shows the graphic representation of the two mediations.

In my first mediation analysis, I found that participants’ predictions of re-gifting partially mediated the relationship between recipient type and willingness to exert effort. A bias-corrected 95\% confidence interval for the indirect effect of recipient type on willingness to exert effort through predicted re-gifting did not include zero, [-0.18 and -0.01]. However, because the direct effect when accounting for this mediator was also significant (\( \beta = -.33, t = 1.97, p = .05 \)), my test
reveals significant, partial mediation. In my second mediation analysis, I found that participants’
predictions of re-gifting also partially mediated the relationship between recipient type and
willingness to pay for the gift. A bias-corrected 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of
recipient type on willingness to pay through predicted re-gifting was between -1.13 and -0.03.
However, as in the previous test, the direct effect was significant ($\beta = -1.61, t = 2.07, p = .03$),
suggesting partial mediation.

2.8.3 Discussion

When participants chose gifts for picky (vs. difficult) recipients, the choices they made
were influenced by the higher predicted likelihood that their gift would be re-gifted. This
expectation in turn reduced the amount of effort participants were willing to exert and the
amount of money they were willing to spend on gifts. The results of Study 2 may not seem
altogether surprising since gift givers in a Secret Santa exchange are often assigned to recipients
they do not always know well nor like. In the following studies, I wanted to provide a more
rigorous test of the notion that selecting a gift for a picky (vs. difficult) recipient could lead to a
reduction in willingness to spend money on gifts even when the recipient is identified as a good
friend.

2.9 Study 3: Pickiness and Social Closeness

In Study 2, I found that participants were willing to exert less effort and spend less
money on a gift for a picky recipient because they predicted the recipient would be less likely to
keep their gift. However, because I did not explicitly state the giver-recipient relationship in
Study 2 (simply that it was a Secret Santa gift exchange), it remains an open question whether my results are robust when gift givers feel very close to the gift recipients.

Previous theory in gift giving (Caplow 1984) suggests that gift givers should be willing to spend more money on close others than distant others. However, it is unclear whether gift givers will choose to spend more money on picky friends relative to picky acquaintances. Because pickiness instantiates an expectation of dissatisfaction, this expectation may eclipse the enhanced willingness to pay for gifts based on social tie strength. In this study, I explicitly manipulate social closeness between giver and recipient to examine whether my findings apply solely to picky acquaintances, or if they extend more generally to picky good friends.

2.9.1 Method

One hundred and fifty-five undergraduate participants (62.4% male, median age = 19 years) at a large university in the northeast were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (recipient: picky vs. difficult) × 2 (social closeness: good friend vs. acquaintance) between-subjects design. Participants read the following gift giving scenario:

“Imagine that the holidays are coming up and you are preparing gifts for people around you. Imagine there is one person on your list that you have not yet prepared a gift for. You are [very good friends with]/[an acquaintance of] this person and will see him/her at a social gathering over the holidays where you can give him/her the gift. However, [this particular recipient happens to be very picky]/[giving a gift to this recipient feels difficult].”

After reading introductory remarks about the gift giving situation and recipient, participants were told that the gift deadline was approaching. I asked participants to indicate their
expectations of how likely the recipient would be to off-load their gift by (a) returning the item, and (b) re-gifting the item, from 1 (not likely at all) to 9 (extremely likely). I also asked participants how much money they would want to spend on a gift for their recipient (in an open-ended format). I included two manipulation check questions for perceived pickiness and social closeness. For perceived pickiness, participants responded to “how picky was your gift recipient?” from 1 (not picky) to 9 (extremely picky); and for social closeness, participants responded to “how close are you to your recipient?” from 1 (not close at all) to 9 (very close).

2.9.2 Results

**Manipulation check.** Participants in the picky condition thought that their recipient was more picky ($M = 7.89, SD = 1.62$) than participants in the difficult condition ($M = 5.73, SD = 2.61$), $F(1, 153) = 36.91, p < .001, d = .98$. Participants in the good friend condition identified that they were closer to their gift recipient ($M = 8.05, SD = 1.49$) than participants in the acquaintance condition ($M = 3.27, SD = 2.79$), $F(1, 153) = 174.90, p < .001, d = 2.13$.

**Predicted gift off-loading.** I indexed return and re-gift expectations to measure the extent to which participants predicted recipients would off-load their gifts ($\alpha = .75$). I then conducted a 2 (recipient: picky vs. difficult) × 2 (social closeness: good friend vs. acquaintance) ANOVA which revealed two main effects: Participants believed that picky (vs. difficult) recipients, $F(1, 153) = 7.10, p = .01, d = .43$, and acquaintances (vs. good friends), $F(1, 153) = 3.98, p = .05, d = .32$, would be more likely to off-load the gifts they received. These results were qualified by an interaction whereby participants believed that picky acquaintances ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.71$) and picky good friends ($M = 5.00, SD = 1.84$) were both equally likely to off-load their gifts, $t(151) = .21, p = 0.83, d = .03$. The likelihood of off-loading for difficult acquaintances, however, was
equal ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.71$) to the picky conditions and significantly higher than the likelihood of off-loading among difficult good friends ($M = 3.74, SD = 1.72$), $t(151) = 2.97, p < .01, d = .48$.

**Willingness to pay.** I carried out a 2 (recipient: picky vs. difficult) $\times$ 2 (social closeness: good friend vs. acquaintance) ANOVA on willingness to pay for the gift and found a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 153) = 3.99, p = .05$, such that on average, participants were willing to spend more money on difficult good friends ($M = $43.00, $SD = $16.50) than on difficult acquaintances ($M = $31.23, $SD = $23.42), $t(151) = 2.63, p < .01, d = .43$. This result is consistent with the literature, that people spend more money on closer (vs. more distant) recipients (Caplow, 1984). The results of Study 3, however, provide an exception to this rule. Participants were not willing to spend more money on their picky good friends ($M = $35.34, $SD = $16.74) relative to their picky acquaintances ($M = $36.13, $SD = $20.96), $t(151) = -0.11, p = 0.91, d = .02$. No main effects were significant ($ps > .10$).

**Mediation.** I ran a moderated mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 8; Hayes 2012) to determine whether predicted gift off-loading mediated the relation between giver-recipient social closeness (good friend = 1, acquaintance = -1) and willingness to pay for the gift, where recipient type (picky = 1, difficult = -1) was included as a moderator (see Figure 2.3 for an illustration of the statistical model). First, the social closeness $\times$ recipient type interaction had a significant effect on predicted gift off-loading ($\beta = 1.09, t(153) = 1.95, p = .05$). Second, predicted gift off-loading had a significant impact on willingness to pay ($\beta = -2.38, t(153) = -2.66, p < .01$). The indirect effect of the social closeness $\times$ recipient interaction on willingness to pay through the mediator was significant (95% CI: -3.87, -0.03). Decomposing the interaction, I found that the conditional indirect effect for the difficult condition was significant.
(95% CI: 0.20, 3.18), confirming that difficult friends instilled lower predicted gift off-loading and this resulted in higher willingness to pay. However, the indirect effect for the picky condition was not significant (95% CI: -1.18, 1.04).

These findings further establish that both picky good friends and picky acquaintances instill relatively similar low levels of feelings that the recipient will off-load their gifts (i.e., that they will likely return or re-gift them). Consequently, even though good friends usually receive more valuable gifts than acquaintances, this is not the case when those good friends are perceived to be picky.

### 2.9.3 Discussion

Social closeness had the predicted positive effect on spending for difficult good friends versus difficult acquaintances (Caplow 1984; Zhang and Epley 2012). However, recipient pickiness weakened the power of the social relationship and equalized givers’ willingness to pay for gifts for good friends and acquaintances and dropped it to a level comparable to difficult acquaintances. Because picky recipients are expected to off-load their gifts (regardless of the giver-recipient relationship), gift givers were discouraged from spending more money on close picky others relative to acquaintances.

### 2.10 Pickiness and Expected (Dis)Satisfaction

Thus far, the evidence suggests that gift givers expect that picky recipients will be dissatisfied and off-load their gifts. I also found that these expectations undermine the desire to spend money on buying a gift for picky recipients. What happens, however, if a picky recipient specifically asks for a particular gift? In this case, the probability that the gift will dissatisfy and
thus be off-loaded should be reduced. Thus, in Study 4 I manipulate whether gift givers are reassured that their gift will be liked by the recipient. Because expectations of picky others’ dissatisfaction will likely attenuate when givers feel certain that their gifts will be liked by picky others, I tested whether reducing the uncertainty about a gift’s likeability increases gift givers’ willingness to buy it, even if the gift is more expensive than givers’ allocated budget for the gift. I hypothesize that when gift givers are provided with more (vs. fewer) assurances that their gift will be well-received by the picky recipient, they will increase their willingness to spend money on an over-the-budget gift.

2.10.1 Pretest to Calibrate Birthday Gift Spending

I first conducted a pretest to establish an upper limit on typical gift expenditures. I asked 32 MTurk participants (50% male, median age = 27 years) to provide an upper limit on their willingness to pay for a birthday gift for a close female friend. Participants reported a mean of $109.84 (SD = $82.14) with a median of $95.00 as the maximum they would spend on a birthday gift for a close female friend. This pretest helped me to calibrate how expensive a gift request would need to be to make my sample population feel uncomfortable with the price of a requested birthday gift and provide a more conservative test of the underlying mechanism.

2.10.2 Method

One hundred and forty two MTurk workers (57.7% male, median age = 28 years) located in the United States participated in this study for compensation. Participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which they wanted to buy a birthday gift for a close female friend. The close friend was labeled as someone picky or difficult based on random assignment. Participants
then read that the recipient had requested a specific pair of shoes for their present; however, the cost of the shoes ($150) would exceed the participants’ expected budget for the birthday gift.

Half of the participants were then randomly assigned to a condition where they were reassured that the recipient would definitely be satisfied with the pair of shoes (certain condition). The other half were assigned to a control condition where they were not given any explicit information about the recipient’s likely satisfaction level. In both cases, however, the gift was an item that was specifically requested by the recipient. The exact scenario text was:

“You decide to ask Patricia directly what gift she would like to receive for her birthday. She sends you the link to a pair of shoes online. [You know this gift can definitely satisfy and delight her.] [null] Unfortunately, when you look at the price tag ($150), you realize that buying this gift will exceed your expected budget for her gift.”

Next, all participants indicated whether or not they would buy the shoes (participants responded with either “yes” or “no’’). Finally, participants indicated how picky the recipient was from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely) as a manipulation check.

2.10.3 Results

Manipulation check. Participants in the picky condition reported that their recipient was more picky ($M = 8.75, SD = 1.12$) than participants in the difficult condition ($M = 6.27, SD = 3.07$), $F(1, 140) = 41.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.09$. Thus, my manipulation of recipient type was successful.

Willingness to give expensive gift. I examined the proportion of participants who stated they would buy the requested shoes for the gift recipient, despite the fact that it was likely over their budget, based on the 2 (recipient type: picky vs. difficult) × 2 (predicted satisfaction: certain...
vs. control). There was a main effect of predicted satisfaction on the percentage of gift givers who chose the requested gift among participants in the certain condition (36.2%) and participants in the control condition (21.9%), $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 3.55, p = .05, \phi = .15$. However, I find that this difference is driven by differences between the picky conditions rather than by differences between the difficult conditions. When the recipient was difficult, there was no difference in the proportion of individuals who indicated they would purchase the expensive gift across expected satisfaction levels (certain vs. control). Participants in both difficult recipient conditions gave the recipient the focal gift at relatively equal frequencies, 30.3% and 28.9% for the certain and control conditions respectively, $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = .16, p = .67, \phi = .05$. However, when the recipient was picky, a different pattern emerged. Without any further reassurance that the picky recipient would definitely like the gift, participants were reluctant to give the requested expensive birthday gift (only 15.4% did so). However, when participants were provided assurances (i.e., in the certain condition), they chose to buy the requested gift for the picky recipient at a significantly higher frequency (39.5%, $\chi^2(1, N = 75) = 5.03, p = .03, \phi = .26$). Thus, only when there was a high degree of certainty that the picky recipient would definitely like the gift were participants likely to splurge on the requested item. However, certainty of liking the gift did not impact gift choice to difficult recipients.

2.10.4 Discussion

The results of Study 4 demonstrate that when there is greater certainty that a picky recipient will be satisfied with the gift (i.e., when their satisfaction is guaranteed), gift givers become more willing to “break the bank” for picky recipients. However, without such certainty and reassurance, gift givers are hesitant to choose a relatively expensive gift for a picky
recipient, even if that item was specifically requested by the picky gift recipient. In contrast, the extra level of reassurance does not appear necessary when the gift recipient is merely difficult. Thus, even when a picky gift recipient has stated a preference, gift givers remain cautious in giving what a picky recipient has asked for unless the giver knows, with certainty, that the picky recipient will be satisfied. Taken together with the results of Study 3, picky gift recipients need to provide gift givers with very clear signals about preferred gifts and re-assurances that they will be satisfied. Otherwise, gift givers will be reluctant to increase the resources they spend when choosing for picky recipients.

2.11 Study 5: Pickiness and Thoughtfulness

The cumulating evidence thus far suggests that gift givers have relatively low expectations that they will be able to find a gift that a picky recipient will like and not off-load. Only when these negative expectations are removed will gift givers be willing to expend the financial resources and strive to delight the picky recipient. Given that asking the picky gift recipient directly what s/he wants as a gift continues to carry uncertainty (Study 4), how do gift givers cope? I predict that gift givers choosing a gift for a picky recipient will favor gifts that are “safe” (e.g., gift cards) – in other words, gifts that have broad appeal.

Belk (1996) suggests that people generally strive to give gifts that are specially tailored to the gift recipient because these gifts uniquely honor the gift recipient’s identity or preferences. Gifts are typically more “thoughtful” when they suit a particular gift recipient rather than suit many people. When people give gift cards (e.g. Amazon.com; Visa), for example, the gifts appear to be less thoughtful because they are generic – they could be given to any recipient (Tuten & Kiechker, 2009). Thus, degree of personalization serves as a proxy for the thought put
into a gift choice. In Study 5, I measure the personalization of gifts and demonstrate that givers choose to give less personalized gifts to picky others as a means of coping with the consequences of a recipient’s pickiness.

2.11.1 Method

One hundred Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers (58.8% male, median age = 30 years) participated in this between-subjects study with two conditions (gift recipient: picky, difficult). Participants were compensated for their participation. Prior to reading the gift giving scenario, participants first rated how personalized a “$25 physical gift” and (separately) a “$25 gift card” feels on a scale from 1 (not personalized at all) to 9 (extremely personalized). I defined personalized gifts as “gifts with ‘thought’ that show the giver wants to give a recipient something uniquely suitable for the recipient.”

Next, participants considered a particular gift giving situation as follows:

Imagine that you are attending a birthday party. In return, you decide to give the host a gift, which would cost about $25. However, you think that [the host is picky]/[giving the host a gift will be difficult].

Participants then answered a question about how much they expected their recipient to like their gift, but here, I framed the question in terms of their hopefulness: “How much hope do you feel when thinking about giving a gift to your recipient?” from 1 (not at all) to 9 (a lot).

Then I asked participants how attractive it would be to give a $25 physical gift and $25 gift card to their recipient. As the last measure, I included a manipulation check where participants were asked to rate the pickiness of the gift recipient from 1 (definitely not picky) to 9 (definitely picky).

2.11.2 Results
Manipulation check. Participants in the picky condition rated their recipient as more picky ($M = 8.84, SD = 0.68$) than participants in the difficult condition ($M = 1.88, SD = 2.29$), $F(1, 98) = 147.54, p < .001, d = 2.44$. Thus, the manipulation was successful.

Gift personalization ratings. To assess how much personalized thought went into buying a physical gift versus purchasing a gift card, I ran a one-sample $t$-test on the personalization ratings of each type of gift, using the scale midpoint (5) as the null. Participants felt that the physical gift was more personalized than the scale midpoint ($M = 7.10, SD = 1.82$), $t(147) = 11.52, p < .001$. They also rated the gift card as less personalized than the scale midpoint ($M = 2.56, SD = 1.99$), $t(147) = -12.28, p < .001$. The results suggest that physical gifts are seen as more “thoughtful” while gift cards are viewed as less “thoughtful” among participants.

Hope. Participants in the picky condition felt marginally less hopeful about giving a gift ($M = 4.56, SD = 1.62$) than participants in the difficult condition ($M = 5.40, SD = 2.39$), $F(1, 98) = 3.32, p = .07, d = .37$. This aligns with my findings from the previous studies concerning expected recipient dissatisfaction – givers expect picky recipients to be less satisfied with their gifts, and they are marginally less hopeful as they approach the gift giving choice.

Attractiveness ratings. Participants thought that giving a physical gift was less attractive when the recipient was picky ($M = 5.93, SD = 2.55$) than when the recipient was difficult ($M = 6.94, SD = 1.36$), $F(1, 98) = 5.99, p = .01, d = .49$. In contrast, participants believed giving a gift card was more attractive when the recipient was picky ($M = 6.22, SD = 2.69$) than difficult ($M = 4.94, SD = 2.66$), $F(1, 98) = 5.59, p = .02, d = .48$.

2.11.3 Discussion
The results of Study 5 indicate that when gift givers are faced with picky gift recipients, they are willing to sacrifice the potentially reinforcing benefits of gift giving by giving less thoughtful gifts to the picky recipient. They rely on less personalized gift cards instead of physical gifts as the symbolic representation of their relationship with the recipient. Like previous findings on reduced willingness to exert effort and money, givers are less hopeful that picky recipients will like their chosen gifts and choose less personal, broader-appeal gifts, suggesting evidence of reduced willingness to exert “thought” as well. It is perhaps no coincidence that Visa’s tagline for its cash gift cards is “Your perfect present for that picky someone.”

2.12 General Discussion

Across five studies, the present work addresses the question of what consumers think about and subsequently do when choosing gifts for picky others. Others’ pickiness corresponds to negative associations of “unappreciative” and “snobby,” and high expectations of recipient dissatisfaction with gifts. As a result, the pattern that robustly emerged is one in which having a picky gift recipient undermines the effort gift givers are willing to exert, the money they are willing to spend, and the thought that they are willing to put into the gift giving process.

More specifically, in Study 1, I found that giver-participants expected picky recipients to be less satisfied and to be more likely to off-load (i.e., return or re-gift) their gifts than recipients considered difficult. This judgment consequently led givers to want to eschew giving a gift to picky recipients, a behavior that challenges gift giving norms and ideals. In Study 2, the belief that picky people off-load their gifts mediated the relationship between recipient type and givers’ (lowered) willingness to spend resources (i.e., effort and money) on picky people. Next, Study 3
showed that gift givers’ tendency to spend less money on picky recipients occurs irrespective of giver-recipient social closeness, a moderation effect that is mediated by predicted gift off-loading. This is a novel finding since part of the reason to buy a gift is to reinforce the relationship between giver and recipient. Yet when the recipient is picky, givers are relatively indifferent to how close the recipient is to him/her. In Study 4, I sought to determine what it would take to encourage gift givers to spend more money on their picky close friends given the findings of Study 3. Only when gift givers are given clear assurances that their recipient will truly like their gifts (i.e., their expected recipient dissatisfaction is mollified) will gift givers become willing to purchase an expensive gift for a picky recipient. When gift givers are not provided with clear reassurances, they are hesitant to purchase a requested item for the picky person that “breaks the bank.” Finally, Study 5 shows that gift givers choosing for picky others prefer to give gift cards over physical gifts despite the fact that gift cards are viewed as less personalized and thus, less thoughtful.

The studies, taken together, pinpoint the challenges that picky recipients create for gift givers and highlight that pickiness undermines the effort exerted, the willingness to pay, and the thoughtfulness of the investment in the relationship. The literature on gift giving assumes that givers generally invest in gift giving in the hopes that they can delight their recipients and reinforce the giver-recipient relationship. The current work extends the gift giving literature by suggesting that recipient pickiness is one exception that interferes with this motivation to delight. Specifically, while gift givers usually want to make earnest efforts to signal how much they value their recipients through original and personalized gifts (Belk 1996; Robben and Verhallen 1994), I found that when a recipient was picky, givers considered the possibility of recipient dissatisfaction and likely off-loading and thus changed their gift giving strategies accordingly.
As such, I address a gap in the gift giving literature: how people choose gifts for people who are not expected to like their gifts – an increasingly relevant challenge given the rapid increase in pickiness (Schwartz 2004).

Giving gifts is something people across the world have been doing for thousands of years. However, in spite of the ubiquity of giving gifts, the research on gift giving suggests that today’s consumers are actually quite inaccurate when it comes to choosing gifts that others will like (Baskin et al. 2014; Flynn and Adams 2009; Galak, Givi and Williams 2016; Gino and Flynn 2011; Robben and Verhallen 1994; Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014; Ward and Broniarczyk 2016). For example, a recent poll found that 38% of recipients admitted to re-gifting items they had received because they believed their gifts were better suited for someone other than themselves (Woolley and Ertimur 2010). Even gift cards are not immune to re-gifting. They are traded and sold for pennies on the dollar (Kristof 2014). In economic terms, consumers’ relative inability to identify a desirable gift is reflected in the billions of dollars in deadweight loss each year when recipients value their gifts for less than the prices paid by givers (Waldfogel 1993).

The current work suggests that as today’s consumers become increasingly picky, the problem associated with this inaccuracy will be exacerbated. As such, what specific gift giving strategies should givers use when faced with picky gift recipients? In Study 4, I found that asking what a picky recipient wants is not in itself sufficient to ensure that the gift giver will feel reassured that the recipient will like their gift (rather, more and clearer reassurance had to be communicated). Providing assurances and communicating certainty is essential in ensuring that the gift giver will move forward with a requested gift, especially if the recipient would like the giver to “break the bank” on that particular gift.
As suggested partially by Study 5, gift givers who don’t expect to tap into their recipient’s exact preferences may give standard and generic gifts that fulfill the basic gift giving obligation. In addition to broad-appeal gift cards, gift givers may also prefer to give other broad-appeal gifts, like pre-packaged gift baskets or the most-popular seasonal items that can be gifted to anyone. Gift givers may also resort to re-gifting things that they do not want, as it may be the least effortful way to fulfill a gift obligation. Other gift givers may seek out gifts that come with lenient return policies. Finally, digital gifts may be appealing to gift givers with picky recipients because digital gifts can facilitate faster returns and easier re-gifting.

Though the present research has focused exclusively on the gift choice from the givers’ perspective, the picky recipients’ self-perspective remains unexplored. What actually delights picky recipients is an open question, but one can speculate that if someone is truly picky and has preferences that are very strict and limited, that person may prefer to tell a gift giver exactly what to buy, even if this gift giving strategy lessens the surprise element of a gift and appears less personal and meaningful. Future research should explore the topic of giving gifts to picky people from the recipient point of view in order to more fully explicate both sides of the gift exchange.

It is my hope that the present research findings begin a conversation about how “pickiness” affects decision making and marketing more generally. While pickiness is a common phrase used to describe others (including the self) in everyday language, I know very little about how pickiness comes about, nor how pickiness manifests and is perceived in different contexts. I take initial steps to shed light on what it means to be perceived as a picky person by other individuals by demonstrating that a “picky gift recipient” evokes a unique set of expectations that affect the choices of gift givers, even when compared to a conservative baseline of a difficult gift recipient. A picky person evokes negative associations and an aura of dissatisfaction.
I believe that my findings have implications for a variety of decision making situations, especially in the context of agent perceptions and decision making. I note that the picky label may be malleable and have slightly different connotations depending on context. For example, pickiness applied to a firm may be viewed very differently from pickiness applied to a shopper. Also, while a picky gift recipient may be seen as unappreciative and snobby, a picky dater or a picky investor may be praised for their careful inspection and selectivity. Depending on the context in which pickiness emerges, the benefits and costs of being perceived as picky may differ significantly.

To shed further light on the pickiness construct, future research might consider self-other differences with respect to “pickiness.” While I find that pickiness has a negative connotation when used to describe other consumers, it may evoke positive connotations when used to describe the self – as if self-admission of pickiness communicates sophisticated or discerning preferences, whereas judgments of others’ pickiness might communicate inflexible preferences. While I have investigated how people choose gifts for others they view as picky, a related area might investigate how people who view themselves as picky choose gifts for others (as well as items they choose for themselves). Quite possibly, in contrast to the reduced effort and money that consumers spend on picky people, picky gift givers might spend more effort and money on their gifts for others (and themselves).

Consumers in the U.S. spent, on average, $800 on holiday gifts in 2015, with holiday-related retail sales totaling over $626 billion – more than the GDPs of Denmark, Greece, and Croatia combined. Gift giving is clearly big business, and it is especially challenging among a large and growing demographic: recipients who are “picky.” In my findings, nearly 40% of recipients are called “picky” by gift givers. Yet despite its ubiquity, little research has formally
examined how such gift purchases are made. The current research addresses this gap by investigating the picky recipient from the perspective of the gift giver. In five studies, I showed that pickiness is uniquely different from other forms of difficulty that may accompany a gift choice. In this vein, I illuminated two antecedents (expected dissatisfaction and expected re-gifting/returning) that explain why gift givers spend less effort, money, or thought in choosing gifts for picky versus difficult others. All in all, my work sheds light on gift giving and on the unique though widespread case of how consumers choose for someone whom they expect will not actually like their choice.
Figure 2.1: Mediation Statistical Model

The indirect effect through predicted gift re-gifting (off-loading) on willingness to exert effort was 95% CI: [-.18, -.01]. The indirect effect through predicted gift off-loading on willingness to pay was 95% CI: [-1.13, -.03].
Participants were willing to spend more money on difficult good friends (M = $43.00, SD = $16.50) than on difficult acquaintances (M = $31.23, SD = $23.42), t(151) = 2.63, p < .01, d = .43. However, participants were not willing to spend more money on their picky good friends (M = $35.34, SD = $16.74) relative to their picky acquaintances (M = $36.13, SD = $20.96), t(151) = -0.11, p = 0.91, d = .02.
Figure 2.3: Moderated Mediation Statistical Model

Note, for social closeness, good friend is coded as 1 and acquaintance is coded as -1. For recipient pickiness, picky is coded as 1 and difficult is coded as -1. The indirect effect through highest order interaction through predicted gift off-loading on willingness to pay is significant; 95% CI: [-3.87, -.04]. The conditional direct effect at the difficult condition is significant ($\beta = 4.61, t = 2.06, p = .04$). The conditional direct effect at the picky condition is insignificant ($\beta = -.69, t = -.31, p = .76$). The conditional indirect effect at the difficult condition is significant (95% CI = [.21, 3.18]). The conditional indirect effect at the picky condition is insignificant (95% CI = [-1.18, 1.04]).
Chapter 3

ESSAY 2: THE PICKY SHOPPER SCALE

3.1 Introduction

"Most of my guitars have been instruments that look cool. I'm not picky. I never think, 'Oh, this neck isn't made of ebony,' or, 'These strings don't feel correct.' It doesn't matter too much." (James Hetfield, Musician)

The picky consumer… it’s a phrase that has much meaning colloquially, but research has yet to define the pickiness construct and how picky shoppers behave. Consider the individual who has a very specific product in mind with a specific combination of attributes and won’t buy anything that deviates even slightly from what s/he has set out to buy. Similarly, consider the individual who samples dozens of items at a store and finds something wrong with each and every item sampled. Decision makers can be “picky” in a diverse range of contexts, from deciding which groceries to buy (Catalina Marketing 2013), to which people to date (Gottlieb 2011), and which funds to invest in (Hausman 1998). In today’s marketplace, consumers have more opportunities than ever before to express and exercise their preferences – what they like and what they don’t like. For firms trying to gain or maintain market share, it may be advantageous to understand picky consumer segments and how these consumers’ preferences drive their decisions.

The current work makes a number of contributions to the marketing literature. First, I rigorously and systematically define shopper pickiness at a theoretical level. This is important to consumer theory because pickiness is inherently about how consumers are making choices. Unlike the clinical definition of a picky eater from the food psychology literature that focuses on physiological reasons for consumption pickiness, I define shopper pickiness broadly and identify
the two underlying cognitive dimensions on which pickiness rests – precise preferences and “flaw” sensitivity. Factors of pickiness are derived theoretically from consumer thought processes associated with how they form preferences and evaluate alternatives.

Second, I develop a way to measure shopper pickiness as an individual difference by creating the “Picky Shopper Scale.” Casual observation reveals that individuals differ greatly in how picky they are as shoppers. Whereas some shoppers are open to and satisfied with a wide range of alternatives (e.g., James Hetfield in the opening quote), other shoppers apply stricter criteria when it comes to what they want and what they don’t want. By identifying the pickiness trait and its impact on preferences, I can better anticipate the downstream consequences of pickiness in a variety of decision making contexts.

Third, the present work differentiates shopper pickiness from related decision making constructs such as the trait of Maximizer-Satisficer (Schwartz et al. 2002) that may appear (without looking at process) to lead to the same behaviors. For example, I show that pickiness leads to differences in information processing and the weights applied to different categories of attributes that are unique from the maximizer. As such, in defining shopper pickiness, I also contribute to the literature on related scales and establish the role of consumer pickiness in a larger nomological network.

In this research, I conceptualize pickiness and theorize its underlying dimensions. In the seven studies that follow, I test the scale items that form the 10 item “Picky Shopper Scale,” and demonstrate the unique contribution that pickiness (and the scale itself) reveals about consumer preference and choice. I now turn to a review of the literature and what I know about pickiness.
3.2 Pickiness

As a starting point to defining the picky shopper, I turn to the literature in food psychology on picky eaters. This is an area that has investigated pickiness at a clinical level in a specific consumption domain. According to this literature, pickiness is an adaptive personality trait (Milton 1993) that is associated with preference for a narrow range of products (Dovey et al. 2008; Guo and Reed 2001; Jacobi et al. 2003; Pliner and Hobden 1992). Researchers in food psychology often use “selective” and “picky” interchangeably (e.g., Fisher et al. 2014; Williams, Gibbons, Schreck 2005) and use it to refer to an increased “reluctance to accept” certain foods (Dovey et al. 2008). Initially, it seems that pickiness is directly associated with narrowness of consumption.

Further research has documented that picky eaters consume in low variety and amount (Boquin et al. 2014; Galloway et al. 2005; Nicholls et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2005) because of biologically-induced aversions that come from a heightened sensitivity to stimulation and a lower threshold to detect subtle changes in the properties of food (Dunn 1999; Nederkoorn, Jansen, and Havermans 2015). These heightened sensitivities lead picky eaters to reject familiar but unattractive foods and to approach tasting new foods with caution. Pickiness appears to also be driven by sensitivity to features that feel particularly unpleasant to consume when interacting with available alternatives (Dovey et al. 2008; Guo and Reed 2001; Jacobi et al. 2003; Pliner and Hobden 1992). Mallinger (2009) elaborates that picky people have the tendency to feel inordinately troubled by negative attributes, which he call “flaws”. He writes that individuals who are picky “have an uncanny knack for noticing flaws. Their attention is drawn, as if by a magnet to metal, to that which is wrong with something rather than that which is good about it. They seem to have antennae that scan constantly for the sour note, however minor or peripheral.”
Over time, picky eaters build rigid expectations and a narrow set of items or gustatory experiences they are willing to accept. Mallinger (2009; pg 119) noted: “Picky people tend to be unduly disappointed whenever an anticipated experience does not precisely match expectations or is not exactly the same as previously or as usual. They may be exasperated if a favorite food is slightly different from what was remembered.”

Thus, from the food psychology literature, the picture of the picky shopper that emerges is of a consumer who has precise preferences and who is distressed when the products available or offered deviate from these preferences or contain attributes deemed as “negative”. I use this as a starting point in defining key features of the picky shopper. I caution, however, that though the picky eating literature is a starting point, the construct of pickiness when used to describe eaters does not generalize completely to fit the description of the picky shopper. There is a need to advance the understanding of what pickiness means when applied in broader consumption contexts.

To develop a more nuanced perspective on picky shoppers, I gathered preliminary empirical evidence via face-to-face interviews with 10 salespeople working in a variety of retail stores to better understand pickiness as a general consumer trait. Informants were asked to describe the pickiest shoppers they have ever encountered. Picky shoppers were generally viewed by informants as difficult to work with. This echoes the findings of essay 1 that paint perceptions of picky others in a negative light. Thus, I wanted to understand how pickiness manifests in choice and create items that would reveal more about the decision making process of picky individuals and focus less on the label of pickiness (which could lead to reactivity by consumers).
Informants typically described picky shoppers in one of two ways. The first category involved people who come into a store with very rigid and precise preferences in mind. These shoppers are usually seeking something very specific, and they buy exactly what they hoped to find. If it is unavailable, they leave without compromise or further in-store deliberation. As one salesperson said in an interview “Picky people have already made up their minds before coming in here. They would be looking for a long sleeve lace dress or something specific. I tell them, well, I don’t have that, and they don’t want to look at what I have.”

The second category of picky shoppers the informants identified are those who take a very long time at the store, carefully dissecting every detail of the products available. Ultimately, these people have trouble committing to a purchase because they always spot components that they dislike in the options they review. As another salesperson said in an interview “The pickiest woman came in and tried on 20 pairs of shoes, spending the whole afternoon here. She liked none of them and did not buy anything.” This notion of pickiness aligns with popular press reports that observe that picky people in general tend to focus on what is wrong (no matter how minor), and the product details that they dislike in a product (Leibling 2009). It is this category of picky shoppers that seems to align well with others’ perceptions of picky people as “snobby” and “dislikes everything” (Cheng et al. 2017).

3.3 Precise Preferences and Flaw Sensitivity

I posit that there are two major factors to pickiness when drawing from extant literature and informant insights. First, I theorize that a shopper can be identified as picky when that shopper displays narrow, rigid, and crystallized preferences. The choice process focuses on products that carry the precise combination of attributes that s/he likes. This component of pickiness is revealed in the picky eating literature – picky eaters demand to eat “only a few
foods” (Galloway, Lee and Birch 2003, p. 694). They know which exact foods they are willing to consume and they become upset when they don’t get what they had in mind (Galloway et al. 2005). This construct maps on to sales associates’ descriptions of picky individuals who are likely to request very specific products and they are able to list the criteria of the attributes they seek. As such, I identify this dimension of shopper pickiness as having “precise preferences.”

I theorize that shoppers with precise preferences have specific product ideals in mind as they shop. These individuals give considerable thought to the product or product attributes they want, and they try to match what is available to buy with the precise item they have envisioned in their mind. Someone who is high on precise preferences is likely to have a list of specific attributes they want in a product, and they are able to articulate exactly what they desire to both themselves and others in great detail. This precision and the existence of an a priori set of expectations implies that for these shoppers, there is little tolerance for error or compromise between an ideal (i.e. desired purchase) and an actual (i.e. existing) product. In other words, for people with precise preferences, their preferences appear not only specific, but also rigid and final. In contrast, an individual who has less precise preferences may be more likely to provide more general and broad ideas of what they are looking for as they 1) may not have formed a clear and precise idea of their preferences and/or 2) are more open to accepting alternatives that differ from what they previously had in mind.

While having precise preferences leads to being categorized as picky, I note that even those with more unclear preferences or a rudimentary understanding for what they want can also display signs of pickiness. As I stated before, the extant literature suggests that pickiness can be driven by a heightened sensitivity to negative features (Mallinger 2009). Consistent with this sentiment, the interviews with sales associates also revealed that “picky shoppers” tended to
reject in-store options based on imperfections that they noticed on available items as they shopped. I theorize that pickier people more frequently identify “flaws” in products as they shop even if they might not have precise preferences prior to shopping. Taken together, I posit a second central factor to shopper pickiness is having a heightened awareness of “flawed” attributes in available options, or “flaw sensitivity.”

I theorize that shoppers who are flaw sensitive have a tendency to focus on and dwell upon the attributes and attribute combinations that they do not like in existing alternatives. In my consideration of “flaws,” I am not only referring to a major negative product attribute, such as a glaring product defect that most shoppers would identify and dislike. Instead, in keeping with Mallinger (2009), I also consider flaws to include somewhat trivial and unrankable attributes that have the potential to be interpreted as unpleasant (e.g., a tiny scratch on the back of a phone case), but which will not interfere with the functionality of the product. While I consider “flaws” to be trivial aspects of a product, what is and is not a flaw can be very subjective and vary largely across shoppers. What differentiates those who are more versus less picky is that individuals who are more picky have the capacity to observe more flaws and/or feel more bothered by the flaws they observe than individuals who are less picky. While the stimulus threshold for a less picky person to identify a feature as a flaw is relatively high, that threshold is much lower for the pickier individual.

3.4 Related Constructs

As stated earlier, pickiness is inherently about individuals’ preferences and how consumers make choices. I begin by explicating the theoretical differences between “pickiness” and “maximizing” because both types of people appears to be selective in decision making and
those who will not satisfice across available options (see Gottlieb 2011). I define the understanding of maximizing and then discuss why pickiness may appear superficially similar but theoretically distinct from maximizing.

The maximizing literature suggests that some decision makers consistently try to choose the “best” (maximize) while others tend to settle for options that are “good enough” (satisfice) (Simon 1955). Maximizing is not limited to the desire to obtain the best option at the point of choice, but rather is accompanied by a yearning to always get something better, even post-choice (Schwartz 2002). The need for maximizers to obtain the best is illuminated by some of the self-report items that constitute the first published individual difference measure of maximizing: “No matter what it takes, I always try to choose the best thing” and “I never settle for second best” (Schwartz et al. 2002, pg. 1182). Because a maximizing “never settles”, I realize that maximizers and picky people seem similar – they both enforce restrictive standards during choice consideration and both are likely to be troubled by perceived “flaws.”

An important distinction, however, between picky shoppers and maximizers is that a picky person’s thoughts and behaviors derive solely from their own idiosyncratic preferences. In contrast, maximizers fixate on social comparison and have the overarching goal to obtain what might be considered the “best” ranked product or product attributes based on what others believe are “best” (Iyengar, Wells, and Schwartz 2006). Thus, maximizing does not require having any unique personal preferences when making choices. In order to achieve the “best outcome,” maximizers make exhaustive comparisons across a large numbers of options (Carter and Gilovich 2010; Levav et al. 2012; Schwartz et al. 2002; Sparks, Ehrlinger, and Eibach 2012) and engage in social comparison with other people (Ma and Roese 2014; Schwartz et al. 2002). Maximizers rely on external (often social) standards, rather than internal standards to evaluate
and select outcomes, especially when decisions are difficult (Lyubormisky and Ross 1997). Because maximizers choose more externally-validated options (Iyengar, Wells and Schwartz 2006), their preferences and decisions may be somewhat more predictable than those of picky people.

3.5 Overview of Studies

In the studies that follow, I employ scale-development procedures to establish the picky shopper construct and its unique contributions to marketing and decision making. I report a series of studies (studies 1-4) that assess the Picky Shopper Scale’s internal structure, reliability, and relationship to a variety of related constructs such as maximizing (Schwartz et al. 2002). I demonstrate the types of consumer behaviors that are associated with each of my proposed underlying dimensions of shopper pickiness (studies 5A, 5B, and 5C). I then conduct additional studies designed to provide a better understanding of how pickiness affects decision making by showing that pickiness leads to the formation of smaller consideration sets (study 6). Finally, I find that pickier people place greater importance on horizontally-distinguished product attributes than maximizers in choice (study 7).

3.6 Generation of an Initial Item Set

Building on the definition of clinical pickiness, the preliminary interviews, and the two underlying dimensions of picky shoppers that I identified, I began to develop the scale items. My focus is on the Precise Preferences (PP) and Flaw Sensitivity (FS) dimensions of the pickiness construct.
I created initial items for my scale with inspiration from relevant literature (e.g. Dovey et al. 2008) and by asking individuals to free-associate to pickiness in an open-ended response format. Specifically, I asked Mechanical Turk workers (n = 135) to free associate and provide adjectives that describe a “picky shopper.” This ensured that I would have a richer pool of language to describe pickiness in my items. The same participants were also asked to submit possible scale items for a picky shopper scale. I then rewrote the consistently repeated vocabulary, themes, and phrases into a scale item format. Forty-six items were generated for the initial scale with the two theorized factors in mind.

Next, to assess content validity, two doctoral student coders were given construct definitions of Precise Preferences and Flaw Sensitivity (named Type 1 and Type 2 for purposes of coding) and asked to independently classify each of the 46 items into the two types. The exact definitions of each factor the coders read is reproduced below:

**Precise Preferences (PP):** “Someone who has a clear idea of attributes she wants when shopping for a product. She is searching for a narrow set of products that have her ideal attributes. She is overly precise when it comes to preference matching between her ideal and what is available in stores. She is someone who knows exactly what she wants to buy.”

**Flaw Sensitivity (FS):** “Someone who can pinpoint negative attributes on products in an assortment which eliminates the product from consideration. In other words, she is hypersensitive to the “flaw” (unattractive feature) in products. She is good at identifying attributes that she does not like in the options that are presented to her.”

Overall, the reliability of the two coders was $\kappa = .75$. This purification procedure allowed me to recognize which items were ambiguous or ill-defined (i.e., items in which the coders
disagreed or which they thought belonged to neither definition or to both definitions) and thus required further attention. Specifically, if one coder believed that the item belonged in PP but the other coder thought the item belonged in FS, the item was dropped. In addition, for some items, the coders wrote notes on why they could place the item into neither or both categories. In these cases, I made the final decision on whether to keep or drop the item. This coding procedure reduced the initial 46 items down to 36 items – 18 items that belonged to PP and 18 items that belonged to FS.

3.7 Studies 1 and 2: Purification and Exploratory Factor Analysis

The 36 item scale was administered to 247 undergraduate students (median age = 19, 45.2% male) at a large northeastern university to provide preliminary estimates of scale structure and reliability. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants received extra course credit for an introductory level business course upon completion. The questionnaire consisted of the 36 Picky Shopper Scale items and other potentially related scales used to measure construct validity.

I calculated corrected item-total correlations for the 18 PP items and the 18 FS items and purified the scale by removing items that fell below .40 on the hypothesized dimension and items that did not correlate more with the hypothesized dimension than the non-hypothesized dimension (cf. Ruekert and Churchill 1984). This procedure further reduced the scale to 24 items.

I then conducted a second purification study with my 24-item Picky Shopper Scale on Mechanical Turk (mTurk) (n = 439; median age = 33, males = 47.6%). Participants received $.50 for completing the Picky Shopper Scale, as well as other scales and measures. Using this dataset,
I ran an exploratory principal factor analysis with PROMAX rotation. Though the eigenvalues for the top five factors were: 8.59, 3.45, 1.15, 1.00, and .98, there was a clear two-factor result based on a Scree test. The clear two factor solution mapped onto the items measuring PP and FS. These two factors accounted for 49.8% of the total variance. Next, I culled items that did not clearly load on one factor or that loaded on both factors (i.e., had high cross-loadings). In an effort to create a compact scale, I chose five items for each factor that had high within factor loadings and weak cross-loadings and covered the full meaning of the factor represented by all the items. The final Picky Shopper Scale (referred to throughout the remainder of the essay) consisted of 10 items (see Appendix A to view the Picky Shopper Scale items).

The 10 items in the Picky Shopper Scale all yielded loadings above .60 on the target factor (pattern matrix) and below .30 on the non-target factor. The reliability of PP was $\alpha = .85$ and the reliability of FS was $\alpha = .87$. The unweighted linear combination reliability of the two factors was $\rho = .91$ (Nunnally 1978). Finally, the correlation between the two factors was $r = .44$, $p < .001$.

I had also included a five-item direct measure of pickiness at the end of the study (e.g., the direct “Picky” measure was comprised of: “I am a picky shopper,” “I am a critical shopper,” “I have a strict filter when shopping,” “I am a highly selective shopper,” and “When shopping, I tend to select few options and reject the vast majority of options”). Though I were concerned about reactance to the direct measure of pickiness, it was correlated at $r = .57$, $p < .001$ with PP and correlated at $r = .64$, $p < .001$ with FS. Finally, this direct 5-item Picky measure correlated at $r = .71$, $p < .001$ with the more nuanced aggregated 10 item Picky Shopper Scale. In addition, when I regressed the 5 Picky items on the two factors, I found that both PP ($\beta = .36$, $t = 9.68$, $p < .001$) and FS ($\beta = .47$, $t = 12.59$, $p < .001$) were significant contributors. This suggests that each
factor, PP and FS, contributes uniquely to the picky construct. I more systematically and rigorously test this idea in study 3 using SEM methodology.

Overall, studies 1 and 2 purified an initial pool of items down to 10 Picky Shopper Scale items based on the two factors I theorized pickiness to stem from. Though direct measures of pickiness were correlated with the Picky Shopper Scale, the direct measures of pickiness obscure the choice process-related aspects of pickiness. Further, the direct Picky measure could have led to consumer reactance among individuals who did not want to paint themselves in a negative light. Thus, for these reasons, the more nuanced Picky Shopper Scale measure is preferable to the direct pickiness measure.

3.8 Study 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In my third study, participants recruited from mTurk (n = 435; median age = 35; males = 46.1%) completed the 10 item Picky Shopper Scale as well as a few short tasks and other scales for $.50. I conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using the variance-covariance matrix of my dataset, specifying the presence of two latent variables, PP and FS, using LISREL 9.2 (Joreskog and Sorbom 1993). Though the model’s chi-square was significant $\chi^2 = 108.23, p < .001$, other fit statistics were acceptable. The comparative fit index (CFI) was .97 and the non-normed fit index (NNFI) was .96; both exceeded the .95 recommendation (Bentler 1992). The root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) was .071 (95% CI = .056-.086), which is acceptable (Browne and Cudeck 1993; Steiger 1998). In addition, the standardized root mean residual (RMR) was a reasonable .045 (Joreskog and Sorbom 1993). In addition, the factor loadings all exceeded .50. Taken together, the fit indices reveal that the 10-item Picky Shopper Scale performs well. The correlation of the two latent variables was $r = .25$. The reliability of PP was $\alpha$
= .89, the reliability of FS was \( \alpha = .88 \). The reliability of the two unweighted linear combination of the two factors was \( \rho = .90 \).

To test the discriminant validity between the two factors, I calculated average variance extracted (AVEs) for each factor. The AVE of PP was .63 and the AVE of FS was .58. Both of these AVEs exceed the square of the correlation between the two factors \( (r^2 = .063) \) and the minimum threshold of .50. This suggests that PP and FS are sufficiently different from each other (Fornell and Larker 1982).

To further validate my scale, I regressed the direct measure of pickiness (i.e., the 5 item Picky index as seen is study 2) on the two dimensions. I specified three latent factors, Picky, FS, and PP; each factor is reflected by five items. The direct Picky measure was positively correlated with both PP \( (r = .31, p < .001) \) and FS \( (r = .71, p < .001) \). When PP and FS are modeled as determinants of Picky (5 item reliability of Picky \( \alpha = .93 \)), the structural equation of my model is:

\[
Picky = 0.16 \times PP + 0.74 \times FS; R^2 = 0.63.\]

Taken together, these results suggests that both PP \( (z = 4.23, p < .001) \) and FS \( (z = 15.30, p < .001) \) are significant contributors to the latent variable Picky. I speculate that FS is a larger contributor than PP in this structural equation and in the zero-order regression results in Study 2 because the colloquial “picky shopper” may remind people of “nit-picking” and paying attention to trivial details. Thus, “picky” may be highlighted more in the FS items rather than the PP items.

### 3.9 Study 4: Test Retest Reliability

To assess whether individual Picky Shopper Scale scores are consistent over time, I ran a test-retest study. One hundred and six mTurk participants (males = 48.1\%, median age = 33)
completed the Picky Shopper Scale twice, with two weeks between the assessments, to examine test-retest reliability. They were financially compensated for their participation.

At time 1, the correlation of the two factors was $r = .46$. The reliability of PP was $\alpha = .90$, the reliability of FS was $\alpha = .88$, and the unweighted linear combination reliability of the two factors was $\rho = .93$. At time 2, the correlation of the two factors was $r = .35$. The reliability of PP was $\alpha = .92$, the reliability of FS was $\alpha = .87$, and the unweighted linear combination reliability of the two factors was $\rho = .94$. The within-factor correlation between time 1 PP and time 2 PP was $r = .68$. The within-factor correlation between time 1 FS and time 2 FS was $r = .72$. I then assessed across-factor correlations and observed that the correlation between time 1 PP and time 2 FS was $r = .37$ while the correlation between time 1 FS and time 2 PP was $r = .24$. As expected, the across-factor correlations were lower than the within-factor over-time correlations. All effects were significant at $p < .01$.

Test-retest reliability was established by administering the Picky Shopper Scale to the same sample on two different occasions. The results suggest that there is good consistency of the Picky Shopper Scale over time. The scale is reliably identifying pickiness as a stable individual difference.

3.10 Construct validity

Researchers advocate looking at socially desirable responding to rule out potential confounds (Mick 1996). I assessed the responses to the Picky Shopper Scale for signs of such social desirability response biases by correlating the factors of my scale with an impression management scale (Paulhus 1984). I observed that neither PP nor FS had a significant
relationship with impression management. This indicates that pickiness is not confounded with the desire to leave a good impression.

Up to this point, I have been creating and testing the items that capture the picky shopper and which allow me to measure shopper pickiness as an individual difference. In this section, I elaborate on the relationships between the Picky Shopper Scale (its factors) and potentially related constructs. This is a necessary step to verify the unique contributions of the Picky Shopper Scale and establish its discriminant validity. As such, I administered other, potentially related, individual difference scales across studies. The relationships between these other scales and the Picky Shopper Scale (overall and by factor) were determined and are summarized in table 3.1.

Maximizing. As discussed above, the most obvious decision making construct that appears to be similar to pickiness is maximizing (Schwarz et al. 2002). They belong to the same nomological network. In study 4, I found significant correlations between pickiness and maximizing (Schwartz et al. 2002), but discriminant validity measures suggest that each factor of pickiness and the overall Picky Shopper Scale achieve discriminant validity from maximizing (Schwarz et al. 2002) (AVEs > r^2; Fornell and Larker 1982). First, I note that PP has a small positive relationship with maximizing. This lends support to my argument that those who are picky are likely to make decisions based on their own idiosyncratic preferences while maximizers may not necessarily have the same level of precise preferences. However, I observe a positive relationship between FS and maximizing. I believe that this relationship exists because those who reject options based on undesirable attributes or “flaws” may operate similarly to maximizers who reject options because they are not the objective best. Together, the Picky Shopper Scale is correlated at \( r = .38 \) with maximizing (Schwartz et al. 2002). This shows that
the two constructs (pickiness and maximizing) belong in the same nomological network but are not interchangeable.

Variety Seeking. Another construct that may belong in the same nomological network as shopper pickiness is the need for change and variety. I posit that pickiness, particularly PP, will be inversely related to the desire to explore (which includes purchasing variety) because PP encompasses the need to stick to predetermined criteria. The PP items in particular delineate a sense of rigidity and reluctance to deviate from set preferences. In contrast, people who desire variety should be more open minded and less rigid. Measuring variety seeking (Raju 1980) and pickiness, I found a small negative correlation between variety seeking and PP \((r = -.10)\). However, FS was uncorrelated with variety seeking. This rendered the overall Picky Shopper Scale insignificantly correlated with variety seeking as well.

Need for Control. Next, I theorize that pickiness is positively linked with need for control. I define control as the perceived ability to alter events (Burger 1989). A review of the control literature suggests that the feeling of control arises when an individual feels they can manage their environment while attempting to product a desired outcome or prevent an undesired outcome (Skinner 1996). Picky people are observed to care quite a bit about what they consume, which highlights a certain level of desire for control. From this, I predict that pickier people, who have rigid preferences and sensitivities towards negative attributes, will actively seek control to get exactly what they want and remove what they don’t want. More broadly, I theorize that pickiness requires a level of active judgment that overlaps with the concept of agency, and therefore, also with need for control (Little et al. 1994). My definition of pickiness implies that a person’s preferences are derived from active, critical, and deliberate introspection rather than from passive habits and patterns. I find that shopper pickiness is modestly correlated
with need for control \((r = .25)\) (Burger and Cooper 1979), which is aligned with my prediction that pickiness is partially related to having the desire to take active control when forming preferences and shopping for desired products.

**Decisiveness.** Kruglanski (1990) described decisiveness as desiring answers for topics instead of facing confusion and ambiguity (p. 337). Webster and Kruglanski (1994) claim that decisive individuals tend to “experience an urgent desire to reach closure” (pg. 1050). As such, individuals who are decisive are likely to figure out quickly what features and attributes they prefer and “close” the decision. This can be interpreted as related to components of PP. In accordance with this prediction, I find a significant correlation between the PP factor and decisiveness \((r = .45)\) (see Decisiveness subscale in Need for Cognitive Closure Scale; Webster and Kruglanski 1994). The FS factor is directionally, but not significantly, negatively correlated with decisiveness \((r = -.14)\). Together, these results suggest that decisive picky individuals may strive to solidify their precise preferences early on and put an end to decisions, while indecisive picky people may be prone to continuously pick at flaws as they arise.

**Regulatory Focus.** I also examine the relationship between pickiness and regulatory orientation. On this spectrum, I suspect PP may be more aligned with a promotion focus, and FS may be more closely aligned with a prevention focus. According to Higgins (1996), those with a promotion focus emphasize achieving an ideal self. This is similar to how someone who is high on PP envisions and seeks their ideal product. In contrast, at the core of a prevention orientation is concern with preventing negative outcomes from occurring (Higgins 1996), just as FS is about identifying and removing flaws. The process of identifying flaws in a product almost certainly will lead to rejecting that product and preventing the product from entering consideration. Thus, I expect regulatory focus (Lockwood, Kunda, and Jordan 2002) to be differentially correlated with
the two factors making up the Picky Shopper Scale. Indeed those scoring higher on the PP
dimension also scored higher on a promotion orientation ($r = .22$) and those scoring higher on
the FS dimension scored higher on a prevention orientation ($r = .17$).

Taken together, the Picky Shopper Scale appears to be uniquely capturing an individual
difference in shopper pickiness that is not being captured by scales residing in the same
nomological network (i.e., maximizing, variety seeking, need for control, decisiveness,
regulatory orientation) and is not subject to socially desirable responding. Though I have
enumerated relationships between one of the factors in the Picky Shopper Scale to these related
constructs, the 10 item Picky Shopper Scale is not subsumed under any of these other constructs.

3.11 Study 5A: Describing the Ideal Product and Reactions to Advertisements

The first four studies of the current work focused on developing and testing the properties
of the 10 item Picky Shopper Scale. In the studies that follow, I address the differences in
decision making processes and behaviors of more and less picky shoppers to verify the predictive
validity of the scale. For the scale to be meaningful and useful to marketers, I must be able to
demonstrate that the dimensions of the Picky Shopper Scale can be a useful tool for predicting
outcomes, and that PP and FS are each related to unique shopper behaviors. I begin my
investigation with a set of three studies related to the two underlying dimensions.

In study 5A, I sought to understand whether I could use the relative scores of individuals
on the Picky Shopper Scale to predict the number of features consumer would consider when
describing an ideal product and whether pickier consumers would be more critical of an
advertised product. As such, I asked individuals to describe their ideal apartment and react to a
focal apartment advertisement. I used the Picky Shopper Scale to assess pickiness as an
individual difference and predicted that individuals who scored higher on PP would be able to describe their ideal apartment in greater detail and people who scored higher on FS would identify more advertised features of an apartment as negative.

3.11.1 Method

Undergraduates (n = 228; median age = 19; males = 49.1%) at a large northeastern university were asked to imagine trying to get a new apartment for the next school year. They were then asked to describe, in an open-ended response format, their ideal apartment and the attributes they would seek in this ideal. Participants were not limited in how long or short their responses could be.

After participants described their ideal apartment, I asked them to look at an advertisement for a “focal” apartment. The advertised apartment was described by ten attributes (e.g. 700 sq. ft.) and based on a real apartment listing in the location where the participants reside (with actual attributes and features). The focal apartment description is reproduced below:

“A one bedroom (700 square feet) apartment, located downtown at the intersection of Pugh Street and Fairmount Avenue. You will be living on the second floor. The apartment building was built in 1980 but it is well renovated and clean. Your room is unfurnished. Your rent will be $800 a month, including heat but excluding electricity and internet. You can park your car in a designated lot that you pay for by semester. It is about a 20 minute walk to your classes and a 7 minute walk to the bus stop downtown. There is a month's rent of deposit due on the first week you move in.”
Participants were asked to discuss their opinions of the focal apartment. Finally, participants completed the Picky Shopper Scale (10 items; PP and FS) and demographic measures.

3.11.2 Results

Scale Reliability. The reliability of the five PP items was $\alpha = .87$ and the reliability of the five FS items was $\alpha = .86$. The two factors had a correlation of $r = .46$, $p < .01$. The Picky Shopper Scale unweighted combination reliability of the two factors was $\rho = .93$.

Precise Preferences and Level of Detail. Two coders counted the extent to which participants were detailed in describing their ideal apartment on a scale of 1 (no detail) – 9 (extremely detailed). I told coders that a score of 9 signaled that the apartment was described in “a lot of detail and it is easy to picture the apartment described”. In contrast, a score of 1 meant that the participant was “not opinionated in what s/he wants, and there is almost no detail in his/her description.” I hypothesized that individuals who were willing and able to elaborate on a higher number of attributes they would seek and to provide more specific details about their desired apartment would be likely to score higher on the PP dimension of the Picky Shopper Scale. Inter-coder reliability was $\alpha = .88$.

I regressed the amount of detail provided on the two factors. I found that the PP score on my Picky Shopper Scale had a positive relationship with the level of detail participants provided in describing their ideal apartment ($\beta = .29, t = 3.73, p < .001$). When PP was taken into account in the regression model, there was no impact of FS on this measure ($\beta = -.02, t = -.29, p = .77$). However, I note that the number of attributes participants listed (intercoder reliability = .92) did not have a relationship with PP or with FS ($ps > .10$).
Flaw Sensitivity and Disliked Attributes. The coders also counted the number of negative attributes (flaws) participants mentioned when assessing the focal apartment. For example, here is one open-ended response to the focal apartment in the ad:

“I want an apartment that is in more walking distance, especially if I am going to be paying over $800 a month. Also, even though it is renovated, it is still old and there may be some problems with the place. For the price of the apartment, I feel like it should be furnished.”

In this instance, the number of disliked attributes was coded as 4 because the participant mentioned disliking: distance, price, age of apartment, and furnishings. They listed each feature of the focal apartment that they found to be negative separately. I hypothesized that people who scored higher on FS would be those who would find more features to be negative in the focal product advertisement, when compared to people who scored lower on FS.

Thus, in my second regression, I used the count of negative attributes mentioned when judging the focal apartment advertisement as my dependent variable. I found that the number of negative attributes participants mentioned was positively correlated with the FS factor ($\beta = .19, t = 2.63, p < .01$). In addition, when FS was accounted for in my model, PP did not have a significant relationship with number of negative attributes mentioned ($\beta = -.08, t = -1.08, p = .28$). Refer to Table 3.2 for zero order correlations for each factor.

3.11.3 Discussion

The results of study 5A suggest that each factor measures what it is designed to measure. As expected, people who scored higher on PP were more willing and able to provide details of what they were seeking than people who scored lower on PP. In contrast, people who scored
higher on FS were more willing and able to name things they disliked about a focal choice alternative than people who scored lower on FS.

### 3.12 Study 5B: Precise Preferences and Switching Behavior

Study 5B examines the extent to which the Picky Shopper Scale, and in particular the PP factor, can predict the likelihood of switching behavior in light of cues that signal product popularity. If individuals score highly on the PP dimension of the Picky Shopper Scale, they are likely to know precisely what they are seeking. As such, they should feel a greater sense of commitment towards the product they have envisioned and refuse alternatives that are missing the components they want, even if those alternatives are popular. This prediction is backed up by literature that has established that when preference strength and clarity increases, individuals’ choices are less likely to be swayed by external cues (Scheibehenne, Greifeneder, and Todd 2010).

#### 3.12.1 Method

Mturk workers (n = 100; median age = 33; males = 49.2%) were compensated to participate in a hypothetical chocolate choice study. I removed 10 participants who indicated they had allergies to some of the ingredients in the chocolate candies used as the stimuli in this study and thus were limited in their choice options. As such, I used the input from 90 participants in total.

Participants were introduced to an assortment of chocolates (n = 16 choice options) that were described on four attributes: chocolate type, cocoa content, flavor, and nut content. I used the same assortment design procedure as Chernev (2003). No combination of attributes was
repeated in the assortment; all chocolate options were unique from one another. Participants were instructed that they were eligible to receive a small box of chocolates of the same kind from the Godiva store as a gift. Participants were then asked to choose one chocolate option from an assortment. I asked participants to rate how attractive the chocolate option they selected was (1 (not attractive at all) – 9 (extremely attractive)). After choosing, participants then read:

“A salesperson at the Godiva store tells you that you can get a small box of the exact kind that you just selected OR a small box of the most popular chocolates from the entire Godiva collection. The most popular chocolates are determined by other customers who frequent the Godiva store.”

I asked participants whether they wanted to switch from their initially preferred option to the most popular alternative (0 = Stay, 1 = Switch). Finally participants filled out the Picky Shopper Scale, a question about general chocolate interest, as well as a few related scales.

3.12.2 Results

The PP factor had a reliability of $\alpha = .88$ and the FS factor had a reliability of $\alpha = .87$. The correlation between PP and FS was $.31, p < .001$ for this dataset. The reliability of the Picky Shopper Scale was $\rho = .90$.

I ran a regression model with PP and FS as predictors of how attractive the participants believed the chocolate they initially chose was. PP had a positive relationship with the attractiveness ratings for the original chocolate choice ($\beta = .35, t = 4.11, p < .001$). In the same model, FS was not a significant predictor of these attractiveness ratings ($\beta = -.03, t = -.42, p = .67$) when PP was accounted for in the model.
In response to the invitation to switch boxes of chocolates, overall, 21.7% of the total sample switched from the initially preferred to the most popular. Further, the Picky Shopper Scale was able to predict which consumers were likely to switch. I ran a binary logistic regression and observed that those who scored higher on PP were less likely to switch to the “popular” box of chocolates (0 = stay, 1 = switch; $\beta_{PP} = -.47$, Wald = 5.16, $p = .02$). In the same model, FS was not a significant predictor of the likelihood of switching to the “popular” choice ($\beta_{FS} = .16$, Wald = .95, $p = .33$). PP had a negative relationship with willingness to forego one’s own choice for a popular alternative. Refer to Table 3.3 for zero order regression coefficients.

3.12.3 Discussion

The results of study 5B reveal that individuals who scored highly on the PP factor of the Picky Shopper Scale found their initial selection, based on the specific combination of attributes they wanted in an assortment, was more attractive overall. Further, those who scored highly on PP were less swayed by other people’s opinions and stayed with their own idiosyncratically preferred, but less popular, chocolate choice.

3.13 Study 5C: Flaw Sensitivity and Reactions to Superficial Product Flaws

Just as I wanted to see whether PP would lead to predictable decision processes in Study 5B (i.e., preference strength and commitment), I also wanted to test whether those who score highly on FS will take action when they encounter superficial product “flaws” in a choice. I specifically tested whether individuals high on FS would complain about and dispose of a product they had already purchased more quickly upon finding a tiny blemish. Those who are
truly flaw sensitive should score highly on the FS dimension of the Picky Shopper Scale and feel more bothered by these small imperfections.

3.13.1 Method

Undergraduate students (n = 126, median age = 19, males = 54.2%) at a large northeastern university imagined buying a cell phone of their choice and subsequently finding a tiny scratch on its back side (not the screen) immediately after purchase. Individuals were told that the blemish was completely cosmetic and the phone functioned perfectly.

Participants were asked to provide their reactions to this situation, namely to indicate: 1) how much they cared about the scratch, 2) how much they felt irritated by the scratch, 3) how likely they would be to go back to the store to return the phone, 4) how likely they would be to go back to the store to swap the blemished phone for a different one, and 5) how likely they would be to complain about the scratch to their friends, all on 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely) scales. Finally, participants filled out the 10-item Picky Shopper Scale.

3.13.2 Results

The PP factor of the Picky Shopper Scale had a reliability of $\alpha = .86$ and the FS factor had a reliability of $\alpha = .86$. The reliability for the scale was $\rho = .91$. The correlation between the PP factor and the FS factor was $r = .57$, $p < .001$ for this dataset sample.

I initially ran a series of regressions with PP and FS as predictors of the five reactions to the phone scratch. I wanted to see whether these two factors would be related to the five downstream reactions of interest related to the phone scratch. When FS was accounted for in each model, PP was not a significant predictor of any of the reactions (all $p$s $>.10$). As expected,
in each of these models, FS was a significant predictor: how much participants cared about the scratch ($\beta = .37, t = 3.64, p < .001$), how irritated they felt by the situation ($\beta = .41, t = 3.99, p < .001$), the likelihood of returning the phone ($\beta = .27, t = 2.53, p = .01$), the likelihood of switching the phone for a different one ($\beta = .26, t = 2.51, p = .01$), and the likelihood of complaining to friends about the scratch ($\beta = .28, t = 2.75, p < .01$). See Table 2 for zero order regression coefficients.

3.13.3 Discussion

The results of study 5C suggest that individuals who scored higher on the Picky Shopper Scale, and in particular the FS dimension of the scale, were more likely to complain and react negatively to small imperfections in a product they had purchased. The results align with the basic construct of flaw sensitivity and reveal that the scale successfully measures relative intolerance to minor product blemishes. This finding has managerial implications for product return policies and the warranties offered by firms that are likely to have a strongly picky customer base.

3.14 Study 6: Consideration Set Size

If picky individuals know more precisely what they like and are sensitive to things they don’t like, an open question is whether pickier individuals have smaller consideration sets. Specifically, do pickier individuals select fewer alternatives and reject more alternatives than other shoppers?
Consideration sets are constructed mental subsets of available options that survive mental screening processes (Gilbridge and Allenby 2004; Häubl and Trifts 2000; Shocker et al. 1991); shoppers often form consideration sets before making choices in order to have a more manageable set of options to decide more rigorously among (Chakravarti and Janiszewski 2003). Consideration sets emerge when consumers use elimination strategies or rules (e.g. editing, intuition, category-based evaluation, attribute processing) to narrow down the number of options they will make a choice from (Chernev 2006; Ursic and Helgeson 1990). Only considered items are ultimately chosen. Consideration sets are typically heterogeneous in size across contexts and across consumers (Roberts and Lattin 1991). I hypothesized that pickier consumers would consistently have smaller consideration sets, with the effect being triggered by both factors of the scale.

First, PP should be inversely related to consideration set size. Because picky shoppers who identify with the PP factor have already developed a clear and precise vision of the product they want to buy, they may only look at alternatives that are very close to this ideal. This will implicitly prevent all but a few alternatives that match these precise preferences from entering into their consideration sets. As precision implies a degree of narrowness and rigidity to preferences, those high on PP should consider only a small set of available alternatives.

Second, FS should also be inversely related to consideration set size. People high on FS habitually identify flaws in available purchase options, a habit that should lead them to reject many of the available options for various reasons. These “flaw sensitive” shoppers are hyper-aware of negative features (or features that bother them in particular). As such, upon identifying a blemish, a picky shopper may fixate on the flaw until s/he rejects the alternative from consideration.
3.14.1 Method

MTurk participants (n = 435; median age = 35; males = 46.1%) first filled out the Picky Shopper Scale and then were introduced to 15 jams (stimuli inspired by Iyengar and Lepper 2000). The 15 jams were pictorially presented sequentially and participants then indicated whether they would be interested in buying each jam in the next year (Yes = 1, No = 0) after each. Next, I asked how important (1 (not important at all) to 9 (extremely important)) each of six jam attributes was in selecting jams to purchase: price, brand, fruit type, texture, taste and color. These importance ratings allowed me to estimate whether pickier shoppers tended to care more about a larger array of product attributes, or whether they really only cared about a few specific jam attributes.

3.14.2 Results

The reliability of PP was $\alpha = .89$, the reliability of FS was $\alpha = .88$. The reliability of the Picky Shopper Scale was $\rho = .90$. The correlation of the two latent variables, PP and FS, was $r = .25$.

To calculate the average consideration set size, I summed the number of the jams participants indicated “Yes,” they would be interested in buying (of the 15 possible). The mean jam consideration set size contained 8.43 (SD = 3.73) jams. However, I found that participants who scored higher on the Picky Shopper Scale said “Yes” to fewer jams. They constructed smaller consideration sets ($\beta = -.10, t = -1.98, p = .05$). I note that each factor in the scale, PP and FS, independently contributed to the smaller set size (see Table 2 for statistics).
Next, I examined the jam attribute importance ratings on the 1-9 scale. Those who scored higher on the Picky Shopper Scale provided higher importance ratings for each of the jam attributes except price: color ($\beta = .14, t = 2.84, p < .01$); fruit type ($\beta = .19, t = 4.08, p < .001$); taste ($\beta = .16, t = 3.29, p = .001$); and texture ($\beta = .16, t = 3.35, p = .001$). The Picky Shopper Scale had a weaker relationship with the importance rating of brand ($\beta = .09, t = 1.95, p = .05$) and no relationship with the importance of price ($\beta = -.02, t = -.40, p = .69$).

Finally, I summed each of the attribute importance ratings (on the 1-9 scale) to create a total attribute importance index. People who scored higher on the Picky Shopper Scale ($\beta = .16, t = 3.33, p < .001$) also had higher scores on the total attribute importance index. PP and FS were also individually positively related with this total importance index (both $ps < .05$) (see Table 2 for zero order correlations).

**3.14.3 Discussion**

Overall, I found a negative relationship between pickiness, as measured by the 10 item Picky Shopper Scale, and consideration set size in a specific product domain (i.e. jams). In addition, people who scored higher on the Picky Shopper Scale reported caring more about all of the jam attributes, relative to those who scored lower on the scale. In particular, they placed weight on certain unrankable (i.e., horizontal) attributes like jam color and jam taste. The idea that picky shoppers care about unrankable (i.e., horizontal) attributes led me to a deeper examination of product attributes, both horizontal and vertical, in Study 7. In particular, Study 7 allows me to make further distinctions between those scoring high on the Picky Shopper Scale and individuals having maximizing tendencies (Schwartz 2002). For maximizers, rankable (i.e., vertical) attributes should be relatively more important in choice because of their focus on social
comparisons, but for the picky shopper, unrankable (i.e. horizontal) attributes may play a larger role.

3.15 Study 7: Vertical versus Horizontal Attribute Importance to a Picky Shopper versus Maximizer

Study 7 was designed to provide more explicit evidence of the differences between shopper pickiness (as measured by the Picky Shopper Scale) and maximizers (as measured by the Maximizer-Satisficer scale) in predicting shoppers’ attitudes and behaviors. As the results of study 5B suggest, the picky shopper’s precise preferences are not driven by the desire to get the “best” option based on others’ standards, but rather to align the picky shoppers’ precise and idiosyncratic preferences with the product options at hand. Picky shoppers were less swayed by popular opinion. Further, as the results of Study 6 suggest, pickier shoppers place a greater important on horizontal product attributes. Such horizontal attributes are attributes with levels that cannot be ranked. These unrankable attributes are less useful for someone who is motivated to determine the “best” overall (i.e., maximizers). In contrast, vertical attributes are attributes with levels that have distinct hierarchies, such that one level can be ranked as “best” with relative consensus across individuals (Greenaway, Hine and Milner 1995; Hotelling 1927; Lancaster 1979). Such vertical attributes should resonate with maximizers by helping them more quickly determine the “best” option.

While both picky shoppers and maximizers are likely to refuse to compromise on their standards when deciding among available alternatives, I predict that maximizers will pay more attention to vertical attributes than horizontal attributes because picking the right level of vertical
attributes can convey the idea that one has chosen an objectively undisputed “winner.”

Alternatives that have the right levels of vertical attributes should be sufficient to satisfy the maximizer’s desires. In contrast, I believe that the value placed on horizontal attributes, which are based on personal preference, will have an impact on picky shoppers’ decisions. Thus, in study 7, I examine how much importance picky people versus maximizers place on rankable (vertical) and unrankable (horizontal) attributes.

3.15.1 Method

I ran study 7 with 118 female undergraduate students at a large northeastern university (median age = 19). Participants received extra course credit for their participation. The context of this study was women’s clothing, necessitating the use of a singer gender for this study. Some clothing attributes tend to be more vertical in nature (e.g. value; quality) and other clothing attributes more horizontal in nature (e.g. design; fit on body). I hypothesized that individuals who scored higher on the Picky Shopper Scale would find both horizontal and vertical attributes to be important in their clothing choice when shopping. In contrast, I predicted that maximizers would predominantly care only about vertical attributes.

Participants were introduced to 20 different clothing attributes. To confirm which attributes were vertical versus horizontal, I first asked participants to categorize which attributes felt “rankable” versus “not rankable” in a sorting task. After participants sorted attributes into one of two boxes (i.e. rankable vs unrankable), they then revisited each attribute again. This time, participants were asked to rate how important each of the 20 attributes would feel to them if they were making a clothing choice on a 1 (not important at all) to 9 (extremely important)
scale. Participants then completed the 10 item Picky Shopper Scale and Schwartz et al.’s (2002) Maximizer-Satisficer scale.

3.15.2 Results

The reliability of the 10-item Picky Shopper Scale was α = .94. The reliability of PP was .89 and the reliability of FS was .91. The correlation between the two factors was \( r = .56, p < .001 \). The Maximizer-Satisficer scale had a reliability of \( \alpha = .85 \). The Picky Shopper scale was correlated at \( r = .48, p < .01 \) with the Maximizer-Satisficer scale.

*Vertical Attributes.* The majority of participants (above 50%) categorized 9 of the 20 attributes I listed as “rankable” by levels. I then averaged the importance ratings of these 9 attributes to create a *Vertical Attribute Importance* index (\( \alpha = .78 \)). In a regression, with the Picky Shopper Scale and the Maximizer-Satisficer scale as independent variables, I found that as people scored higher on both the Picky Shopper Scale (\( \beta = .39, t(115) = 4.25, p < .001 \)) and the maximizer scale (\( \beta = .19, t(115) = 2.08, p = .04 \)), they rated vertical attributes to be more important. Both picky shoppers and maximizers value vertical attributes. The zero order regression coefficient for picky was \( \beta = .47, t(116) = 5.77, p < .001 \); the zero order regression coefficient for maximizer was \( \beta = .35, t(116) = 4.05, p < .001 \).

*Horizontal Attributes.* The remaining 11 items were more frequently categorized (above 50%) as “unrankable”. I used the importance ratings of these 11 attributes to create a *Horizontal Attribute Importance* index (\( \alpha = .75 \)). In a second regression, with the Picky Shopper Scale and the Maximizer-Satisficer scale as independent variables, I found that as people scored higher on the Picky Shopper Scale, they rated horizontal attributes to be more important (\( \beta = .38, t(115) = 3.84, p < .001 \)). However, the Maximizer-Satisficer scale did not have a significant relationship
with horizontal attribute importance ($\beta = -0.003$, $t(115) = -0.03$, $p = 0.98$). The zero order regression coefficient for picky was $\beta = 0.31$, $t(116) = 3.46$, $p = 0.001$; the zero order regression coefficient for maximizer was $\beta = 0.10$, $t(116) = 1.10$, $p = 0.27$. Thus, picky shoppers care relatively more about horizontal attributes than maximizers do. See Table 2 for zero order correlations of importance of horizontal/vertical attributes and each factor of pickiness (i.e., PP and FS).

3.15.3 Discussion

Participants who scored highly on maximizing tendencies believe vertical attributes are important when making decisions about clothing options but do not seem to care about horizontal attributes. In contrast, participants who can be considered picky by scoring highly on the Picky Shopper Scale evaluate both horizontal and vertical attributes as being important. The Picky Shopper Scale is able to capture a component of shopper attitudes that the Maximizer-Satisficer scale cannot. This provides further evidence that pickiness is a distinct construct from maximizing. It also has managerial implications. If a firm’s core customers are picky, their choices will be based on rankable and unrankable attributes. This will make it more difficult to predict their choices in advance.

3.16 General Discussion

The current work provides evidence that shopper pickiness exists at an individual difference level. To establish it as a unique construct, I theorized it to have a two-factor structure – Precise Preferences (PP) and Flaw Sensitivity (FS). I developed a 10-item scale and examined its psychometric properties empirically. The resulting Picky Shopper Scale had the hypothesized
two-factor structure and the scale demonstrated good fit and good reliability across studies (studies 1-4). Next, I determined that the two scale factors were positively related to individuals’ ability to articulate what they wanted in a product (PP) and what they didn’t want (FS) (study 5A). I found that PP and FS were each uniquely related to certain decisions (studies 5B and 5C), such that those who scored higher on PP were less likely to buy popular products that were less reflective of their own preferences. Those who scored higher on FS were more likely to return and complain about products with minor imperfections. Finally, I showed that the Picky Shopper Scale is useful in testing consumer proclivities in decision making. I found that shopper pickiness was negatively related to consideration set size (study 6), and people who were picky care not only about vertically differentiated attributes, but also about horizontally differentiated attributes (study 7).

While I have established that shopper pickiness exists at an individual level, many unanswered questions remain. First, there are many possible antecedents and consequences of pickiness for consumer behavior. For example, it is unclear whether shopper pickiness is learned or innate. According to the picky eating literature (Wardle and Cooke 2008), such behavior is grounded in evolutionary biology and is a direct result of a biological predisposition and aversion to specific tastes and textures. This suggests an innate explanation for pickiness. However, in the context of shopper pickiness (i.e., product choice), it is conceivable that pickiness is a learned adaptation to the shopping environment.

Similarly, it seems likely that the underlying dimensions of pickiness may also shift as a function of learning about the self and one’s own idiosyncratic preferences. Consistent with preference construction and commitment (see Bettman, Luce and Payne 1998 for a review), those with less experience in making specific kinds of choices may be constructing the vision of
their ideal product as product exposure occurs. During this “novice” stage, it may be much easier for picky shoppers to articulate what they don’t like instead of to articulate what they do like. Thus, elevated levels of FS may be more prevalent among those who may be considered “novices”. However, I speculate that “experts” may identify more with the PP factor. If I consider an example PP item “I know exactly what I like,” I can speculate that individuals who more strongly identify with this item may be those who have gone through a lot of deliberation in considering what they like and dislike in the past. This deliberation may precipitate clarity and precision in preference, leading to an elevation of PP. Examining how the individual factors of pickiness align with expertise seems worthy of further investigation.

Though I have advocated that pickiness is a stable individual difference, it is unclear to what extent people compartmentalize their pickiness tendencies so that their pickiness is more or less pervasive within specific domains. It may be that an individual is picky when shopping for clothes but less picky when shopping for household appliances, independent of expertise. Future work may be able to parse out specific domains that trigger shopper pickiness and whether activating pickiness in one domain can subsequently impact pickiness in a separate one. Examining the preferences of people across categories of choices and at different ages to determine when “pickiness” is maximally active is a ripe area for future investigation.

I anticipate that those scoring high on the Picky Shopper Scale and consumer pickiness in general manifests in a variety of consumer behaviors. For instance, are picky shoppers more loyal shoppers? Once picky shoppers find a product or brand that meets their exacting standards, are their preferences impervious to competitor sales promotions and tactics? Are they more open to new products introduced by preferred brands and brand extensions? It seems likely that picky individuals will exert a great deal of effort in identifying product brands that they prefer. As
such, they may be less likely to switch away from a brand once it has been identified as meeting their exacting standards. That said, it also seems possible that it will be more difficult to continuously satisfy these picky individuals. This could lead the picky shopper to defect from the brand more quickly. Understanding brand loyalty among picky individuals is a topic worthy of further investigation.

The current work, and Study 5B in particular, hints that individuals who are picky may be less susceptible to influence tactics used by salespeople. In the Godiva chocolate choice, individuals were not swayed by the preferences of others. Following the herd is but one example of the arsenal of tools available to sway individuals to succumb to influence (Cialdini 2001). Picky shoppers may be one group that is more impervious to such attempts. This is also an area deserving of further investigation.

I believe that a firm’s ability to identify an individual shopper’s pickiness level and their capacity to anticipate how those picky shoppers will make decisions is a highly valuable asset to managers. Though most firms are not likely to ask prospective customers to complete the Picky Shopper Scale, I can imagine situations in which the scale could be gathered by an agent as part of a preliminary search criteria assessment (e.g., by realtors asking buyers to describe the desired features of a new home, or personal shoppers serving as agents of buyers as they are gathering preliminary preference data). Particularly for salespeople, interacting with a picky person may require a very different script than interactions with a less picky person. For example, if someone is high on the FS dimension and nit-picks at many product details, central cues may be more persuasively effective than peripheral cues. Managers who want to cater to picky people may need to take extra care in establishing relationships, schooling their salespeople to be patient and
offering a different compensation structure to salespeople who are faced with the pickiest customers.

In terms of product design, offering products that can be customized and personalized may be beneficial for the picky shopper. Creating a product that matches more directly their precise preferences should be very attractive to pickier customers. Further, offering extended warranties and liberal return policies could provide the impetus for picky shoppers to make a purchase, even if they must pay a premium to do so. This will provide re-assurance to those higher on FS who seemingly struggle to make decisions.

Offering more flexibility in product design extends to website design as well. Because picky people often have smaller consideration sets (i.e., their list of desired and required features is longer), firms may be able to help the picky shopper narrow down their choice sets more efficiently by allowing the shopper to apply a greater number of search filters during the search process. For example, many retailer websites currently allow consumers to choose the attributes they are looking for (e.g., size, brand, color); once consumers have selected the features they are searching for, the website will only display the options that match those preferences. However, retailer websites typically do not offer the option of removing undesirable attributes from searches (e.g., don’t show store brands, only designer brands). This may lead the picky shopper to feel frustrated, especially if they are highly flaw sensitive (the larger factor of shopper pickiness) but they have not yet developed the lexicon to be able to quickly articulate their precise preferences.

Perhaps firms that are very good at horizontal differentiation will be better suited to attract picky individuals, while firms that are very good at vertical differentiation may be better off targeting maximizers. Currently, I see evidence that some stores are very good at charging
premiums for particular horizontal attribute levels. For example, while Tory Burch is a shoe store that sells a variety of flats with the same base material and brand logo, particular designs (e.g., the Reva) and colors (e.g., black) are consistently priced at a premium because differences in these attribute levels make a large difference to some consumers.

Finally, it could be that picky shoppers may tend to flock towards certain companies and brands because those companies have communicated certain values that resonate with pickier people. Perhaps brands that have a more picky personality (e.g., less tolerant of imperfection; very detailed in communicating brand identity) will also have a comparative advantage in reaching picky shoppers.

The proliferation of product choice in global marketplaces opens many doors for modern consumers to be pickier than ever before. Identifying which consumers are more likely to deviate from shopping norms (e.g., shop only for a precise item in mind; reject all alternatives because of perceived flaws) and how pickiness affects choice contributes to consumer psychology literature and is of interest to marketing practitioners who interact with this consumer segment. My research states that pickiness exists as an individual difference across consumers, and this individual difference is directly related to several ways consumers form perceptions and make decisions. The current work is a first step in understanding how pickiness as a construct can be applied to describe consumers. Identifying the underlying factors of this construct, I create the starting point on how to identify and categorize picky shoppers.
Table 3.1

The Picky Shopper Scale*

1. I know exactly what I want. (PP)
2. I often go into a store with specific requirements in mind. (PP)
3. I tend to have very precise attribute preferences. (PP)
4. I have demanding expectations of what I want to buy. (PP)
5. I picture things I want to buy in great detail. (PP)
6. I dwell upon features I don’t like on potential purchases. (FS)
7. I am sensitive to negative aspects in products that others don’t seem to care about. (FS)
8. It is hard for me to ignore even the tiniest negative features. (FS)
9. I notice product “flaws” without deliberately looking for them. (FS)
10. I find little things to nit-pick about when making purchases. (FS)

Note: PP = Precise Preferences; FS = Flaw Sensitivity

* Scale items measured on a 1 (Does not describe me at all) to 9 (Describes me very well)
Table 3.2
Construct Validity Correlation Coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Ran With</th>
<th>PP</th>
<th>FS</th>
<th>Composite Scale</th>
<th>Reference for Construct Measured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximizing</td>
<td>Study 4</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>Schwartz et al. 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety Seeking</td>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>Raju (1980)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Control</td>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>Burger and Cooper (1979)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisiveness</td>
<td>Study 5B</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>Webster and Kruglanski (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion Focus</td>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention Focus</td>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Desirability (Impression Management)</td>
<td>Study 5A</td>
<td>-.006</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>Paulhus (1984)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * denotes $p < .05$; ** denotes $p < .01$. 
Table 3.3

STUDIES 5-7 ZERO ORDER CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PP, FS, AND DEPENDENT VARIABLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study 5A</th>
<th>PP ($\beta$)</th>
<th>PP(test statistic)</th>
<th>FS ($\beta$)</th>
<th>FS(test statistic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detail in Ideal Product Description</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>$t = 4.06^{**}$</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>$t = 1.56$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Flaws Identified in Focal Product</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>$t = 1.64$</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>$t = 2.43^*$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Study 5B**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PP ($\beta$)</th>
<th>PP(test statistic)</th>
<th>FS ($\beta$)</th>
<th>FS(test statistic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness of Own Choice</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>$t = 4.08^{**}$</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>$t = .86$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Switch to Popular Choice</td>
<td>-.40</td>
<td>Wald = 4.46*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>Wald = .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Study 5C**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PP ($\beta$)</th>
<th>PP(test statistic)</th>
<th>FS ($\beta$)</th>
<th>FS(test statistic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care About Minor Product Flaw</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>$t = 2.46^{**}$</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>$t = 4.59^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel Irritated About Minor Product Flaw</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>$t = .94$</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>$t = 3.84^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return Product</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>$t = 1.83$</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>$t = 3.16^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switch Product</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>$t = 2.24^*$</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>$t = 3.38^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complain about Product (Spread Negative WOM)</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>$t = 1.31$</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>$t = 3.42^{**}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Study 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PP ($\beta$)</th>
<th>PP(test statistic)</th>
<th>FS ($\beta$)</th>
<th>FS(test statistic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consideration Set Size</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>$t = -1.97^*$</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>$t = -2.09^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Attribute Importance Ratings</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>$t = 3.44^{**}$</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>$t = 2.88^{**}$</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Study 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PP ($\beta$)</th>
<th>PP(test statistic)</th>
<th>FS ($\beta$)</th>
<th>FS(test statistic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Horizontal Attributes$^a$</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>$t = 3.23^{**}$</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>$t = 2.82^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Vertical Attributes$^b$</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>$t = 5.66^{**}$</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>$t = 4.64^{**}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * denotes $p < .05$; ** denotes $p < .01$

$^a$Horizontal attributes include: size, packaging, color, design, fit with wardrobe, fit on body, type of add on (e.g. pockets; buttons), type of raw material, formality, endorsed by a particular celebrity, and endorsed by a particular friend.

$^b$Vertical attributes include: value, quality, beauty, fashionable (vs not), brand, brand line extension, scarcity, durability, and reviewer ratings.
Chapter 4

ESSAY 3: PICKY CONSUMERS AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL COST OF
CONSUMPTION: WHEN FREE LOSES ITS APPEAL

4.1 Introduction

Marketers and businesses use many tactics that include the “free” label in order to attract consumers. Consumers often believe they have nothing to lose in taking home a zero-priced item. Because of their popularity, free appeals have evolved to take different forms. For example, promotional models that build on the allure of “free” include promotional merchandise (i.e., nicknamed SWAG products, these products are often branded with a logo or slogan), freemium models (i.e., basic versions are free, but upgraded versions cost money), cross-subsidies (i.e., free gifts are offered with purchase; buy one get one free (BOGO)), and pure gifts (i.e., goods are gifted to the consumer at no cost) (Anderson 2009). These offers, not unlike price discounts, lower the perceived costs of purchases, which in turn, increases consumers’ consumption intentions (Ailawadi et al. 2001; Heerde et al. 2003; Raghbir et al. 2004). As Anderson (2009, p. 12) notes in his review of free appeals, the concept of free is “the rallying cry of the modern marketer, and the consumer never failed to respond.”

While free items are certainly alluring, are there segments of consumers who resist and are less persuaded by free appeals? In the current work, I examine when and why consumers might forego a free, zero dollar item or be willing to pay more to get exactly what they want instead of taking a “free” close substitute. In particular, I focus on identifying and understanding which consumers are the most likely to reject free things.

Examples abound in the marketplace of free things that are rejected by consumers. Polls suggest that consumers do not participate in activities they perceive as dangerous and potentially
life threatening, even if they do not have to pay to experience them (Murray 2015). There are also examples where consumers openly reject free things, presumably because they are not as good a preference match as the non-free item. Free samples, cross-subsidies, and freemium options often go unclaimed by consumers (Frost et al. 1998), suggesting that in certain circumstances, consumers would rather forego or pay more to fulfill a need than to take free alternatives.

In the current work, I isolate a particular group of consumers who may be more likely to forego these free items – those instantiated with a consumer mindset of pickiness, or those encouraged to think like a “picky” consumer. I posit that consumers who are manipulated into a picky mindset may see free items as carrying psychological costs, even when there are no financial costs incurred. I predict that those in a picky mindset will be 1) more reluctant to take less appealing items even if they are free, 2) more willing to pay a premium for more desirable items even when a free close substitute is available, and 3) faster at disposing of free items than those in a less picky mindset. Before discussing the specifics of why those instantiated to think like a picky person may undermine the power of various “free” promotional tactics, it is necessary to discuss the allure of “free” to consumers in general.

4.2 The appeal of zero cost

When a consumer is faced with deciding whether or not to make a particular product purchase, s/he will typically weigh the costs of buying the item against the benefits of consuming it. Assuming only a single item is considered, when the costs are less than the benefits accrued, the item is typically viewed as a desirable purchase. For most consumers, price is often seen as a salient proxy for costs to most consumers. As price decreases, the perceived transaction value
and likelihood of purchase increases (Blattberg and Neslin 1990; Grewal, Monroe, and Krishman 1998; Lichtenstein, Ridgway, and Netemeyer 1993). Often, consumers become tempted by price reduction promotional tactics associated with an item, even when they do not have a particular need for that item because they base their decision to buy on this cost/benefit value equation. As stated by Lichtenstein et al. (1993), the concept of monetary cost (i.e., price of purchase) is one of the most important attributes consumers consider during a purchase decision. Monetary cost “at a minimum, represents to all consumers the amount of economic outlay that must be sacrificed in order to engage in a given purchase transaction” (pg. 234).

While there are exceptions, higher prices generally negatively impact purchase probabilities. Consumers generally find lower priced, higher value items, and those associated with sales promotions attractive (Lichtenstein et al. 1993). Consumers want to optimize the perceived transaction value – the pleasure obtained from taking advantage of the financial terms of the promotional deal (Lichtenstein, Netemeyer, and Burton 1990; Monroe and Chapman 1987; Thaler 1985; Urbany and Bearden 1989).

Taking the notion of transaction value a step further, when the price of an item is set to zero, the absence of financial cost makes the item’s allure almost irresistible to the typical consumer, even if the item admittedly provides the consumer only the slightest of marginal benefits. In fact, when monetary costs are dropped to zero, transaction value increases disproportionately, and two unique things occur. First, the mere label “free” carries with it a powerful psychological benefit. Shampanier, Mazar, and Ariely (2007) found that people view a free item as extremely attractive because the zero cost itself feels like an added benefit and are tempted to choose the free option, even if it doesn’t exactly fit with their a priori product preference. Specifically, Shampanier et al. (2007) found that consumers were more likely to take
a free Hershey chocolate over a 25¢ Ferrero Rocher chocolate than if they were choosing between a 1¢ Hershey chocolate versus a 26¢ Ferrero Rocher chocolate. Consumers seem to over-value free things. Thus, even the label “free” (versus a small monetary cost) is an added benefit that sways consumers’ decisions towards a certain option.

Second, in addition to overweighting the benefits associated with items labeled “free,” consumers are less sensitive to negative contextual information about quality when items are free (Chandran and Morwitz 2006). For example, Chandran and Morwitz (2006) found that consumers were more likely to buy a book from a low quality bookstore (and ignore the low quality contextual information) when the store offered free shipping than when the store charged a small fee for shipping but was a high quality provider. The idea of free monetary cost made it easier for consumers to ignore the unappealing attribute (i.e., service quality in this case). Thus, the concept of free both provides an added benefit to consumption and serves as a buffer against potential negative product attributes (e.g. quality). Consumers were more interested in a focal “free” product and more willing to ignore the focal product’s negative features.

4.3 The Picky Consumer and the Psychological Costs of Consumption

While “free” has convinced many consumers to accept certain products that they did not initially seek (Shampanier et al. 2007), in the current work, I propose that people who are “picky” or in a picky state of mind will be better able to resist the allure of various “free” promotional appeals. The picky consumer has precise, uncompromising preferences about what s/he likes and dislikes and is sensitive to perceived product flaws (Cheng, Baumgartner and Meloy 2017). In particular, Cheng et al. (2017) found evidence that pickier shoppers form smaller consideration sets due to their precise preferences and heightened awareness of product
“flaws” (i.e. subjectively perceived negative attributes). Pickier individuals were also more resistant to social cues that aimed to compromise their product attribute preferences and were more likely to feel displeasure when they noticed minor blemishes on their product purchases (Cheng et al. 2017). It appears that picky consumers are rigid in the product characteristics they want in a product and are adamant in rejecting the product characteristics they see as flaws or unwanted.

In addition to having precise preferences and an increased sensitivity to product flaws, pickier individuals care about a wider range of product attributes (Cheng et al. 2017). In fact, Cheng et al. (2017) found that when consumers rated how important five jam attributes (taste, brand, fruit type, texture, color) were to them in making a purchase decision, those who were generally pickier rated the five non-price attributes as more important than their less picky counterparts. Even in relation to Maximizers, pickier consumers consider more attributes, and all of the attributes feel important. Because pickier people are known to carefully consider a broader range of product attributes when they make choices, price may play a smaller role in picky consumers’ decisions relative to many other attributes.

Taken together, I propose that the picky consumer’s precise preferences and aversion to a large range of attributes (particularly negative ones) will lead them to be less swayed by “free” promotional appeals. Central to my argument is the idea that unless a free item is perfectly aligned with a picky person’s preferences (i.e., no missing or extra minor “subjectively” undesirable feature), taking actual possession of the free item may feel psychologically costly as a person anticipates consumption, even if no financial costs enter into the decision equation. Next, I turn to the topic of psychological costs associated with ownership and consumption, which differs from the monetary costs associated with purchase.
Previous literature has discussed two forms of psychological costs in choice. First, psychological costs can be associated with having too many choices which makes decision making feel more difficult (e.g., Bettman, Johnson, and Payne 1991; Botti and Iyengar 2004; Simonson 1993). Further, psychological costs may involve recognizing opportunity costs, such as evaluating the unrealized utility from alternative choices and the associated regret that comes about (Kahneman and Frederick 2002; Slovic 1972).

In the present work, I define psychological costs as the expected disutility associated with owning and using an item or an item’s features, separate from the monetary costs of purchasing and obtaining an item. When there is disutility associated with consumption, consumption in and of itself becomes a source of a cost and the cost of consumption goes beyond the price of purchase. Similar to the notion that “pain of paying” triggers anguish in spending money (Prelec and Loewenstein 1998; Rick, Cryder and Loewenstein 2008), psychological costs represent the displeasure associated with consumption and having to interact with the items purchased. Psychological costs are anticipatory in nature as consumers feel future disutility at a present decision making point.

To the extreme, psychological costs have been documented to be anxiety-provoking and contribute to psychological stress (Cofer and Appley 1964). For example, in deciding whether to purchase vegetables, a consumer who does not like vegetables might consider not only the monetary cost of paying a few dollars but also the psychological cost of having to taste something undesirable. For someone who is picky, I theorize that the benefit of having zero monetary cost (to buy a certain item) is likely to be offset by a higher anticipated psychological cost related to consumption, unless the “free” item perfectly matches the picky individual’s preference.
To demonstrate that a positive relationship exists between pickiness and heightened psychological costs of consumption when options do not match consumers’ exact preferences, I ran two pretests. In the first, I focused on whether “picky eaters” feel it is more “costly” to consume vegetables. I used eating as the domain for this pretest because previous literature has documented that picky eaters tend to consume fewer vegetables (Galloway et al. 2005) because they can taste the bitterness in vegetables intensely and interpret oral irritants as painful (Snyder 1932). In this pretest, mTurk participants (n = 100, median age = 30, males = 49.6%) were introduced to an assortment of grocery items and asked how “costly” it feels to consume each product (1 “not at all” to 100 “a great deal” slider scale). I then asked participants to rate their pickiness when it comes to eating (i.e. “I am a picky eater”) on 1 “does not describe me at all” to 9 “describes me very well” scales. Results suggest that those self-reporting being a picky eater associated greater costs with consuming vegetables ($r = .22, p = .03$). Pickiness in eating did not have a relationship with the “costs” of consuming fruits ($p = .80$), meats ($p = .90$), or snacks ($p = .84$). It appears that picky eaters, who are known to be sensitive to the taste in certain vegetables, do associate some types of consumption with the notion of costs.

To further explore the relationship between pickiness and psychological costs, I ran a second pretest to see if pickier daters attribute higher psychological cost to dating someone who does not perfectly fit their predetermined criteria. In this pretest, undergraduate participants (n = 200, median age = 19, males = 52.3%) listed five traits that they would prefer in a significant other and imagined that they were dating someone who did not meet all five traits they listed. I asked participants to report the extent to which it felt “costly to date someone who is less than perfect” and “a loss when I am dating a person who does not match all my criteria” (1 “not at all” to 9 “extremely”). Finally, I asked participants questions concerning how picky they are as
daters. Results suggests that self-reported pickier daters (α = .79) indicated that dating someone who doesn’t fit with their exact preferences felt more like a “loss” (B = .15, t = 2.12, p = .04) and more “costly” (B = .41, t = 6.28, p < .001). This second pretest also shows a significant correlational relationship between pickiness and the costs of consuming an option that does not adhere to preferences.

Thus far, I have defined psychological costs and provided preliminary evidence that picky people consider or experience higher psychological costs when they consume something that does not match their preferences. Taking this a further step, I hypothesize that for picky people who are acutely aware of their own likes and dislikes, committing to a choice that goes against their product attribute preferences (even at zero monetary cost) may feel like a liability with psychological consequences to bear. It is precisely this extra layer of psychological consideration of owning and consuming that differentiates a picky shopper from a not picky shopper. The former group sees consumption as having an additional, salient factor of psychological cost on top of its monetary cost while the latter group is not sensitive to the psychological costs associated with consumption. Under these assumptions, I hypothesize that the allure of “free” promotions will be reduced when someone is “picky.” Further, as a result of these psychological costs, picky people will reject and/or quickly dispose of items that trigger these costs in spite of needing to pay nothing to initially obtain these items.

While the primary objective of this essay is to show the relationship between pickiness and how people interact with free appeals, a secondary purpose of this research is to put forward a method to prime consumers to think like a picky person. While previous work (Cheng et al. 2017) suggests that pickiness exists as an individual difference across shoppers, the current research aims to establish that consumers can be experimentally prompted to think more like a
picky person and that this specific mindset can lead to downstream consequences similar to directly measuring pickiness as a trait.

4.4 Overview of Experiments

In the current work, I test the relationship between pickiness and rejection of zero-cost options across several contexts. In study 1, I establish that consumers manipulated into a “picky” mindset (vs a “not picky” mindset) in an experimental setting are more likely to reject an unattractive item that is offered to them for free (i.e. a logoed item). The process is mediated by feeling higher psychological costs associated with the consumption of that item. Thus, study 1 establishes some initial evidence of the role of psychological costs in affecting consumers’ choices; those who are in the picky mindset are more likely to reject something, even if that thing is priced at zero. Extrapolating on the idea that those who are in a picky mindset will be more likely to reject free things, study 2 explores whether people in a picky mindset are also less attracted to buy one get one free (BOGO) promotions, where an item is marketed as “free” upon purchasing something else. Next, study 3 explores whether consumers in a picky mindset are more willing to pay a premium for an item (i.e. cell phone) that perfectly fits their preferences instead of a basic free item that fulfills the same need and is a close substitute. Finally, studies 4A and 4B explore the disposal rate of picky people when they inherit a good from the gift economy (i.e., a free hand-me-down piece of clothing). Study 4A establishes that the rate of disposal is faster for picky people because picky people feel that wearing an imperfect item feels more costly. Study 4B shows that these faster disposal rates occur for picky people even when that item can be used again in the future. I know turn to the specific studies.
4.5 Study 1: The Cost of Consumption

In this first study, I aim to show that people who are primed to feel picky are more discerning and likely to reject unattractive free products. To do so, I introduce a process by which individuals can be primed into a picky mindset. This differs from previous studies in the pickiness literature that have only been successful in measuring pickiness as an individual difference (Cheng et al. 2017; Pliner and Hobden 1992). I also explore whether people who are primed to feel picky are more sensitive to the potential costs of taking and keeping an unattractive item (even when it is given out for free).

To establish general perceptions of items labeled “free,” I conducted a pretest using undergraduates in a large public university (n = 382, males = 51.7%, median age = 19). While there was no direct correlation between pickiness and the interest in free products in general ($B = .03, p = .53$), people who scored higher on the picky shopper scale did feel that free SWAG (logoed) products were more undesirable ($B = .14, p < .10$). In addition, those who scored higher on the picky shopper scale believed that non-logoed products were more attractive than logoed items ($B = .13, p = .01$) and they were more likely to reject free logoed goods at company giveaways ($B = .22, p < .001$). In a second pretest, student participants (n = 90, 56.7% males, median age = 19), indicated their pickiness and whether “free things are highly alluring to me” on 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) scales. Verifying the first pretest results, there was not a significant relationship between pickiness and the allure of free things ($r = .08, p = .44$). In other words, pickier consumers admit that “free” items are alluring, but whether that free item is sufficiently attractive to alter choice behavior comes down to the specific item under consideration.
4.5.1 Method

Undergraduate students (n = 222, males = 53.7%, median age = 19) at a large northeastern university participated in this study. Initially, I asked all participants their baseline perception of SWAG items, defined in the study as “promotional products branded with a logo or slogan used in marketing and communication programs.” I asked participants to evaluate how SWAG products compare in attractiveness with non-SWAG items on a semantic differential scale (1 (SWAG more attractive) to 9 (non-SWAG more attractive)). This measure provides a baseline on how attractive the focal product of this study appeared to this sample.

Next, all participants were given a picky mindset prime. Those randomly assigned to the “picky” condition were asked to think of one benefit of having picky preferences and those randomly assigned to the “not picky” condition were asked to think of one benefit of having open preferences. After this pickiness prime, participants were asked to imagine having the opportunity to take a free SWAG mug home. The exact scenario text was:

“You are walking in the middle of a fair and you see Company X promoting their brand and spreading general awareness. You don't know anything about Company X. Company X is offering free mugs. The mugs are white. On one side of the mug is Company X's logo (printed in orange). The logo resembles an abstract bird. On the other side of the mug is Company X's name, printed in bold black. The company representative tells you that you can take some mugs if you want.”

I emphasized that this mug had a company logo on it. Such SWAG products are popular promotional items that companies often give out for free.
Participants were asked how likely they were to take the mug (1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely likely)). Next, I asked four questions designed to uncover the perceived psychological costs associated with taking the SWAG mug. Psychological cost items included “how burdensome would it feel to take this Company X mug,” “how psychologically costly would it feel to own this Company X mug,” “how much value do you derive from taking a mug” (reverse coded), and “how much does the Company X mug’s design and logo bother you” (all 1 (not at all) to -9 (quite a lot) scales). Finally, participants were asked to report how picky they feel about mug designs. Participants also provided demographic information.

4.5.2 Results

*Manipulation Check.* Those in the picky condition felt marginally more picky about mug designs than those in the not picky condition (M_{not picky} = 3.10, SD = 2.30; M_{picky} = 3.72, SD = 2.56, F(1, 220) = 3.26, p = .07). It appears that the general pickiness prime can marginally trigger pickiness in a specific domain.

*Evaluation of SWAG.* Overall, participants rated SWAG products as relatively less attractive than non-SWAG products. The semantic differential scale mean was 5.77 (SD = 2.37), a mean statistically above the scale midpoint (5), t = 4.90, p < .001. This result suggests that SWAG products are not as attractive to this sample population as non-SWAG products. Confirming this information, I then investigated how likely consumers assigned to different conditions would be to take and keep a free SWAG product when the opportunity arose.

*Likelihood to Take Free Item.* Those in the picky condition claimed they were less likely to take the free logoed mug than those in the not picky condition (M_{not picky} = 4.62, SD = 2.21;
\[ M_{\text{picky}} = 3.93, \text{SD} = 2.20; F(1, 220) = 3.74, \ p = .05 \]. The results suggest that while SWAG may not be very attractive to participants in general, those in the not picky condition were still more likely to take a SWAG product when it was free, compared to those in the picky condition. Therefore, priming a picky mindset seems to have impacted people’s choices in reacting to a free but relatively undesirable item.

**Psychological Costs of Taking Free SWAG.** The four items designed to measure the psychological costs of consuming SWAG were indexed to create one psychological cost composite item (\( \alpha = .82 \)). Those in the picky condition felt more psychological cost (\( M = 4.10, \text{SD} = 1.75 \)) associated with taking the SWAG mug than those in the not picky condition (\( M = 3.48, \text{SD} = 1.56; F(1, 220) = 5.45, \ p = .02 \)). Thus, despite the lack of monetary costs, the mug felt more costly for those who were picky.

**Mediation.** I ran a mediation analyses of the picky mindset prime on the likelihood of consuming SWAG through the psychological cost index mediator (Hayes 2013; PROCESS Model 4, bootstrap 5,000 samples). There was a significant indirect effect of pickiness through the psychological cost mediator on likelihood of consuming the SWAG mug (95% CI = [0.06, 0.34]). The direct effect of this model, when accounting for the mediator, was insignificant (\( B = .17, t = 1.22, \ p = .22 \)), indicating complete mediation.

### 4.5.3 Discussion

Consumers primed to think like a picky person were less likely to take free SWAG products that had been pretested to be less attractive than non-SWAG items. This relationship can be partially explained by the increased psychological cost of owning this type of less-than-
attractive item for those primed to be picky. In study 2, I examined whether priming a picky mindset increases consumers’ resistance to a different type of “free” promotional appeal -- BOGOS.

4.6 Study 2: Buy One Get One Free Versus Single Item Discounts

As stated before, price promotions (particularly involving the “free” concept) often create an influx of consumer demand. Even though goods that come with promotional incentives are often the most eccentric and undesirable of products available (Alptekinoglu and Grasas 2014), consumers, as seen in the example of logoed merchandise in study 1, may still feel the temptation to purchase because the transaction utility of the associated deals are too attractive to pass by.

In study 2, I focus on “free” in the context of cross-subsidies, where paid products subsidize free products when they are purchased as a bundle. The buy one get one (BOGO) promotion is a staple of cross-subsidy marketing. It attracts consumers to commit to more items in a shopping transaction, as additional items they commit to are framed as “free.” In particular, I hypothesize that people who have been primed to be picky will be less attracted to BOGO offers as pickiness is about wanting to buy things that precisely align with their preferences. Specifically, I expect that individuals primed with a picky mindset will like BOGO promotions less than those not primed with pickiness. I anticipate that the psychological costs of “free” add-ons in the BOGO bundle will be interpreted as requiring a commitment to additional (unwanted) items.
4.6.1 Method

In this study, 114 mTurk participants (median age = 31, males = 64%) filled out a short survey in exchange for compensation. To examine a second method for priming a “picky” versus “not picky” mindset, I asked participants to describe what it feels like to be  a) “picky” (picky condition)/“open” (not picky condition), and b) to provide one upside of being picky/ open. Then, all participants were given the following scenario and instructions: “Imagine going into a clothing store and finding one article of clothing that you really love. You definitely want this exact article of clothing but it is a bit expensive. When considering buying this piece of clothing that you really love, please rank order how attractive each of the following potential store promotions would feel to you” (where 1 is the least attractive promotion and a higher rank indicates greater attractiveness).

The store promotions presented to participants to rank included BOGO type promotions (e.g., buy one item get one different item of equal price value half off), single item discounts (e.g., 30% off one item), and miscellaneous others (e.g., buy one item, store donates a portion of proceeds to charity; 10% additional off entire store). My prediction is that people who are primed with pickiness will be less interested in BOGO type promotions (ranked lower) and more interested in single item discounts (ranked higher) than their not picky counterparts when participants know that they “definitely want” one purchase in the store. For those primed with a picky mindset, it is unclear whether they would want a second or third different item from the same store. To assess the psychological cost of the focal promotion, I asked “How burdensome is it to participate in Buy One Get One promotions?” (1 = not at all to 9 = extremely scale).

In addition, unique to this study, I asked participants “if you absolutely love an item when shopping, are you willing to “break the bank” and spend an amount that is outside your
normal budget” (Yes, No). This measure is designed to explicitly measure whether picky consumers consciously admit to wanting to spend more money in order to meet their preferences. Finally, participants then responded to the picky shopper scale (Cheng et al. 2017) as a manipulation check.

4.6.2 Results

**Manipulation check.** Participants who were primed to feel picky scored higher on the picky shopper scale than participants who weren’t; \( M_{\text{picky}} = 6.37, SD = 1.38, M_{\text{not picky}} = 5.77, SD = 2.17; F(1, 112) = 10.67, p < .01 \). The manipulation of shopper pickiness was effective.

**Ranking of BOGO Promotions.** Participants in the picky condition rank ordered “Buy one get one free” promotions as less attractive (i.e., gave the promotion a lower rank), on average, than participants in the not picky condition (\( M_{\text{picky}} = 6.71, SD = 1.58, M_{\text{not picky}} = 7.29, SD = 1.33; F(1, 112) = 4.36, p = .04 \)). Similarly, participants in the picky condition rank ordered “Buy one get one half off” as less attractive than participants in the not picky condition; \( M_{\text{picky}} = 3.63, SD = 1.38; M_{\text{not picky}} = 4.23, SD = 2.17; F(1, 112) = 7.40, p < .01 \). In addition, those who were in the picky condition admitted that it felt more “burdensome” to participate in BOGO promotions (M = 6.74, SD = 1.88) than participants in the not picky condition (M = 6.04, SD = 2.25), \( F(1, 112) = 4.07, p = .05 \). This notion of burden echoes previous discussions of psychological cost, where it is possible that the uncertainty of liking more than one item in a store increases the picky condition’s disutility of committing to multiple items under the BOGO promotion.

**Ranking of Single Item Discounts.** There was a main effect of pickiness on how highly participants ranked Single Item Discounts (e.g. 30% off 1 item) was. Participants in the picky
condition consistently ranked 30% off ($M_{\text{picky}} = 6.06, SD = 1.49, M_{\text{not picky}} = 5.04, SD = 1.53; F(1, 112) = 7.12, p < .01$) and 50% off ($M_{\text{picky}} = 7.92, SD = 1.18, M_{\text{not picky}} = 7.40, SD = 1.43; F(1, 112) = 4.45, p = .04$) as more attractive than participants in the not picky condition. This means that rank discrepancies across conditions can mostly be attributed to the differences in attractiveness of BOGO versus single item discounts.

Likelihood of Breaking the Bank. Participants in the picky condition reported that there was an increased likelihood that they would be willing to break the bank for a purchase they loved relative to participants in the not picky condition (53.2% vs 26.9%, $\chi^2 = 8.08, p < .01$). This suggests that picky people are willing to spend more money on a single item they love than their not picky counterparts, who may weight transaction utility and the allure of free things more heavily.

4.6.3 Discussion

In study 2, I found further evidence that people primed with a picky mindset were not as attracted to BOGO-type promotions as people primed with a not picky mindset. Participants knew they were definitely interested in one item in the store, but it was not explicit that there were additional items in the store they really wanted. For those primed with a picky mindset, single item discounts were more desirable when shopping with a picky mindset. Adding the “free” component to a transaction did not necessarily sway picky consumers. This finding, combined with the results of study 1, provides additional evidence that picky people resist “free” promotions. Further, the results highlight that people who are primed to be picky are actually willing to pay more money for an item they really like. The latter finding leads to study 3 in
which I explore whether individuals primed to be picky will reject free options that are close substitutes to more desirable options that must be paid for.

4.7 Study 3: Willingness to Pay More

In the previous studies, I have established that picky people are more reluctant to consume items that don’t fully meet their preferences. As such, these picky individuals are less likely to take free items and less interested in cross-subsidy promotions that frame add-ons as “free.” In study 3, I test how pickiness impacts the choice between a free option that fulfills a basic consumer need versus paying for an option that better matches one’s preferences, a promotion loosely based on the “freemium” market design (Kumar 2014). This study provides initial insights concerning what boundary conditions may trigger pickier people to pay for a version of a product that is otherwise free, becoming the segment that may “pay” while other people are perfectly content taking on “free” options.

4.7.1 Method

In this study, I explore a situation in which consumers need to make a choice between spending money to get something they “really like” versus getting something they “sort of like” for free. One hundred and ninety mTurk participants (median age = 32; males = 49.5%) participated in a 2 (picky: picky, not picky) x 2 (perceived commitment: long, short) between subjects experiment. First, participants were manipulated into a picky or a not picky condition. The manipulation condition was very similar to but subtly different from that of study 1. Those in the picky condition were asked to name 1) one benefit of being a picky shopper and 2) one
cost of not being picky enough when shopping. Those in the not picky condition were asked to name 1) one benefit of being open-minded (not picky) when shopping and 2) one cost of being a picky shopper. Next, all participants read a scenario about choosing between two phones. The exact scenario text was:

“Imagine that you are shopping for a new phone. Imagine that you have narrowed it down to two phones. Phone A is a phone you really like, and it costs $200 to buy when you sign a 2 year contract with a carrier. Phone B is a phone you sort of like, and because there is a store promotion, it is free when you sign a 2 year contract with a carrier.”

Participants in the long commitment condition then read: “Keep in mind that whatever phone you choose will be a long-term commitment because you will not be able to easily switch phones within the next 2 years.” In contrast, participants in the short commitment condition read: “Keep in mind that whatever phone you choose will only be a short-term commitment because you will be able to get a new phone once your contract ends in 2 years.” Note that the time frame of two years was identical across both conditions. The manipulation of commitment was truly perceived commitment.

All participants then provided a binary choice of whether they preferred Phone A or Phone B. Next, I asked participants questions pertaining to their general reactions to using and owning Phone B (the free phone). I asked participants the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: “Phone B feels costly to own for the next two year” and “I would never own a phone that is not my first choice” (on scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree)). Participants then completed the picky shopper scale (Cheng et al. 2017) as a manipulation check.
4.7.2 Results

*Manipulation Check.* Those in the picky condition scored higher on the picky shopper scale (M = 6.39, SD = 1.25) than those in the not picky condition (M = 5.23, SD = 1.34); F(1, 186) = 35.78, *p* < .001). The manipulation of pickiness was successful.

*Phone Choice.* As a reminder, participants in this study had to choose between Phone A (a $200 phone they “really like”) and Phone B (a free phone they “sort of like”). I ran a 2 × 2 chi-square analysis to explore the interaction of pickiness × purchase commitment length on likelihood to pick the free choice. Participants in the long-term commitment condition chose Phone B (the free phone) less frequently than participants in the short-term commitment condition (34.4% vs 57.0% respectively); χ² (N = 190) = 10.62, *p* < .001. In addition, those in the picky condition chose free Phone B less frequently (36.3%) than those in the not picky condition (54.5%); χ² (N = 190) = 6.70, *p* = .01. An interaction effect revealed that for participants primed to be not picky, framing the phone as a long-term or short-term commitment did not influence phone choice (46.3% vs 59.4% respectively chose B; *z* = -1.33, *p* = .18). However, for participants in the picky condition, framing the phone as a long-term commitment triggered fewer people to choose Phone B (24.5% long-term vs 52.6% short-term respectively chose B; *z* = -2.75, *p* < .01). See Figure 4.1 for a graphical representation of these percentages. It appears that those in a picky mindset who viewed a product as a long term commitment were the most likely to pay an additional fee to get a product they “really like” instead of taking the free alternative to fulfill a need in a particular product category.
Psychological Cost. Was the prospect of a long-term commitment to a less desirable phone psychologically costly for those primed with a picky mindset? In a pickiness x purchase commitment length ANOVA analysis, I found a main effect of pickiness on psychological cost of owning and using free Phone B \( (M_{\text{picky}} = 4.01, \ SD = 1.85; \ M_{\text{not picky}} = 3.52, \ SD = 1.81); \ F(1, 186) = 3.53, \ p = .05 \). There was also a marginally significant pickiness x purchase commitment length interaction effect \( F(1, 186) = 3.11, \ p = .08 \), where those who were manipulated to feel picky and felt that they were in a long-term phone contrast felt a higher psychological cost associated with owning Phone B than all other conditions \( (t(186) = 2.04, \ p < .05) \). This suggests that the effect of pickiness on psychological costs of owning Phone B is exacerbated when owning Phone B is framed as long-term. No other effects were significant in this model \( (ps > .10) \).

Similarly, I also ran a pickiness x purchase commitment length ANOVA on desire to never own a non-first choice phone and found a marginally significant main effect of pickiness in this model \( (M_{\text{picky}} = 3.99, \ SD = 2.55; \ M_{\text{not picky}} = 3.49, \ SD = 2.39); \ F(1, 186) = 2.75, \ p = .09 \). This finding was complemented by a marginally significant interaction effect \( (F(1, 186) = 3.33, \ p = .07) \), such that those who were manipulated to feel picky and feel a phone contract lasts a long time were the group most likely to agree that they would never want to own a non-first choice phone \( (t(186) = 2.71, \ p < .01) \).

4.7.3 Discussion

Overall, the main effect of pickiness in this study reveals that people primed with pickiness were more willing to pay extra money for a product they really wanted (but for which
there was a close free substitute) than people primed to be not picky. Further nuances revealed that whereas people who were primed to be not picky liked the free (but explicitly less desirable) options equally well whether they were framed as a long or short-term commitment, the decisions of those primed to be picky depended more on how much commitment was attached to that purchase. Finally, people primed to feel picky and put in a long-term frame of mind felt the highest psychological cost associated with using the free phone and felt it was the most unacceptable to use a phone that was not a “first choice”. This study further uncovers the puzzle of when picky people might choose to upgrade to a paid version of a product and forgo a free version of a similar product. I speculate that those individuals who experience pickiness may more readily anticipate the potential future psychological costs of selecting an imperfect item. Next, I look at how this anticipation impacts picky people’s reactions towards disposal.

4.8 Study 4A: Faster Rate of Disposal

In the previous studies, I have shown how the perceived psychological costs of consumption lead picky people to reject “free” offers and opt into paying for an alternative when the market provides free substitutes. These psychological costs arise when a free option does not fit with a picky person’s preferences very well, a detail that a less picky person is more willing to ignore. Study 4A directly tests whether a perceived imperfect attribute on a free product would make that product less desirable to keep for someone in a picky mindset.

The context of this study was hand-me-down clothing, a staple of the free gift economy. Things passed down from one consumer to the next are often objectively perfect in quality but can be seen as undesirable based on personal preference and style. In this study, instead of measuring willingness to pay or likelihood of adopting a free product, I explore how a picky
mindset impacts disposal intentions of free products. I predict that even in a context in which picky people accept free products, they will be faster at disposing of the item because owning and using the product may feel psychologically costly.

4.8.1 Method

Participants were mTurk workers (N = 119, median age = 31, males = 52.9%) who were compensated for their time. They were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Participants in the “picky” condition were asked to write about some benefits of being a picky shopper while participants in the “not picky” condition were asked to write about some benefits of being an open-minded shopper. Next, I provided participants with the following scenario:

“Imagine that you need a black suit for a last minute occasion you are attending. You don’t think the clothes you own will work for the occasion and you don’t have a lot of spare cash at the moment. Luckily, an acquaintance who is moving away is willing to give you their black suit for no cost to reduce their moving load. The suit fits your occasion perfectly. However, the shoulders are a bit too big on you and it is a different style than what you would have normally preferred in a suit.”

I then asked all participants to provide their reactions to owning and wearing the suit, including “how much do you like this suit,” “how confident would you feel wearing this suit,” “how satisfied are you with owning this suit,” “how costly does it feel to possess this suit,” and “how uncomfortable would it feel to wear this suit” on 1 “not at all” to 9 “extremely” scales. These items were designed to test the psychological cost of owning/wearing the imperfect suit (positive utility items were reverse coded in my analyses). I then asked all participants to write down in open-ended response how long they thought they would keep the suit after they had finished
wearing it for their occasion. Finally, I asked participants to report how picky they feel as a shopper and how picky they are about clothing (1 = “not at all” to 9 = “extremely” scales).

4.8.2 Results

*Manipulation check.* Those in the picky prime condition yielded a higher mean on the question assessing whether they feel they are a picky shopper relative to those in the not picky prime condition (M<sub>picky</sub> = 5.83, SD = 2.15; M<sub>not picky</sub> = 4.79, SD = 2.67; F(1, 117) = 4.76, p = .03). It appears that the writing task successfully primed participants in the picky condition to feel pickier than participants in the not picky condition.

*Psychological Cost.* I indexed the five reactions that focused on costs and benefits into one overall composite score and labeled it the “psychological cost of ownership” (α = .88). I found that those in the picky condition felt greater psychological cost associated with owning and wearing the hand-me-down suit (M = 5.45, SD = 2.10) than those in the not picky condition (M = 4.51, SD = 1.86), F(1, 117) = 6.71, p = .01. Even though participants were exposed to the same free (but stylistically imperfect) suit in both conditions, for pickier people, it felt more costly to wear and own the suit.

*Disposal Time.* Participants in the picky condition reported that they wanted to keep the suit for a shorter length of time (in years) than participants in the not picky condition (M<sub>picky</sub> = 1.69, SD = 2.11; M<sub>not picky</sub> = 2.72, SD = 3.57; F(1, 117) = 3.70, p = .05). Combined with the psychological cost results, it appears that priming a picky mindset increases individuals’ dislike for the suit and triggers them to dispose of the suit at a faster rate.

To test whether psychological cost mediated the relationship between pickiness and how long participants chose to keep the suit, I performed a bootstrapping mediation analysis with
5000 samples using Hayes (2013) PROCESS Macro (Model 4). Results show that the psychological cost of ownership completely mediated the relationship between pickiness (coded as non-picky = -1, picky = 1) and length of time the suit would be kept. The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect through satisfaction mediator was estimated to lie between [.03 and .38]. The direct effect, when accounting for satisfaction was not significant (B = .74, t = 1.36, p = .18).

4.8.3 Discussion

In study 4A, I show that picky people feel that owning an imperfect item is associated with higher psychological cost of ownership. This heightened cost leads people who are primed to feel picky to dispose of that item more quickly. This study further continues the conversation concerning how picky people are more likely to associate consuming certain products with psychologically cost. Unlike previous studies where a commitment has not yet been made and participants are given a choice to reject a free item, this study sheds light on what may happen even once picky-minded participants have already “committed” to possessing an imperfect item.

4.9 Study 4B: Disposal and Moderation of Need

I found in the previous study that people primed with pickiness were quicker to dispose of items that didn’t perfectly match their preferences. However, it is uncertain whether this effect would be mitigated if that imperfect item was framed as capable of serving a use again in the future. Perhaps even those who are picky can be persuaded to keep an imperfect item for longer if that item can be used later on. In contrast, the counter-hypothesis is that picky people may consider replacing an imperfect item that can serve a future need rather than re-using that
imperfect item. In study 4B, I explore a boundary condition of whether picky people are faster to dispose of an imperfect free item when it may be used on a future occasion.

4.9.1 Method

Two hundred and six undergraduate students at a large public university (median age = 19, male = 54.4%) completed the study. This study’s context was the same as that of the previous study where all participants were told they had accepted a suit for free from an acquaintance to meet the need for a suit for an upcoming occasion. Before any manipulation, participants filled out how long they thought an average person keeps a suit in their closet (reported in number of months). In addition, all participants were told that while the suit meets the needs of the occasion perfectly, the fit of the suit is slightly off and the style is not what they would have normally preferred in a suit. Unique to this study, participants were then randomly assigned to a 2 (writing prime: picky, not picky) x 2 (future usability: high, low) between subjects design.

To provide a final method for priming a picky mindset, participants were told that people can be “picky when shopping (e.g. shopping for clothes)”. Then, participants participated in a writing task. Those in the picky condition were asked to write about a time when they personally were a “picky shopper”. In contrast, those in the not picky condition wrote about a time when they personally were “NOT a picky shopper”. In this study, I added the subtle “(e.g. shopping for clothes)” text into the prime to get participants to think in more domain-specific terms than before.

After all participants imagined wearing the imperfect suit once to an occasion, those in the high future usability condition then read “you are likely to attend a similar occasion in the future.” Those in the low future usability condition read instead “You don’t anticipate attending
a similar occasion any time soon.” This manipulation was designed to signal to some participants that they needed a suit in the future. This could be an important factor driving disposal intentions of the free suit. Next, all participants reported how long they wanted to keep the suit in their closet (reported in number of months). Participants answered “how much do you like this suit,” “how confident would you feel wearing this suit,” “how satisfied are you with owning this suit,” “how costly does it feel to possess this suit,” and “how uncomfortable would it feel to wear this suit” on 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely scales. Finally, participants reported how picky they feel concerning clothing.

4.9.2 Results

*Manipulation Check.* Those in the picky condition reported being more picky about clothes (M = 6.72, SD = 1.90) than those in the not picky condition (M = 6.14, SD = 2.26), F(1, 204) = 3.93, p = .05. In this study, the domain-specific version of the picky prime was successful.

*Disposal Intentions.* Because individuals may have very different expectations of how long a suit should be kept versus how long they wanted to keep the imperfect free suit, I subtracted how long (in months) participants reported wanting to keep the imperfect suit before disposal from how many months they thought the average person would keep a suit to create a disposal intentions measure. Dissecting this measure, when participants indicate wanting to keep a suit for a shorter time than their expected reference length of how long a suit should be kept, this measure is a positive number. The larger the gap between these two numbers signals faster disposal intentions. That is, a positive and increasing disposal intention scores indicates wanting to dispose of the item faster. In contrast, when a participant scores a negative disposal intentions
score, it means that they are slower to dispose of the item (even compared to their own reference point of how long a suit should be kept).

I ran a 2 (writing prime: picky, not picky) x 2 (future usability: high, low) between subjects ANOVA and found no main effects ($p$s > .10). However, I found a significant interaction between pickiness and future usability of the suit on disposal intentions ($F(1, 204) = 4.16, p = .04$). For those who were primed to be not picky, participants had lower disposal intentions for the suit when the suit had high future usability when compared to when it had low future usability ($M_{\text{high}} = 1.84, \text{SD} = 31.03; M_{\text{low}} = 14.61, \text{SD} = 26.02, t = -2.17, p = .03$). This significant effect is expected – anticipating a future use for a piece of clothing should discourage disposal. However, for those who were primed to be picky, there was not a contrasting difference in disposal intentions between the high future usability ($M = 15.38, \text{SD} = 29.90$) and low future usability conditions ($M = 11.04, \text{SD} = 32.92, t = .03, p = .97$). Despite having awareness that the suit could be used again in the future to fill a need, picky participants still chose to dispose of the imperfect suit relatively quickly. See Figure 4.2 for a graphical representation.

**Psychological Cost.** Using the same pickiness x future reusability ANOVA model on the dependent variable of psychological cost, I found a main effect of pickiness on psychological cost ($F(1, 204) = 5.44, p = .02$). Specifically, those in the picky condition felt it was more costly to possess the suit ($M = 6.33, \text{SD} = 2.00$) than those in the not picky condition ($M = 5.61, \text{SD} = 1.84$). No other main effect or interaction effect was significant in this model ($p$s > .10).

Next, I conducted a moderated mediation model (Hayes 2013, Model 8) to test the pickiness x future reusability relationship on disposal intentions through the psychological cost mediator. Effects suggest partial mediation as the highest order indirect effect through this mediation model was statistically significant (95% CI = .04, 10.15). The direct effect, when
accounting for the psychological cost mediator, was significant as well, $B = -12.40, p < .05$. See Figure 4.3 for a statistical diagram of this moderated mediation.

4.9.3 Discussion

In this study, I continued to explore the boundary conditions of pickiness and disposal intentions of imperfect gifts. In study 4A, it appears that picky people not only felt a psychological cost in accepting and using an imperfect item, they also felt propelled to get rid of the imperfect item more quickly than their not picky counterparts. In study 4B, I found that whereas not picky people were encouraged to hold on to an imperfect item if it served a future use, picky people intended to quickly dispose of the undesirable hand-me-down whether it could serve a future use or not. This study shows the extent to which psychological costs impact picky consumers when they own items that do not fit their needs.

4.10 General Discussion and Future Research Directions

In this research, I find that when individuals are primed with a picky mindset, they become resistant to many possible choices in the marketplace. Because picky individuals typically seek options close to their ideal, people who are primed to feel picky are more likely to 1) reject free promotional items and deals, 2) opt to pay for product options even when free close substitutes are available and 3) dispose of free items that fall short of their ideal at a faster rate than their not picky counterparts. I argue that these downstream effects occur because picky people are more sensitive to the disutility or psychological cost of consuming the free items instead of just the monetary costs of buying these items.
While consumer behavior teaches us that every purchase a consumer makes is to fulfill some sort of need, the needs that such purchases fulfill can be diverse. A consumer sometimes buys items that do not align with their innate preferences, evidenced by the fact that Americans spend trillions of dollars annually on nonessential and underutilized goods (Whitehouse 2011). One reason this mismatch between preference and product choice occurs is due to the influence of various marketing stimuli and promotions (Heilman, Nakamoto, and Rao 2002; Park, Iyer and Smith 1989). From this research, I find that picky people are less susceptible to price promotions that make use of the allure of the “free” appeal. However, there is still the question of whether being picky leads to higher efficiency or higher waste. It seems that the picky person’s ability to resist items that do not perfectly fit their preferences may have more of a minimalistic view on possessions. They might opt out of possessing anything if it doesn’t match their preference, even when facing tempting promotional deals. In an ideal world, perhaps people who think in a picky mindset would only buy things that provide them the highest level of utility, which means that they would possibly live with fewer possessions. However, I find in study 4 that when consumers take home imperfect items (due to various constraints that prevent them from obtaining the perfect item to meet their needs), pickiness triggers people to be quick to dispose of these items. This study has implications for how picky people might react where they own things that do not perfectly match their preferences. For example, when picky people receive gifts that they did not personally select (i.e. Cheng et al. 2017), this research suggests that picky gift recipients will be more willing to get rid of those items quickly without using the items to their fullest potential.

A question worthy of further research is whether picky people engage in stockpiling behaviors if they find one item that they really love. In this essay’s study 2, I find that picky
people do not prefer BOGO sales under the assumption that the second item (framed as free) under this promotion type needs to be different from the first item. The uncertainty of whether a picky person could find more than one really desirable item in a store propels him/her to pursue single item discounts. However, results may be different when the context of BOGO promotions is slightly altered. For example, in the context in buying consumable utilitarian products, perhaps a picky person would be highly likely to engage in BOGO type deals if s/he deliberately wants to stockpile the same item that s/he really likes.

Finally, future research can ask a broader question to extend the findings of this research, which is: are pickier people better at resisting persuasive tactics in general? There are so many more persuasive tactics (outside of price appeals) that consumers encounter every day. Engaging in a “picky mindset” may help consumers stay true to their preferences and resist a large range of marketers’ persuasion tactics at the point of purchase. Future research can explore whether picky shoppers are indeed better at resisting persuasion tactics such as appeals that involve scarcity, bait-and-switch, and social proof (aka conformity). For example, perhaps picky people who know exactly what they like and dislike will not care if something is framed as scarce or popular. Picky people also may also go out of their way to buy the item that fits their preferences instead of giving up and falling for bait-and-switch marketing, even if it means more effort to restart their search process upon encountering bait-and-switch tactics. In terms of conformity, evidence exists that picky people care less about what is popular (Cheng, Baumgartner and Meloy 2017), but are picky people also less swayed by emotional conformity such as laugh-tracks and canned-laughter when judging whether something is funny or not? A person who truly knows his or her preferences should be better at not letting other people judge what is funny and what is not on their behalf. It is possible that picky people may even find these types of cues irritating (instead
of persuasive/contagious). I believe that understanding how picky people broadly react to external persuasion can help advance the theory of the picky shopper construct while also informing marketers as to the potential limits of certain persuasive marketing techniques.
Figure 4.1

STUDY 3: Picky × Time Investment on Percent of Consumers Willing to Take Free Phone
Figure 4.2

STUDY 4B: Picky x Reusability on Disposal Intentions

Disposal Intentions

- Not Usable in Future
- Usable in Future

- Not Picky
- Picky
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Pickiness is all around us and is becoming a popular term to describe the self and others. Building on the core goal of defining pickiness in consumer behavior and isolating its downstream effect, three essays demonstrate how consumer pickiness is perceived by others (Essay 1), how I can measure pickiness in the self (Essay 2), and how I can prime a pickiness mindset and show its consequences for the attractiveness of different promotional activities (Essay 3). Incrementally, each essay offers new insight into what pickiness means and how it impacts consumers’ decisions.

Each dissertation essay makes several distinct theoretical and practical contributions. The first essay contributes to our understanding of others’ perceptions of pickiness and the implications for agent decisions, such as gift giving. This essay also demonstrates the role of perceived target pickiness in demotivating agent decision makers. Specifically, I illuminate two antecedents (expected dissatisfaction and expected re-gifting/returning) of perceived pickiness that causes gift givers spend less effort, money, or thought in choosing gifts for picky versus difficult others. When pickiness is dissociated from expected satisfaction, I find that the effects of pickiness on demotivation are mitigated. In all, this essay has implications for social decision making writ large where individuals make choices for other people.

The second essay contributes to an improved understanding of shopper pickiness and extracts the factors of pickiness from the self’s perspective. This essay sets out to understand pickiness as an individual difference among consumers through scale development. I then report a series of studies that assess the internal structure, reliability, and discriminant validity of the “picky shopper scale” in relation to a variety of other related constructs, such as Maximizing. I
examine the downstream consequences of such pickiness in a series of application studies and
demonstrate the types of consumer behaviors associated with each of the underlying factors.

The third essay contributes to literatures on pickiness and price promotions. This essay
demonstrates that consumers may not perceive price discounts and other forms of promotional
activity as being attractive when individuals are primed to be in a picky state of mind. While the
concept of “free” is attractive to most consumers, I find that when participants are primed with a
picky mindset, they are more likely to forego promotions that provide free items. When they do
accept certain items (such as gifts) that may not perfectly align with their preferences such that
they perceive a psychological cost of ownership, they will dispose of these items quickly.
Therefore, the results of Essay 3 suggest that when gift givers expect dissatisfaction and predict
gift off-loading in Essay 1, they are absolutely correct. Picky people do indeed dispose of
products at a faster rate, even when they are “free gifts.” This research furthers our
understanding of the downstream consequences of pickiness, what factors weigh into picky
people’s decisions, and how pickiness interacts with various promotions in the marketplace.

Overall, the findings from the three essays contribute to an improved understanding of
the role of pickiness in consumer decision making. This dissertation offers significant insights to
marketers and makes important contributions to the marketing literatures for construct
development, scale development, and judgment and decision making.
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Essay 1: “Picking Gifts for Picky Others”
Essay 2: “The Picky Shopper Scale”

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Judgment and Decision Making
Consumer Preferences
Social Influence and Promotions
Scale Development