

The science of picky shoppers

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There are hard-to-please customers in almost every industry, with certain people being picky about which clothes, houses and even romantic partners they will consider.

A new series of studies has found that shopper pickiness can go beyond

shopping for the "best" option. The researchers define what it means to be "picky" and also developed a scale for measuring shopper pickiness.

Margaret Meloy, department chair and professor of marketing at Penn State, said the findings could help companies devise the best strategies for satisfying their pickier customers.

"If a company knows they have a lot of picky customers, they may need to change the way they reward salespeople or dedicate specific salespeople to their pickiest customers, because picky shoppers have very narrow preferences and they see perceived flaws in products others wouldn't notice," Meloy said. "Alternatively, a company may allow picky shoppers to customize their products to satisfy their idiosyncratic preferences. It's not just about offering the best products, but offering the products that are best for the picky customers."

Meloy added that even the most robust promotional strategies, like offering a free gift with purchase, may fail with picky customers.

Previous research has found that about 40% of people have family or friends they would consider "picky," suggesting the trait is common. The researchers said it might be helpful for retailers to have a better understanding of what being "picky" means for their [customer](#) base, and what those customers may need from a product or shopping experience.

Meloy said that while pickiness affects a customer's shopping habits and therefore affects a company's business, there hasn't been much research done on defining pickiness or investigating how it influences a customer's behavior.

"In marketing, we call customers who want the absolute best version of a product 'maximizers,'" Meloy said. "But with picky customers, the best is more idiosyncratic. For them, it might not be about getting the best

quality, but getting the precise version of a product they have in their head—a shirt in a very precise shade of black, for example. We wanted to explore this a bit more."

For the paper—recently published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*—the researchers performed a series of studies to create a scale for measuring shopper pickiness and to identify the consequences of that pickiness on customer behavior.

The first series of studies focused on developing the scale. The researchers said they created a series of questions that would help uncover the psychological dimensions of pickiness while also avoiding using the word "picky," since the word tends to have negative connotations. Once the researchers were confident the scale accurately measured pickiness, they conducted additional studies to examine the possible consequences of pickiness.

The researchers found that people who scored higher on the picky [shopper](#) scale tend to have a small window of what they consider acceptable, which the researchers described as having a small latitude of acceptance and a wide latitude for rejection. These shoppers were more likely to reject a free gift when offered as a thank you for participating in a survey.

"This may seem irrational to some people who may not understand why a person would reject things that come at no cost," said Andong Cheng, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Delaware who earned her doctorate at Penn State. "We speculate that it could be psychologically costly for picky shoppers to take free items that they don't like because possessing these items is a source of irritation for these individuals."

Additionally, the researchers found that picky people didn't change their

opinions based on a product's popularity. When they were informed that their top choice of a product was less popular than other options, people who scored high on the picky scale weren't swayed by that information. They stuck with their original selection.

Meloy said the results support the theory that being picky is a general personality trait that isn't just present in one situation or area of a person's life.

"We looked at a range of contexts to see whether being picky in one domain meant you were likely to be picky in others," Meloy said. "Sure enough, individuals who were picky in one domain were picky in other domains. For example, if you tend to be picky while shopping for groceries, you'll probably be picky shopping for clothes, as well."

Meloy said the findings also illustrate the importance of a company understanding and tailoring their business practices to their customer base.

"If you know you have a lot of picky customers, you might not want to bother with offering free products or promoting products by saying how popular they are with other people," Meloy said. "It's just not going to work as well with picky customers. These companies will need to come up with strategies that give customers more control to better align their idiosyncratic preferences with the company's offerings."

Hans Baumgartner, Smeal Chair Professor of Marketing at Penn State, also participated in this work.

More information: Andong Cheng et al, Identifying Picky Shoppers: Who They Are and How to Spot Them, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1223](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1223)

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