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# Personality and Individual Differences

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## Failing to commit: Maximizers avoid commitment in a way that contributes to reduced satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

Past research suggests that individuals who approach decisions with the goal of maximizing, or selecting the best possible option, show less satisfaction with their choices than those with the goal of satisficing, or selecting the first “good enough” option. The present investigation examines whether this difference in choice satisfaction stems from a difference in willingness to commit to one’s choices. We argue that maximizers are reticent to commit to their choices and that this reticence robs them of the dissonance reduction processes that leave people satisfied. In Study 1, maximizers reported a stronger preference than satisficers for retaining the possibility to revise choices, both when reporting preferences in their own life and when choosing between options in a hypothetical situation. In Study 2, satisficers showed evidence of classic dissonance reduction after making a choice – they offered higher ratings of a chosen poster and lower ratings of the rejected alternatives, relative to baseline. However, maximizers were less likely to change their impressions of the posters after their choice, leaving them less satisfied with their selected poster. These results provide valuable insight into post-decision processes that decrease maximizers’ satisfaction with their decisions.

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### 1. Introduction

Many of the choices we make, regarding whom to marry, what job to accept, or even which movie to watch, are intended to make us happy. We try to make wise choices that will leave us satisfied. That said, it is not always possible to know what is the best choice. Herbert Simon (1955) argued that it is rarely possible to review all possible options in detail and identify the single best choice. He argued that, instead, people tend to satisfice, or select an option that is “good enough,” in that it meets a minimum threshold of acceptability.

More recent research has demonstrated individual differences in the degree to which people seek to “maximize” by identifying and selecting the best possible choice option or to “satisfice” by selecting the first option that is “good enough” (Schwartz et al., 2002). Those who strive to make the best decisions (maximizers) do not seem to benefit from this mindset, relative to their satisficing peers. Maximizers tended to make better decisions by objective standards. For example, among graduating students, maximizers found jobs with starting salaries that were 20% higher than satisficers (Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006). By objective standards, maximizers achieved better outcomes, however they reported lower satisfaction with those jobs than their satisficing peers. Similarly,

maximizers tend to be more likely than satisficers to report regret and depression, in general, and show lower happiness, optimism and self-esteem, compared to satisficers (Schwartz et al., 2002).

At least one reason that maximizers show less satisfaction is that they make decisions in very different ways than satisficers. Maximizers spend more time reviewing options when making a choice than do satisficers (Dar-Nimrod, Rawn, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2009). This exhaustive decision process has been argued to increase maximizers’ uncertainty that they have found the best choice (e.g. Iyengar et al., 2006).

The present investigation examines whether maximizers show less commitment to their choices than satisficers in a way that leaves them less satisfied with their choices. We propose that maximizers’ focus on finding the best option undermines their commitment to choices. As a result, we argue, maximizers miss out on the psychological benefits of commitment, leaving them less satisfied than satisficers.

Past research has focused on how maximizers and satisficers might differ *while making a choice* (e.g., Dar-Nimrod et al., 2009). However, little is known about how this individual difference influences processes occurring after the choice is made. Because maximizers want to be certain that they have made the “right” choice, we argue that they are less likely to fully commit to a decision. Identifying the “right” choice can be a never-ending task. Feelings about which option is best can always change in the face of new information. Maximizers might be unable to fully embrace

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a choice because they cannot be absolutely certain they chose the best possible option. Therefore, we predict, maximizers are likely to feel less committed to their choices than satisficers.

Past research is consistent with the argument that maximizers feel less committed to their choices than satisficers. First, maximizers seek to verify that they have chosen the “right” option more often than satisficers. Iyengar et al. (2006) found that maximizers relied more on other external sources of information than satisficers when evaluating potential jobs, such as advice from career service centers, expert rankings, and advice from family members. Maximizers also report engaging in more social comparison both before and after making a choice than do satisficers, indicating that they are continuing to look for evidence that they have made the best choice even after making a decision (Schwartz et al., 2002). When engaged in a job search, maximizers fantasized more than satisficers about having additional options, indicating they might have been uncomfortable committing to an available option before they verified that they had identified the best (Iyengar et al., 2006). Second, maximizers engage in more post-decision processing than satisficers, including counterfactual thinking and social comparison (Schwartz et al., 2002), suggesting a continuing lack of commitment even after an option has been selected.

To the degree that maximizers commit to their decisions less than satisficers, they should be less likely to experience the benefits of commitment. After making a decision, a wealth of research suggests that people reduce cognitive dissonance about their decision through “spreading of alternatives,” or increasing their liking for the chosen option and decreasing their liking for rejected options (Brehm, 1956; Festinger, 1957). People thus reduce the dissonance that might characterize a difficult choice by shifting their attitudes to be consistent with their choices. Brehm and Cohen (1962) suggested that commitment is a necessary condition for this dissonance reduction process to take place. If maximizers are less committed than satisficers to their decisions, we argue, they should experience less cognitive dissonance. Recognizing the appeal of foregone alternatives is less inconsistent when one has not fully committed to a choice. Thus, a lack of commitment to decisions is expected to keep maximizers from viewing their selected option more favorably after a choice, a well-established consequence of a committed decision.

## 2. Overview of the present studies

We conducted two studies to explore whether maximizers commit less to their choices and are less likely to show benefits of choice commitment than satisficers. In Study 1, we developed scales to measure a self-reported tendency to commit to decisions and examined the correlation between two commitment avoidance strategies and maximizing tendencies. In Study 2, we employed a typical spreading of alternatives paradigm and gave participants the opportunity to rank posters in order of their preference, choose a poster to take home from those ranked in the middle of the set, and then re-rank all posters. We expected these studies to show that maximizers report engaging in commitment avoidance strategies more often, show less “spreading of alternatives” after choice, and consequently show less satisfaction with their choice than satisficers.

## 3. Study 1

Study 1 was designed to explore whether maximizers are less comfortable committing to their choices than are satisficers. This study also draws from past research suggesting that people report that they prefer to retain the possibility of changing their mind after making a decision, even though this preference robs people of the dissonance reduction that accompanies closed options and,

as such, leads to lowered choice satisfaction (Gilbert & Ebert, 2002). Participants were asked to complete two scales, created for this study, designed to measure commitment avoidance. Participants were next told about a hypothetical study in which students were able to choose a poster to take home as a thank you gift for participation. They were asked whether they would prefer to be in a version of the study in which they had to fully commit to their choice (i.e., they would not be allowed to change their mind after selecting a poster) or a version in which they could avoid psychologically committing to the choice (i.e., they could exchange their poster if they later changed their mind). We anticipated that maximizing would predict reports of engaging in commitment avoidance strategies. We also anticipated that maximizing would predict a preference for the version of the poster study in which participants were not forced to commit to their choice.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

Eighty-six undergraduates (40 women) participated in exchange for course credit in an introductory psychology course. Participants were, on average, 20.0 years old ( $SD = 1.9$ ). They were 83% White, 7% Black, 1% Asian, and 6% multiracial. The remaining 4% did not indicate ethnicity.

### 4.2. Procedure

Upon arriving at the laboratory, participants completed the 13-item Maximization scale (Schwartz et al., 2002). It asks participants to rate their agreement with statements such as “I never settle for second best” and “Whenever I’m faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren’t present at the moment” on a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree),  $\alpha = .72$ . They were next asked to complete two scales, created for this study, designed to measure a tendency to avoid decision commitment. In the Preference to Keep Options Open scale (Appendix A), participants rated their agreement, on 7-pt scales, with 6 items such as “When I go on a trip, I often pack more than one outfit for each day/event. I want to bring enough clothes that I have multiple options when I get dressed each day.” The items were averaged to create an overall measure of need to keep options available ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ). Participants also completed the Decision Commitment scale (Appendix B) for which they rated their agreement with 11 items measuring a tendency to avoid committing to a choice by retaining the option to change their minds. For example, participants were asked to rate their agreement with items such as “I really don’t like ‘all sales final’ signs – I need to be able to change my mind” and “Once I make a choice, that’s it. I don’t tend to change my mind,”  $\alpha = .76$ .

Participants were next asked to imagine a study in which participants would choose one of seven posters to take home. They were told about two versions of the study, counterbalanced for order. In one version, participants would be welcome to change their mind and select a different poster even after the experiment was over. In the other version, participants would not be able to change their mind about the poster. Participants were asked to indicate which version they preferred and, separately, rate the strength of their preference on scales ranging from 1 (very slightly prefer) to 7 (very strongly prefer).

## 5. Results

To explore whether maximizers are less willing to commit to decisions than satisficers, we calculated correlations between par-

ticipants' Maximization scores and their responses to the Preference to Keep Options Open and Decision Commitment scales. As predicted, the tendency to maximize was correlated with both a preference to keep one's options open,  $r = .60$ ,  $p < .001$  and with lowered willingness to commit to decisions,  $r = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Next, we explored whether maximization predicted preferences for the hypothetical study version in which participants were able to change their minds. A logistic regression revealed that higher scores on the measure of maximizing significantly predicted a preference for the changeable study version,  $\chi^2(1, N = 86) = 4.88$ ,  $p < .03$ . The odds of choosing the changeable condition were .95 times higher for every one-unit increase in maximizing score. Maximizing scores were also significantly correlated with participants' rated strength of preference for the changeable outcome ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .04$ ). As recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008), we conducted a bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis in order to determine whether a tendency to avoid commitment mediated the relationship between maximizing and strength of preference for the changeable outcome. This analysis estimated the mean indirect effect of maximizing on strength of preference for the changeable outcome through commitment avoidance. The 95% confidence interval for this indirect effect ranged from .09 to 1.39, suggesting that the effect of maximizing on preference for changeability was mediated by commitment avoidance. Last, as expected, when all analyses were conducted with gender included as a predictor variable, there were no significant main effects of gender and no significant interactions between gender and maximization.

## 6. Discussion

Participants who scored higher in maximizing reported more often avoiding psychological commitment to their choices and preferring to keep their options open, relative to those who scored lower in maximizing (i.e., satisficers). Higher maximization scores also predicted participants' rated preference for a hypothetical scenario in which they would retain the ability to change their mind regarding a selected poster, allowing them to avoid fully committing to their choice, and a direct test for mediation revealed that low decision commitment mediated the relationship between maximizing and strength of preference for changeable outcomes. By not fully committing to their decisions, we expect that maximizers rob themselves of the psychological benefits of commitment.

## 7. Study 2

Prior research has demonstrated that one of the most beneficial effects of committing to a choice is the cognitive dissonance reduction that results after taking full possession of an option. Study 2 was designed to explore whether maximizers are less likely than satisficers to experience an important post-decisional benefit of commitment – spreading of alternatives. Participants were asked to rank 15 posters in order of preference before choosing one of the seven posters they ranked in the middle of the set to take home. After choosing a poster, participants were asked to rank the posters again and rate their satisfaction with their chosen poster, both in the lab and a week after their laboratory session.

## 8. Method

### 8.1. Participants

Fifty-two undergraduates (37 women, Mean age = 18.6, SD = 1.1) participated in exchange for course credit in an introductory psychology course. Seventy-three percent were white, 14% were black, 6% were multiracial, 4% were Asian, and 4% opted not to respond.

### 8.2. Procedure

Upon arriving at the laboratory, participants completed the Maximization scale. Next, participants were shown a set of fifteen  $8 \times 10$  prints of posters. The posters were selected to appeal to a wide variety of undergraduates and represented movies, musicians, famous paintings, and cityscapes of Paris and New York. The experimenter gestured to a box containing poster-sized versions of the prints. Participants were asked to arrange the stack of prints in order of preference from top (favorite) to bottom (least favorite).

After a brief filler task, participants were given an opportunity to choose a poster to take home. The experimenter offered a cover story regarding inventory issues and explained that participants would not be able to choose from all fifteen posters. Instead, participants were asked to choose from a set of sealed envelopes containing lists of different subsets of the posters. The selection of options was rigged to insure that participants were offered a choice among the posters that they had ranked fifth through eleventh. (Their top and bottom four posters did not appear on the list.) This method was used to insure that all the participants would be forced to make a reasonably difficult choice.

After completing a second brief filler task, the experimenter explained that preferences sometimes change and asked participants to rank the 15 prints a second time. They were told their responses should reflect how they felt about the posters in that moment. Lastly, participants rated their agreement with three statements designed to measure their satisfaction with their poster and their choice ("I am satisfied with this poster", "My choice to get this poster was a wise one", and "I feel bad about my decision to choose this poster"). Agreement was rated on a 7-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. After reverse scoring the last item, responses to all three items were averaged to create a composite measure of satisfaction,  $\alpha = .77$ .

To explore whether the effects of maximizing on commitment and satisfaction extended beyond the laboratory session, we emailed participants 1 week after participation asking them to complete a web-based follow up survey. Participants were shown images of the same 15 posters and were asked to rank them a final time. They also answered the satisfaction questions a second time and reported whether they had kept their poster or given it away. If they still had their poster in their possession, they reported whether it was hanging up on their wall.

## 9. Results and discussion

Data from three participants were excluded for not following directions. We excluded data from an additional three participants who expressed suspicion about our cover story for why participants could not choose from the full set of 15 posters. For brevity's sake, we have omitted discussion of gender. It had no effect in any of the described analyses.

### 10. Spreading of alternatives

Following the procedure outlined by Lieberman, Ochsner, Gilbert, and Schacter (2001), we first compared participants' baseline poster rankings to their set of rankings from the end of the first laboratory session. We then calculated a composite score representing the degree to which participants spread alternatives by subtracting the average decrease in rank for the six unselected prints from the increase in rank for the selected print. A correlational analysis revealed, as predicted, that participants higher in maximizing displayed less spreading of alternatives than did higher in satisficing,  $r(44) = -.29$ ,  $p < .05$ , see Table 1.

We next calculated estimated spreading of alternatives values for participants high and low in maximizing. Participants higher in satisficing (i.e., one SD below the mean on the maximization scale) demonstrated a spread of alternatives greater than zero,  $M = 2.11$ , 95% CI between 1.03 and 3.19, suggesting that their preference for the chosen poster increased between their pre-decision baseline rankings and the ranking provided at the end of the experimental session. In contrast, the spread scores for participants higher in maximizing (i.e., one SD above the mean on the maximization scale) did not differ from zero,  $M = 0.57$ , 95% CI between  $-.51$  and 1.65. Thus, there was no evidence that maximizers were engaged in the classic pattern of post-decisional dissonance reduction.

Only 16 participants completed the follow up survey 1 week after the experimental session. However, we conducted a set of exploratory parallel analyses to examine whether participants' maximizing scores continued to predict spreading of alternatives one week after choosing their poster. A correlational analysis revealed, as predicted, that participants higher in maximizing showed less spreading of alternatives between their baseline rankings in the lab and the follow up survey a week later than did their satisficing peers,  $r(14) = -.64$ ,  $p < .009$ . As during the laboratory session, participants higher in satisficing displayed the classic pattern of spreading alternatives one week after the laboratory session, as evidenced by a spread score greater than zero,  $M = 3.08$ , CI of 1.92–4.24. In contrast, participants higher in maximizing continued to show no evidence of this classic pattern of dissonance reduction,  $M = 0.92$ , CI of  $-.11$ –1.96.

## 11. Satisfaction

We next examined the relationship between the tendency to spread alternatives and participants' rated satisfaction with the selected poster during the laboratory session. As predicted, participants with higher spreading of alternatives scores offered higher ratings of satisfaction with their choice,  $r(41) = .30$ ,  $p < .05$ . Also as predicted, participants higher in maximizing reported lower choice satisfaction than those lower in maximizing,  $r(41) = -.31$ ,  $p < .05$ . In an exploratory analysis of the relationship between maximizing and choice satisfaction one week later, this trend continued but did not reach significance,  $r(14) = -.25$ ,  $p > .30$ .

### 11.1. Commitment

Of the 16 participants who completed the follow-up, three had given their poster away to a friend. For the 13 remaining participants, logistic regression revealed that maximizing was a significant predictor of choosing not to display the poster yet,  $\chi^2(1, N = 13) = 4.87$ ,  $p < .03$ . Opening a poster and taking the time to hang it up on the wall represents a direct act of commitment to a choice, whereas delaying action would allow the participants to easily keep all options available related to the fate of their poster and their dorm room décor.

In summary, results revealed that individuals scoring higher in maximizing engaged in significantly less post-decisional spread as

revealed by ranking scores and were ultimately less satisfied with their choice than individuals scoring lower in maximizing. In addition, the most direct measure of behavioral commitment to the choice (choosing to hang up the poster a week later) revealed that maximizing predicted a decision to not behaviorally commit to the poster.

## 12. General discussion

Past research suggests that maximizers achieve better outcomes but are less happy with those outcomes than satisficers. In two studies, we examined whether maximizers are less likely than satisficers to commit to their choices and this lack of commitment, in turn, limits their choice satisfaction. In Study 1, maximizers reported greater preferences both to keep their options open and to retain their ability to change their minds relative to satisficers. Maximizers also scored lower than satisficers on a measure of decision commitment. Study 2 demonstrated that, compared to satisficers, maximizers displayed less of a classic form of dissonance reduction typically following committed choice – the tendency to spread alternatives by changing evaluations of the alternatives in favor of the decision. They were ultimately less satisfied with their choice than satisficers. Exploratory analyses revealed that maximizers were less likely than satisficers to hang up a selected poster, a behavioral action that represents commitment to a decision regarding room décor.

Future research should investigate the degree to which maximizers' greater reticence to commit to choices, relative to satisficers, stems from the difficulty of being confident that one has made the "right" or "best" choice. If reluctance to commit is driven by this uncertainty over whether the best has been found as we suggest, several factors should moderate the negative effects of maximizing. In particular, compelling external feedback regarding the quality of one's choice from a trusted source might reduce the costs of maximizing. Such feedback might increase maximizers' satisfaction with a choice, to the degree that it suggests they have met their goal. More importantly, however, feedback indicating that they have made the "right" choice would allow maximizers to commit to their choice, thereby affording themselves the psychological benefits of commitment including dissonance reduction.

The present research also provides a new perspective on recent research addressing the factors that underlie consumer satisfaction. People tend to be more satisfied with purchases of experiences (e.g., vacations) than purchases of material goods (e.g. cell phones) (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Part of why people are often more satisfied with experiential than material purchase decisions is that two similar experiences are inherently more difficult to compare side by side than are two similar material goods. As a result, people more often try to maximize when deciding between material goods than experiences. Similarly, people show more of the negative consequences of maximizing for material than experiential decisions, including lower satisfaction and greater tendencies to think about foregone options after a decision has been made (Carter & Gilovich, 2010).

To the degree that it is easier to avoid commitment to a material than an experiential purchase, the current work suggests that this difference might contribute to tendencies for consumers to maximize more often for material than experiential purchases. Certainly some material purchases are final and some experiential purchases come with money-back guarantees. That said, it is likely easier to reverse a decision about which of two material goods to buy and get your money back than to reverse a decision between two experiences. You can return a shirt to the store and have your payment refunded. In comparison, you cannot give back the experience of

**Table 1**  
Estimated change in poster ratings for participants high vs. low in maximizing.

	High in Satisficing (–1 sd)	High in Maximizing (+1 sd)
Change in ratings for chosen poster	1.83	0.47
Change in ratings for rejected posters	–0.28	–0.1
Spread score (change in selected – change in rejected)	2.11	0.57

seeing a movie. Though there tends to be a limited opportunity for reversing a material purchase decision, we suggest that the time is often much longer than is typical for experiential purchases. As a result, consumers might be less likely to commit to decisions about material than experiential purchases. Future work should examine whether maximizers might particularly benefit from the commitment that many experiential purchases impose upon decision makers, because our results show that maximizers are less likely to self-impose such commitments and thereby recruit the satisfaction-enhancing psychological processes associated with commitment.

One final important avenue for future research is to better understand how maximizing might interact with other key personality traits to impact decision satisfaction and subjective well-being. Prior work suggests that maximizing correlates with perfectionism and neuroticism (Schwartz et al., 2002), but that the effects of maximizing on measures of well-being exist even in analyses controlling for these constructs. Future research should aim to improve our understanding of how maximizing might interact with perfectionism, neuroticism, and other traits to predict consumer satisfaction.

In summary, the present research provides further evidence for why seeking the best option might have ironic detrimental effects. Previous research has demonstrated that when decision-makers pursue the best possible option, they may engage in many pre-decisional activities that result in increased regret, uncertainty, and disappointment over not meeting lofty goals. However, our research shows that maximizers might also sentence themselves to a constant state of ongoing decision. The problem with seeking the best might not just be the uncertainty surrounding the success of the quest, but rather the uncertainty surrounding whether the quest can end.

### 13. Author bios

Erin Sparks is a doctoral student at Florida State University. Her research focuses on the consequences of maximization.

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### Appendix A

#### *Preference. to keep options open scale*

- (1) When I go to the store, I find that I spend more than I originally intended because I'm unable to choose between multiple good options.
- (2) Sometimes I buy more than I probably need because I want to always be able to choose between multiple options (e.g., regarding what to wear or what to have for dinner on a particular day).

- (3) I'm willing to spend extra money if it means I'll have more options later.
- (4) I don't like to decide on a specific set of meals when grocery shopping. I like to just buy stuff for a bunch of different meals so that I have multiple options to choose from when I get hungry.
- (5) When I go on a trip, I often pack more than one outfit for each day/event. I want to bring enough clothes that I have multiple options when I get dressed each day.
- (6) When I am planning a vacation, I don't like to commit to a specific itinerary. I want to know about all the cool stuff I can do, but also to keep my options open about what I'll do on a specific day until I wake up that morning.

### Appendix B

#### *Decision. commitment scale*

- (1) Once I make a choice, that's it. I don't tend to change my mind.
- (2) When I'm buying something, I often think, "I should just get it, if I decide later that something else would be better, I can just return it."
- (3) I never really bother to return things that I've bought, even if I'm not crazy about them.
- (4) Whenever possible, I prefer to keep my options open and like when I'm not locked into a decision.
- (5) If I'm having trouble making a choice, I remind myself that I can just change my mind later.
- (6) I really don't like "all sales final" signs – I need to be able to change my mind.
- (7) For important life choices, the decision isn't ever really over. If I ever realize that another option would have been better, I'll do what I need to do to reverse my original decision.
- (8) After I book a vacation or order a product, I keep reading the reviews I find, even the bad ones. I can always find a way to undo my mistake if I need to!
- (9) After I've picked something, the decision never really ends. I can always decide to change my mind!
- (10) It's hard for me to make plans with people that are always thinking about whether we should go back on something we've already decided. I just don't work that way. When I'm done, I'm done.
- (11) Once I buy something, I'm committed to it. It's mine for good!

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