Stop Arguing! How Childhood Exposure to Interparental Conflict Affects Consumer Response toward Product Review Dispersion

Abstract

This paper explores how exposure to interparental conflict (IPC) during one's childhood impacts online buyer behavior later in adulthood. We show that people who report having witnessed higher (vs. lower) levels of IPC as children evaluate products less favorably when they are associated with product reviews exhibiting a higher (vs. lower) dispersion of opinion. This result is driven by a desire to avoid conflict. The research deepens the understanding consumer responses to review dispersion by identifying a novel psychological factor. It also contributes to the developmental psychology and socialization literatures by documenting the long-lasting impact of early childhood family communication processes on adult consumer behavior. Future research avenues are discussed.

Key words: interparental conflict, review dispersion, interpersonal arguments, conflict avoidance

Mengmeng Liu, Lee Shau Kee School of Business and Administration, Hong Kong Metropolitan University; Maureen Morrin, the Henry Rutgers Professor of Marketing, Rutgers University Camden; Boyoun (Grace) Chae, Department of Marketing, Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mengmeng Liu, Lee Shau Kee School of Business and Administration, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Homantin, Kowloon, Hong Kong. Contact: mengmeng.liu@link.cuhk.eud.hk

1. Introduction

Online shopping continues to grow at a rapid pace, with retail e-commerce sales reaching $4.28 trillion in 2020 and online shopping described as "…one of the most popular online activities worldwide" (https://www.statista.com/statistics/379046/worldwide-retail-e-commerce-sales/). Recent surveys show that 93% of consumers aged 35-54 "always" read online reviews (https://www.brightlocal.com/research/local-consumer-review-survey/). Thus, it is crucial to understand how online product reviews guide consumer purchase decisions. In the present research, we focus on the impact of the role played by the *dispersion* of online product reviews, that is, the heterogeneity of consumer opinions about a product (Sun, 2012).

Previous research on review dispersion has shown mixed results. Some studies show a positive effect of review dispersion on product evaluation and sales (Clemons, Gao, & Hitt, 2006; Khare, Labrecque, & Asare, 2011; Sun, 2012), whereas others show a negative impact (Moon, Bergey, & Iacobucci, 2010; Zhu & Zhang, 2010), and still others a null effect (Chintagunta, Gopinath, & Venkataraman, 2010). These mixed findings suggest there are likely "important moderators worthy of investigation" in this domain (He & Bond, 2015).

Indeed, recent studies show that review dispersion may have different effects on shoppers depending on psychological factors such as uncertainty avoidance (West & Broniarczyk, 1998), self-expression motivation (Rozenkrants, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2017), and attribution processes (He & Bond, 2015). We aim to extend this line of research by exploring an individual difference variable that has not been previously investigated in the context of online reviews. In particular, we examine the extent of childhood exposure to destructive interparental conflict (IPC) in terms of its influence on how adult consumers react when they encounter differences of opinion in product reviews.

This research makes significant contributions in at least three ways. First, the research contributes theoretically to extant work on consumer socialization and development. Child development researchers have shown that high-conflict parental relationships can cause children to experience anxiety, depression, and shame (e.g., Rhoades, 2008), with the negative effects continuing into adulthood (e.g., Riggio, 2004). Relatedly, consumer researchers have shown that individuals who grow up in disrupted households exhibit more materialism and compulsive consumption behavior (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Denton, 1997). The present research contributes to these streams of research by examining the nuanced effects of children's long-term exposure to destructive interparental conflict on consumption behavior in the commonly experienced context of online purchasing. Second, it provides marketing practitioners novel insight into an important aspect of the psychology underlying consumer response to review dispersion. We show that consumers interpret mixed reviews as a form of interpersonal conflict, which some consumers, based on their childhood experiences, are motivated to avoid. Third, this research offers a strategic solution for managers that can offset the potentially negative impact of dispersed reviews on shopper response. Namely, we show that communicating the potential benefits of interpersonal conflict to individuals who ordinarily are motivated to avoid conflict can attenuate the negative impact of dispersed reviews.

We next discuss our conceptual framework, then present five studies testing aspects of the framework, followed by a general discussion.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Review dispersion and its implications

Online shopping is growing, and perusing product reviews posted by other shoppers has become almost an inherent part of the decision-making process while shopping online. In addition, the

COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the shift to online purchasing, with annual sales at Amazon.com now exceeding those at the largest brick and mortar retailer in the U.S., Walmart (https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/technology/amazon-walmart.html). This increasing trend toward online shopping highlights the critical need for marketers to more fully understand the role of online reviews in consumers' purchase decisions.

Prior research shows that both the valence and variation of product reviews significantly influence product preference and purchase behavior (e.g., Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Not surprisingly, positive (negative) product reviews tend to positively (negatively) impact purchase likelihood (e.g., Chintagunta et al., 2010). However, unlike the impact of review valence, the impact of review dispersion seems to be contingent on various contextual and individual factors. There have been attempts to document the main effect of review dispersion, yet the findings have been mixed. For instance, some studies show a positive impact of review dispersion on product evaluation and sales (Clemons et al., 2006; Khare et al., 2011; Sun, 2012), whereas others show a negative (Moon et al., 2010; Zhu & Zhang, 2010) or null effect (Chintagunta et al., 2010). As a result, researchers have tried to understand whether contextual factors or individual differences determine whether review dispersion positively or negatively influences consumer decisions.

Research has documented that consumers' subjective interpretation of review dispersion can play a crucial role. Review dispersion may be interpreted as a signal of uncertainty regarding product performance (e.g., Meyer, 1981; West & Broniarczyk, 1998). West and Broniarczyk (1998) proposed that consumers become more risk-seeking (risk-averse) when the consumption event is framed as a loss (gain) based on prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Hence, when uncertainty is deemed desirable (vs. undesirable), consumers prefer a product with more dispersed reviews (West & Broniarczyk, 1998). Research also finds that consumers relate review

dispersion to self-expression. Rozenkrants, Wheeler, and Shiv (2017) proposed that people who are motivated to seek a stronger self-concept prefer products with more polarized reviews. Consumers interpret significantly different reviews as indications of strong opinions, which can help them restore a sense of self-clarity. He and Bond (2015) examined review dispersion from the perspective of taste similarity. They found that consumers can attribute review dispersion to either the product itself or to reviewers' dissimilar tastes. When consumers recognize that heterogeneity comes from people having dissimilar tastes, they attribute the variance to reviewer characteristics rather than the target product, in which case their evaluation of products is less affected by review dispersion.

In the current paper, we focus on an understudied moderator that can influence how consumers interpret review dispersion. We propose that consumers interpret review dispersion as a form of interpersonal conflict, which will be repellant to some consumers. Product review dispersion, by definition, reflects heterogeneity of opinions about a product (Sun, 2012), or a difference in views between two or more people. Even when no verbal conversations or interpersonal interactions between reviewers takes place, consumers may perceive more disagreement and conflict when the written reviews and product ratings are contrasting and incompatible, compared to when the reviews are more similar or homogenous. While reading mixed reviews, consumers may even feel the need to choose a set of reviews on which they will rely more, essentially taking one side over the other, as if they themselves had engaged in the interpersonal conflict.

Based on the forgoing discussion, we expect that consumers who are chronically motivated to avoid interpersonal conflict will respond negatively to and devaluate products with more dispersed reviews. In the present research, we draw from work in the child development

literature to identify an individual difference variable that influences people's chronic tendencies to avoid conflict. Namely, we are interested in the extent to which adult consumers report having been exposed to high levels of *destructive interparental conflict* (IPC) during childhood. We expect that greater exposure to IPC in childhood will elicit more negative responses from adult shoppers when exposed to greater product review dispersion due to a motivation to avoid conflict.

2.2. Childhood exposure to interparental conflict

There are disagreements in nearly all families. Exposure to disagreement in the home is not necessarily harmful to children. Indeed, observing constructive conflict in the home environment helps children learn how to effectively solve their interpersonal disagreements (Cummings, Goeke -Morey, & Papp, 2004). Thus, marital discord can be beneficial to children if parents resolve such disagreements constructively, with affection, and with minimal, well-regulated levels of anger (McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009).

However, family disagreements that take the form of destructive interparental conflict (IPC) are a severe stressor for children. IPC often involves physical and verbal aggression, personal insult, and expressions of anger and hostility, and these conflicts often remain unresolved (e.g., McCoy et al., 2009). The extent to which interparental conflict is "destructive" is related to its frequency, mode of expression, duration, intensity, and lack of resolution (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Destructive interparental conflict is strongly associated with children's emotional insecurity (e.g., McCoy et al., 2009) and mental health problems (e.g., Goeke-Morey et al., 2007), and often results in higher rates of conduct disorder, anxiety, and withdrawal tendencies (Long et al., 1988).

Importantly, exposure to IPC leaves a fundamental mark on children's interpersonal

relationship style. Children exposed to a high level of IPC are more likely to have difficulty dealing with interpersonal conflict, and often implement strategies to avoid conflict altogether (Cummings & Davies, 1996). Central to the current research is whether and how the effects of exposure to IPC extend into adulthood beyond contexts involving social relationships. In particular, we examine how exposure to IPC impacts adult consumption behavior in contexts where interpersonal conflict may be only subtly cued, such as in product reviews.

Studies have shown that the effects of childhood experiences often come into play when consumers encounter a current threat or stressor in adulthood (e.g., Mittal, Griskevicius, & Haws, 2016). For instance, Whelan and Hingston (2018) showed that simply listing every day (vs. luxury) brands leads individuals from low childhood SES households to experience lower self-esteem (see also Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014). Such results imply that situational cues related to childhood experiences may activate behavioral motivations in adults based on such experiences.

The preceding discussion leads us to expect that products with higher (vs. lower) levels of review dispersion will have a negative impact among individuals with a history of greater childhood exposure to IPC because dispersed reviews are interpreted as signs of interpersonal conflict. In this way, review dispersion acts as a situational cue that elicits an adverse reaction among high IPC individuals, who are highly motivated to avoid interpersonal conflict. To see whether review dispersion elicits perceptions of interpersonal conflict, we conducted a pilot study among Amazon Mechanical Turk participants (N = 181). Participants were presented with a product associated with reviews that exhibited high or low review dispersion, and then indicated their perceptions of perceived conflict. We used the 23-item Perceived Conflict scale (Stern, Sternthal, & Craig, 1973) to assess the degree to which respondents perceived the product

reviewers as: friendly/hostile, cooperative/not cooperative, conciliatory/not conciliatory, etc. (on 7-point scales). The results support our contention that products associated with more versus less dispersed reviews tend to elicit greater perceptions of perceived conflict ($M_{\text{High\_Dispersion}} = 3.66$ vs. $M_{\text{Low\_Dispersion}} = 3.25$, $F(1,179) = 5.83$, $p = .017$; see Web Appendix A).

2.3. Conflict avoidance

If, as the pilot study results suggest, review dispersion is interpreted as a form of interpersonal conflict, then people who wish to avoid interpersonal conflict should be motivated to avoid products with more dispersed reviews. According to the approach-avoidance motivational framework, people are motivated to avoid rather than approach threatening or painful stimuli (Kelly et al., 2020). When an individual possesses an avoidance goal, they typically wish to maximize the physical distance between themselves and the undesired object, and thereby avoid contact with it (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 65). It has been shown that avoidance goals can include trying avoid disagreement and conflict (Impett et al., 2013, p. 393). Research has further shown that IPC affects the way individuals appraise conflict (e.g., Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Papp, 2007), with conflict for such individuals perceived as a threat (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). IPC sensitizes individuals to the anticipated outcomes of conflict (Davies et al., 1999), with higher IPC individuals anticipating more conflict in their relationships (Davies et al., 1999) and as a result often intend to avoid interacting with others in order to minimize the possibility of conflict (Gottman & Katz, 1989).

The preceding discussion leads us to propose that when exposed to situational cues involving mixed opinions, as in dispersed product reviews, high IPC individuals will devaluate such products, because they are motivated to avoid interpersonal conflict. More formally, we hypothesize:

H_1: Consumers exposed to higher (vs. lower) levels of destructive IPC in childhood will devaluate a product exhibiting high levels of dispersion.

H_2: The lower evaluation of products associated with high (vs. low) review dispersion is driven by a conflict avoidance motivation.

Five studies are presented that systematically investigate of the joint effect of exposure to destructive IPC in childhood and review dispersion. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate our core proposition that individuals exposed to higher levels of IPC in childhood evaluate products with high (vs. low) review dispersion less favorably. Study 3 provides behavioral evidence by examining the effect on actual choice behavior. Study 4 illustrates the proposed underlying mechanism (i.e., conflict avoidance). Study 5 offers a potential managerial solution, by directly manipulating consumers' perceptions about conflict, such that priming the desirability of conflict attenuates high IPC individuals' devaluation of products with dispersed reviews.

3. Study 1

Study 1 examines the effect of review dispersion on product evaluation among individuals exposed to higher (vs. lower) levels of IPC during childhood. In this study, participants were presented with hotel reviews that were low or high in dispersion, operationalized in terms of star ratings and written evaluations.

Destructive IPC is typically measured using the Children's Perception of Interpersonal Conflict Scale (CPIPCS; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992; see Appendix A for scale items), which we utilize in the present research. The CPIPCS is composed of three subscales: six items that assess the frequency of conflict (e.g., "I often saw my parents arguing"), seven items that measure the intensity of the conflict (e.g., "My parents pushed or shoved each other during an

argument"), and six items that assess the extent to which conflicts lacked resolution (e.g., "Even after my parents stopped arguing, they stayed mad at each other"). The higher the score, the greater the extent to which an individual has been exposed to IPC during childhood.

Study 1 additionally investigates whether childhood socioeconomic status (SES), parental divorce, or perceptions regarding the tendency to experience interpersonal conflict in daily life can substitute as moderators in place of IPC. The family stress model suggests that family economic hardship increases a couple's hostility/conflict and withdrawal/distancing behaviors, exacerbating marital issues and increasing relationship instability (e.g., Robila & Krishnakumar, 2005). Thus, it is plausible that greater exposure to IPC may be associated with lower childhood SES; yet IPC is likely present at all SES levels (i.e., in both poorer and wealthier households). Thus, we expect that childhood socioeconomic status (SES) may be a risk factor for exposure to destructive IPC, but that it will not act as a substitute (conceptually or empirically). In addition, parental divorce is likely positively correlated with destructive IPC, as divorce often is associated with marital discord, yet we expect that IPC rather than household structure is the key driver of the effect, as some divorces are amicable and may reduce exposure to IPC. Thus, we want to test whether the impact of IPC is robust while controlling for these two alternative constructs. Lastly, we measured perceptions regarding the tendency to experience interpersonal conflict, which allows us to investigate whether individuals perceiving more interpersonal conflict in their daily lives (regardless of the reason why) drives the conflict-avoidance motivation in response to product review dispersion. We therefore examine three individual difference constructs that are likely related to IPC, childhood socioeconomic status, family structure (e.g., divorced or not), and perceived tendency to experience interpersonal conflict, in terms of the extent to which they affect adult consumers' responses to different levels of review dispersion.

3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants recruited from Mturk (N = 359, 36.1% male, median age = 32) were randomly assigned to a low or high review dispersion condition (all participants were included for analysis). Participants were asked to imagine they were looking for a hotel for an upcoming trip at hotels.com and were informed that they would be presented with several customer reviews about a hotel. Three reviews were presented in random order on the next screen, with the average star rating held constant at three stars across the two conditions. In the low dispersion condition, each review showed three stars on a 5-star rating scale. In the high dispersion condition, the reviews had one, three, and five stars. The valence of the written reviews was designed to match the star ratings (see Appendix B). Participants then evaluated the hotel using a 3-item scale (1 = unfavorable, bad, unlikely to try it; 7 = favorable, good, likely to try it). Next, perceived review disagreement as a manipulation check was measured using three items (1 = no disagreement at all, very similar reactions, no conflict at all, 10 = lots of disagreement, very mixed reactions, lots of conflict). Next, participants completed a 3-item childhood SES measurement: "My family had enough money for things when I was growing up," "I grew up in a relatively wealthy neighborhood," and "I felt relatively wealthy compared to others my age" (Griskevicius et al., 2011). Destructive IPC was measured using the 19-item CPIPCS on a 0-100 scale. In addition, we measured participants' tendency to regularly experience interpersonal conflict using three items we developed ("I rarely experience conflict with other people," (reversed-scored) "I experience a lot of interpersonal conflict on a day-to-day basis," and "I often find myself engaged in conflict with other people," from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Finally, participants provided demographic information such as age and gender.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. IPC. Each of the three dimensions of CPIPCS had high internal reliability ($\alpha_{frequency}$ = .87; $\alpha_{intensity}$ = .88; $\alpha_{lack\ of\ resolution}$ = .91) and were highly correlated ($r_{frequency*intensity}$ = .75, $r_{frequency*resolution}$ = .81, $r_{intensity*resolution}$ = .69, all *p*s < .001). Following prior research (Grych et al., 1992), we computed an IPC index by averaging all the items (α = .96).

3.2.2. Manipulation check. A regression on perceived review disagreement (α = .86) as a function of review dispersion (low = -1, high = 1), the IPC index (mean-centered), and their interaction showed that only review dispersion was significant ($M_{High\_Dispersion}$ = 6.34, $M_{Low\_Dispersion}$ = 3.94; *b* = 1.196, *se* = .098, *t* = 12.16, *p* < .001; other *p*s > .27), suggesting that our review dispersion manipulation was successful.

3.2.3. Hotel evaluation. A similar regression on hotel evaluation (α = .91) showed that the coefficient of review dispersion (*b* = -.086, *se* = .061, *t* = -1.39, *p* = .163) was not significant. IPC (*b* = -.004, *se* = .002, *t* = -1.82, *p* = .069) was marginally significant. More central to our research, the 2-way interaction between IPC and dispersion interaction was significant (*b* = -.005, *se* = .002, *t* = -2.00, *p* = .046). Further analysis showed, in support of H_1, the coefficient of IPC was negative and significant for participants' evaluation of the hotel with high dispersion reviews (*b* = -.009, *se* = .003, *t* = -2.70, *p* = .007), but not for the hotel with low dispersion reviews (*b* = .000, *se* = .003, *t* = .12, *p* = .899). Further, floodlight analysis shows that high IPC participants evaluated the hotel with high (vs. low) dispersion reviews less favorably (Johnson-Neyman point of transition at 8.41, with 35% respondents at *p* < .05; Figures 1, 2). Low IPC individuals exhibited no difference towards products with high (vs. low) dispersion reviews.

The pattern of results remained the same when parental divorce ($M_{Divorced\_CPIPCS}$ = 53.87, M_{Intact_CPIPCS} = 35.80, *p* < .001) was included in the model either as a covariate ($b_{CPIPCS×Dispersion}$ = -.005, *p* = .047; $b_{Divorced}$ = -.039, *p* = .568), or as a substitute for IPC ($b_{Divorced×Dispersion}$ = -.091, *p*

= .154; see Table B1 in Web Appendix B). Notably, neither the main effect of parental divorce nor its interaction with dispersion was significant.

Next, we examined the effect of childhood SES (α = .88) and its relationship to IPC. Childhood SES was negatively correlated with exposure to destructive IPC (r = -.27, p < .001) such that those who grew up in lower SES households were more likely to experience higher levels of IPC. When childhood SES (mean-centered) was included in the model as a covariate, SES had a marginal effect on product evaluation (b_{SES} = .067; p = .076), but the IPC × dispersion interaction effect remained significant ($b_{CPIPCS\times Dispersion}$ = -.005; p = .034). We also regressed product evaluation on childhood SES (mean-centered; b = .075, se = .036, t = 2.06, p = .039), review dispersion (b = -.093, se = .061, t = -1.51, p = .130) and their interaction (b = .004, se = .036, t = .12, p = .899). The results showed a single main effect of childhood SES such that respondents who grew up in lower (higher) SES households evaluated the hotels in general less (more) favorably. Review dispersion was not significant, nor was its interaction with SES (see Table B1 in Web Appendix B). These results show that although childhood SES may correlate with childhood exposure to IPC, childhood SES does not have the same effect as IPC on consumers' responses to review dispersion.

Further, tendency to experience interpersonal conflict (α = .69) was positively correlated with IPC (r = .14, p < .01). Nonetheless, including this variable in the regression model as a covariate left the IPC × dispersion effect essentially unchanged (b = -.005, se = .002, t = -1.98, p = .048), and the effect of tendency to experience interpersonal conflict was not significant (b = -.033, se = .075, t = -.44, p = .659). A regression analysis with tendency to experience interpersonal conflict, review dispersion and their interaction as independent variables showed that none of the effects was significant (all ps > .10), suggesting that tendency to experience

interpersonal conflict as an adult does not elicit the same response to high dispersion reviews as does exposure to IPC during childhood.

3.3 Discussion

Study 1 validates our main proposition. Adult consumers who report having been exposed to higher levels of IPC during childhood evaluated a product that displayed more (vs. less) dispersed reviews more negatively. The effects were robust even when parental divorce is controlled for. While these high IPC consumers were more likely to come from lower SES households, SES does not moderate or predict their sensitivity to high review dispersion. The results also show that the tendency to experience interpersonal conflict as an adult does not have the same effect as exposure to IPC during childhood.

This study manipulated product review dispersion by varying review ratings and their correspondent written reviews. One might argue that the different content of the written reviews rather than by review dispersion might have driven the effects. We address this potential concern in study 2 by varying only the star ratings of the reviews while holding written reviews content constant across the two review dispersion conditions.

4. Study 2

In this study, we kept the contents of reviews constant across the conditions and varied only the star ratings of the reviews. To examine the robustness of the effect, we tested our hypothesis in a healthcare context, which can bear significant consequences for consumer wellbeing. Participants indicate their likelihood of making an appointment with a physician based on the patient reviews provided.

4.1. Participants and procedure

Undergraduates (N = 207, 37.5% male, median age = 19) were randomly assigned to a low or

high review dispersion condition (all participants were included for analysis). The study was administered in paper-and-pencil format. Participants first read the cover story: "Please imagine you have not been feeling well for a few days and finally come to the point that you feel you need to see a doctor. You don't have a doctor and so decide to look online. You find a doctor whose patients have posted their experience with this doctor. Please review the information about this doctor carefully and answer the questions that follow." Participants were then presented with information about a physician, including their specialties and patient review information. Across both conditions, the physician had an average rating of 3.0 (out of 5.0) based on 82 patient reviews. Participants were also presented with three reviews from patients (in randomized order). Approximately half of the participants saw three reviews, all with three stars (i.e., low review dispersion condition); the remaining half saw three reviews associated with one, three, and five stars respectively (i.e., high review dispersion condition; see Appendix B). The physician description and the reviews were developed based on actual reviews found online, with adaptations for the current scenario. Participants then evaluated the physician using a three-item scale (1= bad, unfavorable, would definitely not make an appointment, 7 = good, favorable, would definitely make an appointment). Perceived review disagreement was measured as in study 1. After a 3-minute filler task that involved evaluating some consumer products (e.g., a T-shirt), participants completed the CPIPCS (1 = strongly disagree; 9 = strongly agree), the 3-item childhood SES scale, and provided demographic information.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. IPC. Each of the three dimensions of CPIPCS had high internal reliability ($\alpha_{frequency}$ = .83; $\alpha_{intensity}$ = .79; $\alpha_{lack\ of\ resolution}$ = .76) and were highly correlated ($r_{frequency*intensity}$ = .70, $r_{frequency*resolution}$ = .61, $r_{intensity*resolution}$ = .60, all *p*s < .0001). Following prior research (Grych et al.,

1992), IPC was computed by taking the average across the three subscales (IPC α = .90).

4.2.2. Manipulation check. As in study 1, we regressed perceived review disagreement (α = .70) on review dispersion (low = -1, high = 1), the IPC index (mean-centered), and their interaction, and found that only review dispersion was significant ($M_{\text{High\_Dispersion}}$ = 4.46, $M_{\text{Low\_Dispersion}}$ = 3.92, b = .264, se = .063, t = 4.19, p < .001; other ps > .10), as desired.

4.2.3. Physician evaluation. A similar regression on physician evaluation (α = .84) showed that review dispersion was not significant (b = -.054, se = .062, t = -.88, p = .378) whereas IPC was marginally significant (b = -.090, se = .048, t = -1.85, p = .065). More importantly, the IPC × review dispersion interaction was significant (b = -.107, se = .048, t = -2.20, p = .028). Replicating study 1 results, follow up analyses show that the coefficient of IPC was negative and significant for participants in the high review dispersion condition (b = -.198, se = .069, t = -2.83, p = .005), but not for those in the low review dispersion (b = .017, se = .068, t = .25, p = .801). Further, floodlight analysis shows that high IPC individuals evaluated the physician less favorably in the high (vs. low) dispersion condition (Johnson-Neyman point of transition at 0.87, with 24.6% respondents at p < .05). We did not find a Johnson-Neyman point of transition for the low IPC individuals at p < .05 (Figures 3, 4).

The pattern of results remained unchanged when parental divorce ($M_{\text{Divorced\_CPIPCS}}$ = 5.04, $M_{\text{Intact\_CPIPCS}}$ = 4.31, p = .009) was included in the model as a covariate ($b_{\text{CPIPCS×Dispersion}}$ = -.117, p = .017; b_{Divorced} = .166, p = .101) or as a substitute for IPC ($b_{\text{Divorced×Dispersion}}$ = .054, p = .606; see Table B2 in Web Appendix B). Childhood SES (α = .53) was negatively correlated with CPIPCS (r = -.136, p = .051), as in study 1. We again tested the role of SES in physician evaluations. Results of a regression analysis on physician evaluation as a function of childhood SES, review dispersion, and their interaction showed that none of the effects was significant (all ps > .31; see

Table B2 in Web Appendix B). Thus, although childhood SES was correlated with IPC, SES is not a proxy for IPC.

4.3. Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of study 1 in a healthcare context, showing that people who scored high (vs. low) on CPIPCS were less favorable toward a physician when patient reviews were highly dispersed. IPC did not affect participants' perception of the physician when physician review dispersion was low. Notably, the predicted pattern of results emerged in this study, where we varied only the star ratings of the reviews and held review content constant. This suggests that the effect of IPC observed in study 1 was indeed driven by participants' reaction to the review dispersion and not to the specific content of the written reviews. Together, studies 1 and 2 provide convergent evidence for the effect of IPC on adult consumers' responses to review dispersion, in support of H_1, using two different dispersion manipulations across two different decision contexts. The two studies also showed a negative correlation between IPC and childhood SES, but only IPC interacted with review dispersion to predict consumer response.

5. Study 3

Study 3 examines whether IPC moderates the effect of review dispersion on actual consumer choice behavior. Participants were asked to choose between two different chocolate truffles associated with different review dispersion patterns in a taste test. We expected that consumers who experienced higher levels of IPC during childhood would be more likely to choose the chocolate truffle associated with lower dispersion reviews. Further, unlike the earlier study, we measured IPC separately from and before the choice task to prevent any survey order effect.

5.1. Participants and procedure

Participants recruited via a university mass email (N = 122, 35.2% male, median age = 21)

completed the study for a small monetary reward (all participants were included for analysis). Upon arrival at a behavioral lab, participants completed a questionnaire in which the CPIPCS was included along with other personality measures. Then, to impress upon the participants that the two parts of the study were unrelated, the researcher moved them to another room to complete the main study. Participants were informed that the purpose of this study was to provide feedback to a major chocolate manufacturer regarding a new product soon to be launched. They were presented with two chocolate truffles (Truffle A and Truffle B), each wrapped in a small transparent bag. They were informed that their task was to taste and evaluate one of the truffles. They were further told that they would be given a gift of the truffle they chose to taste after finishing the study. The truffles were each presented with a set of three consumer reviews and ratings. The position of the product (Truffle A on the left versus right), the presentation order of review dispersion (low dispersion condition presented first versus second in the questionnaire), and the reviews (one-star versus five-star review showed first) were all counterbalanced (see Appendix B). After reading the product descriptions, participants chose one of the two chocolate truffles to taste. After participants tasted the truffle, they evaluated it using a two-item 7-point scale (1 = tastes terrible, tastes very bad; 7 = tastes delicious, tastes very good), completed the 3-item perceived review agreement measure on the truffle they chose as a manipulation check, and responded to demographic questions.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. IPC. Each of the three dimensions of CPIPCS had high internal reliability ($\alpha_{frequency}$ = .81; $\alpha_{intensity}$ = .77; $\alpha_{lack\ of\ resolution}$ = .78) and were reasonably highly correlated ($r_{frequency*intensity}$ = .65, $r_{frequency*resolution}$ = .47, $r_{intensity*resolution}$ = .47, all *p*s < .001). The three dimensions were combined to form an IPC index (α = .88).

5.2.2. Manipulation check. We regressed perceived review disagreement (α = .90) on review dispersion of the truffle participants chose (low dispersion = -1, high dispersion = 1), the IPC index, the order of dispersion review (low dispersion review first = -1, high dispersion review first = 1), the position of truffle (Truffle B on the left = -1, Truffle A on the left = 1), the order of reviews (version 1 = -1, version 2 = 1), and all interaction terms. Results showed that only review dispersion was significant ($M_{\text{High\_Dispersion}}$ = 5.15, $M_{\text{Low\_Dispersion}}$ = 3.54, b = .774, se = .122, t = 6.35, $p < .001$; all other ps > .18), as intended.

5.2.3. Choice. We conducted a logistic regression on truffle choice (truffle with low dispersion reviews = 0, truffle with high dispersion reviews = 1) as a function of IPC index (mean-centered), order of dispersion review (low dispersion review first = -1, high dispersion review first = 1), position of truffle (Truffle B on the left = -1, Truffle A on the left = 1), order of review (version 1 = -1, version 2 =1), and all interaction terms. Results showed that only the coefficient of IPC was significant (b = -.028, Wald = 5.248, p = .022; other ps > .22), such that participants with higher IPC scores were less likely to choose the truffle with high dispersion reviews, as hypothesized. A regression analysis examining the same set of predictors on truffle enjoyment (r = .84) showed none of the predictors was significant (all ps > .16).

5.3. Discussion

Study 3 documents the impact of childhood IPC in a consequential consumption context involving actual product choice. Conceptually replicating earlier findings in a joint product evaluation context, this study shows that individuals were less likely to choose the truffle with highly dispersed reviews as IPC score increased.

In the next study, we attempt to understand the underlying mechanism of the impact of childhood IPC on consumer devaluation of products with more dispersed reviews.

6. Study 4

Study 4 (preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/KC6_NQ4) was designed to explore the underlying mechanism of conflict avoidance. We propose that individuals who have been exposed to higher (vs. lower) levels of destructive IPC as children will be motivated to avoid products with more review dispersion. That is, high IPC individuals, when encountering a product with mixed reviews, will be motivated to move away from such a product, as such a product is tainted and makes them feel uncomfortable. Further, the conflict avoidance motivation will lead to lower evaluations for products with higher dispersion reviews among high IPC individuals. Since some of our results suggest that IPC may be correlated with low SES, and prior research suggests that early life deprivation can motivate adults to minimize uncertainty (Amir, Jordan, & Rand, 2018), we also explore the potential role of decision uncertainty (West & Broniarczyk, 1998).

6.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited from Mturk for a small monetary reward (N = 124, 47.6% male, median age = 41; all participants were included for analysis). The study procedure and stimuli were similar to those of study 3. Participants were presented with images of two different types of chocolate truffles (Truffle A and Truffle B) side by side. Each truffle was presented with a set of three representative consumer reviews and ratings. The key independent variable, review dispersion, was manipulated by varying the ratings and written reviews as in study 3. More specifically, one truffle received three 3-star ratings, and the written reviews were average in valence; whereas the other truffle had one, three, and five stars and the written reviews varied in valence to match the star ratings (see Appendix B). The images of the two truffle types were

counterbalanced. After reading the product descriptions, participants indicated which truffle they preferred (1 = definitely Truffle A, 8 = definitely Truffle B).

Next, participants indicated their desire to avoid the product associated with conflict. We developed three items to measure conflict avoidance motivation: "The truffle with mixed reviews should be kept away," "The truffle that contains mixed reviews can make me feel uncomfortable," "The truffle that is tainted by the reviewers' disagreements might be less favorable," (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants also completed items to measure decision uncertainty (i.e., "I would describe myself as indecisive during the decision," "I was struggling with the evaluation" and "I felt uncertain about how I evaluate the products"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; Affonso, Janiszewski, & Bettman, 2020). Next, participants completed a 3-item perceived review disagreement scale for both truffle A and truffle B as manipulation checks, and the CPIPCS (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree). The marital status of their biological parents was also measured, along with demographic information.

6.2. Results and discussion

6.2.1. IPC. Each of the three dimensions of CPIPCS had high internal reliability ($\alpha_{\text{frequency}} = .87$; $\alpha_{\text{intensity}} = .91$; $\alpha_{\text{lack of resolution}} = .88$) and were highly correlated ($r_{\text{frequency*intensity}} = .85$, $r_{\text{frequency*resolution}} = .73$, $r_{\text{intensity*resolution}} = .68$, all ps $< .001$). The three dimensions were combined to form an IPC index (IPC $\alpha = .95$).

6.2.2. Manipulation check. We ran a regression on the difference between perceived review disagreement for truffle A versus truffle B as a function of IPC index (mean-centered). Only the intercept was significant (Intercept $b = 2.675$, $se = .177$, $t = 15.08$, $p < .001$; $M_{\text{High\_Dispersion}} = 5.75$, $M_{\text{Low\_Dispersion}} = 2.68$; IPC $b = .012$, $se = .096$, $t = .12$, $p = .899$), suggesting that perceived

disagreement was affected only by review dispersion and was not affected by individual chronic exposure to IPC, as desired.

6.2.3. Preference for truffle with higher dispersion reviews. We first ran a regression on preference for the truffle with higher dispersion reviews as a function of the IPC index (mean-centered), the position of the truffle (version 1 = -1, version 2 = 1), and their interaction. Replicating our earlier findings, the coefficient of IPC was negative and significant (b = -.211, se = .090, t = -2.32, p = .021). The other predictors were not significant (other ps > .66). In other words, preference for the truffle with more dispersed reviews decreased among individuals who experienced greater levels of IPC. The pattern of results remained the same when parental divorce ($M_{\text{Divorced\_CPIPCS}}$ = 4.86, $M_{\text{Intact\_CPIPCS}}$ = 4.08, p = .017) was included in the model either as a covariate (b_{CPIPCS} = -.194, p = .038; b_{Divorced} = -.148, p = .382) or substitute for IPC ($b_{\text{Divorced}\times\text{Dispersion}}$ = -.046, p = .782; see Table B3 in Web Appendix B).

6.2.4. Mediation analysis. We created an index of motivation to avoid the product with more dispersed reviews (α = .78) as a potential mediator. As we did not find any effects of truffle presentation order, we collapsed responses of the two presentation order conditions and performed a mediation analysis (PROCESS macro, Model 4 of Hayes 2018), which supported our proposed underlying mechanism with a significant indirect effect (Index of mediation = -.0463, se = .0341, 95%CI: -.1437 to -.0021). More specifically, participants exposed to greater levels of IPC reported a stronger motivation to avoid the product with more dispersed reviews (b = .130, se = .064, t = 2.02, p = .044), and this avoidant response led to a decrease in preference for the truffle with more dispersed reviews (b = -.355, se = .121, t = -2.92, p = .004; Figure 5). See Web Appendix C for additional mediation analyses on the individual items composing avoidant response and the decision uncertainty measure (which was not supported), as well as a

factor analysis on the outcome measures.

In this study, we showed that adult participants exposed to higher levels of IPC in childhood exhibited lower preference for the product with more dispersed reviews, and this effect was driven by a motivation to avoid conflict.

7. Study 5

Study 5 (preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/MD5_4BN) tests a potential managerial solution to negative effects of review dispersion. Here we directly manipulate the desirability of interpersonal conflict and test whether it attenuates high IPC individuals' lowered preference for a product with dispersed reviews. We have argued that high (vs. low) IPC individuals are motivated to avoid products perceived as associated with conflict, which is what leads to their reduced preferences for such products. If so, then changing their perceptions about interpersonal conflict to be more positive should mitigate this effect. This study thus primed the desirability of interpersonal conflict. We expected that asking consumers to think about the potential benefits of interpersonal conflict would reduce the product devaluation tendency of high IPC individuals. We did not expect that the manipulation of conflict desirability would impact product preferences of low IPC individuals, as these consumers are less motivated to approach or avoid products as a function of perceived interpersonal conflict.

7.1. Participants and procedure

Panelists from Mturk completed the study (N = 300, 37.7% male, median age = 36; eight panelists were excluded based on preregistered criteria, leaving N = 292 for analysis). Participants were first asked to complete a brainstorming and sentence completion task. We manipulated the desirability of conflict by asking participants to provide three reasons in support of one of two statements: **"**To progress, society needs human interaction, conflict, argument, and

debate**"** (i.e., high conflict desirability condition) or **"**To progress, society needs human interaction, agreement, collaboration and consensus**"** (i.e., low conflict desirability condition; see Appendix B). Next, participants were directed to a product evaluation task for two types of truffles. We utilized the same set of product stimuli as in study 4 (see Appendix B), and the same measures as in the previous studies to measure consumer preference. After reading the product descriptions, participants indicated which one they preferred (1 = definitely Truffle A, 8 = definitely Truffle B). Participants also completed review dispersion manipulation check questions regarding how they would describe the reviews for both Truffle A and Truffle B (1 = Very similar sentiments, Very similar reactions, 7 = Very mixed sentiments, Very mixed reactions). Last, they completed the CPIPCS (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree), marital status of their biological parents, and demographic information.

7.2. Results

7.2.1. IPC. Each of the three dimensions of CPIPCS had high internal reliability ($\alpha_{frequency}$ = .91; $\alpha_{intensity}$ = .91; $\alpha_{lack\ of\ resolution}$ = .92) and were highly correlated ($r_{frequency*intensity}$ = .88, $r_{frequency*resolution}$ = .76, $r_{intensity*resolution}$ = .75, all *p*s < .001). We combined three dimensions were to form an IPC index (IPC α = .96).

7.2.2. Manipulation check. We ran a regression on the difference between perceived review disagreement for truffle A versus truffle B as a function of conflict desirability (low = -1, high = 1), IPC index (mean-centered), and their interaction. Only the intercept was significant (*b* = 3.070, *se* = .145, *t* = 21.12, *p* < .001; other *p*s > .63; $M_{High\_Dispersion}$ = 5.75, $M_{Low\_Dispersion}$ = 2.68), suggesting that perceived disagreement was affected only by review dispersion, and not by any of the other predictors, as desired.

7.2.3. Preference for truffle with higher dispersion reviews. We ran a regression on preference

for the truffle with more dispersed reviews as a function of the conflict desirability manipulation (low = -1, high = 1), IPC index (mean-centered), and their interaction. Results showed a significant IPC × conflict desirability interaction (b = .121, se = .056, t = 2.14, p = .032; other ps > .30). Subsequent analyses showed that, when people were primed with low desirability of conflict, the coefficient of IPC was negative and significant on preference for the truffle with more dispersed reviews (b = -.180, se = .079, t = -2.27, p = .023). That is, high (vs. low) IPC consumers primed with low conflict desirability had lower preferences for the product with more dispersed reviews, replicating earlier findings. However, when led to think about the desirability of conflict, the coefficient of IPC became nonsignificant (b = .062, se = .081, t = .77, p = .439). Further, floodlight analysis shows that high IPC individuals preferred the truffle with more dispersed reviews more so in the high versus low desirability of conflict condition (Johnson-Neyman point of transition at 2.09, with 17.46% respondents above this point at $p < .05$); whereas low IPC individuals exhibited no difference in preference for the two truffles as a function of conflict desirability condition (Figures 6, 7).

The pattern of results remained the same when parental divorce ($M_{\text{Divorced\_CPIPCS}}$ = 5.01, $M_{\text{Intact\_CPIPCS}}$ = 4.01, $p < .001$) was included in the model either as a covariate ($b_{\text{CPIPCS}\times\text{ConflictDesirability}}$ = .123, p = .029; b_{Divorced} = -.151, p = .215), or as a substitute for IPC ($b_{\text{Divorced}\times\text{ConflictDesirability}}$ = -.028, p = .811; see Table B4 in Web Appendix B). Notably, neither the main effect of parental divorce nor its interaction with dispersion was significant.

7.3. Discussion

Study 5 offers a potential managerial solution and additional support for our proposed mechanism. We show that high IPC individuals exhibit lower preference for a product with more dispersed reviews when they have negative perceptions regarding interpersonal conflict and are

thus motivated to avoid conflict. However, when prompted to think about the desirability of interpersonal conflict, this attenuates high IPC consumers' devaluation of products with dispersed reviews. Moreover, the manipulation has no deleterious effects on low IPC individuals' preferences. It thus offers essential insight for practitioners by providing a practical intervention.

8. General discussion

Online shopping has become a significant part of everyday life. The COVID pandemic that called for consumers worldwide to stay home only accelerated its rise in prominence. Product reviews are a permanent feature on most product websites, and differences in opinion about purchased products can significantly influence consumer evaluation and choice behavior.

In the current paper, we enhance the field's understanding of the effects of review dispersion from the standpoint of perceived interpersonal conflict. We show that product review dispersion is seen as a form of interpersonal conflict. Therefore, consumers who are motivated to avoid interpersonal conflict due to previous unpleasant experiences in their lifetimes, will tend to devaluate products with more dispersed reviews. We show more specifically that individuals exposed to high levels of IPC while growing up evaluate products exhibiting high (vs. low) levels of review dispersion less favorably (Study 1 and 2) and are less likely to choose them (Study 3). We further show this devaluation is driven by an avoidant response (Study 4), which can nevertheless be offset by simply thinking about the potential benefits of conflict (Study 5).

This research offers marketing academics and practitioners fresh insight by highlighting a new aspect of product review dispersion, as a reflection of interpersonal conflict. Theoretically, it contributes to the online review literature by identifying an individual difference variable that moderates consumer response to review dispersion. Although it has been suggested that high

review dispersion may be interpreted as the product being more self-expressive and hence particularly appealing to those with low self-concept clarity (Rozenkrants et al., 2017), our research shows that review heterogeneity can be perceived as interpersonal disagreement that turns off those consumers who are more sensitive to conflict. Second, the present research is a first attempt to answer whether having quarreling parents may affect people's decisions later in life when they are adults. We find that it does. As such, we document a unique and long-lasting effect of childhood exposure to destructive parental arguing on consumption decisions in adulthood. Informing consumers about the ways exposure to IPC may bias their buying behavior as adults, could benefit them by leading them to choosing products that more optimally meet their needs, as opposed to those that produce conflict avoidance responses.

This research can provide useful insight to marketing practitioners. Product review dispersion can create perceptions of interpersonal conflict, which can repel some consumers. Extending this notion to a retail context, high IPC individuals may be reluctant to re-patronize a store where they have witnessed conflicts among shoppers or between shoppers and salespersons. Retailers may therefore want to devote more efforts at reducing sources of in-store tension, such as by reducing the wait time in checkout lines, providing sufficient sales staff, and ensuring adequate stocks of popular products (such as during Black Friday sales events).

Marketers whose brands receive highly variable reviews may want to focus on communicating to their customers the potential benefits of interpersonal conflict. Prompting the value of conflict in promotional messaging may help offset the negative response toward review dispersion among high IPC consumers. Our findings can thus inform marketing communication strategies, which should aim to make consumers a bit less motivated to avoid conflict. The Sierra Nevada Brewing company (https://sierranevada.com) for example, notes "We are 100% family

owned, operated, and argued over" which may hint at some of the positive aspects of argumentation[1]. Marketers could highlight in their messaging more specific benefits of conflict, such as the development of more creative and innovative product ideas, by allowing for the input of differing points of view. Marketers could message to their customers that a mixture of opinions evident in product reviews lends more credibility to the reviews, as the posting of both positive and negative reviews may suggest limited screening efforts on the part of the seller – resulting in more accurate and balanced information presentation. Further, marketers may benefit from instituting pricing formats that minimize concerns about interpersonal conflict, such as by implementing a no haggle pricing policy, as opposed to using policies that force consumers to engage in the type of deal making traditionally associated with haggling (e.g., the car buying process), or bidding in auction formats, which may be associated with competition and conflict.

9. Conclusion, limitations, future research

9.1. Conclusion

While ample studies have documented that adults exposed to high levels of IPC during childhood are more likely to have interpersonal problems and exhibit social withdrawal or aggression (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Cusimano & Riggs, 2013), there is little research examining how such early experiences shape one's attitudes and behaviors in the marketplace. Our research shows that consumers who had such negative experiences as children are motivated to avoid products associated with conflict. Such desire exerts an influence even in the context of subtle conflict cues, as reflected in the dispersion of product reviews.

The impact of childhood exposure to destructive IPC on avoidance of products with dispersed reviews is unique. It is not adequately explained by other related consumer

[1] The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for this example.

psychological constructs such as childhood SES, parental divorce, or the tendency to experience interpersonal conflict. We found SES to be negatively correlated with destructive IPC in some studies, but SES never proved to be a conceptual substitute for IPC in our model. Notably, we measured participants' daily experiences with chronic interpersonal conflict and found it to be positively correlated with destructive IPC during childhood, but it did not affect product evaluation. Taken together, these findings suggest that childhood experiences have a unique and profound influence on people's lives as adults and may trigger different consumption decisions as a coping mechanism (such as avoiding products with dispersed reviews), but that such patterns of response can be attenuated.

9.2. Limitations

The present research examines participants' self-reported childhood experiences of parents arguing. Although this approach is consistent with prior literature on IPC, the findings are correlational in nature. It is also possible that biases exist when recollecting one's childhood experiences. For example, adults who tend to avoid conflict for various reasons may recall their childhood as more conflictual. Ideally, longitudinal studies following cohorts of children and their parents would further shed light on the impact of IPC on conflict avoidance tendencies and consumption choices. Although we used highly realistic stimuli, four of the five studies were conducted online using hypothetical scenarios. While the anonymity of online surveys should render participants more open to reporting unpleasant childhood experiences, the hypothetical scenarios suffered from a lack of external validity. Additional field studies would allow us to garner more confidence in the generalizability of our findings.

9.3. Future research

Future research could explore whether the effects of exposure to destructive IPC may extend to

other forms of daily communication and consumption. In our studies, we focused on product reviews at online retailers. Future research could extend the scope to social networking services where people's daily conversations happen, and thus where differences of opinion and conflicting ideas are naturally presented. For example, would a lack of consensus about pictures posted on Snapchat and similar photo-sharing programs lead to more negative evaluations of these images among high IPC individuals? Indeed, would high IPC individuals tend to avoid social media altogether if such venues are perceived as platforms for heated disagreements or hate speech? For similar reasons, would brands that choose to take social stands (e.g., pro- or anti-vaccine mandates) or support political candidates that may not be universally popular be more likely to be avoided by high IPC individuals? That is, does the observed effect generalize to attitudes beyond product evaluation?

It would be meaningful to examine whether and how other consumption factors such as product type would influence the impact of review dispersion on consumer product evaluation. In our research, we examined the effect utilizing products such as a chocolate truffles and hotel and health care services. In contexts such as these, which involve more hedonic products, it is possible that people are somewhat more likely to accept taste inconsistency, because people's subjective evaluations are expected to vary. If so, the IPC effect may be even more salient for more utilitarian products. For example, would high IPC individuals be more accepting of disparate viewpoints in the fields of fashion, but less so in the fields of technology?

Extending this idea, it might be interesting to see whether the IPC effect would be stronger for material (versus experiential) purchases, in which more objective (rather than subjective) attributes may play a larger role in the evaluation process (Dai, Chan, & Mogilner, 2020). For example, would dispersed reviews regarding travel gear such as luggage and portable

hairdryers elicit a more avoidant response among high IPC individuals, compared to vacation destinations or experiences? Additionally, the role of reviewer anonymity could be explored. In our studies, the reviewers' were not personally identified. It is possible, however, that the effect of IPC on response to review dispersion would be more salient if reviewers were more (vs. less) identifiable, as this may heighten the perceived level of interpersonal conflict among customers.

Other boundary conditions could be explored such as age, the passage of time, and other family dynamics experienced during one's lifetime. For example, it is possible that other family interactions and experiences, such as maternal warmth (McGregor, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Creed, 2012) or sibling relationships (Davies et al., 2019), offset the adverse effects of IPC on adult consumer behavior. Since IPC is just one of many causes of conflict avoidance, future research could investigate how individuals who are conflict-avoidant for other reasons respond to highly dispersed reviews. Research shows that older adults have a stronger desire to avoid conflict because they perceive more threats to their belongingness and experience greater anticipated loneliness (Oberhauser, Neubauer, & Kessler, 2017). It is thus possible that the avoidance of high review dispersion is more likely among elderly consumers. It is also plausible that the effects of IPC "wear off" over time, such that childhood family dynamics become less salient as one ages. Across our studies, we did not consistently find an age effect, although this might have been due to the limited range in our samples.

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Figure 1

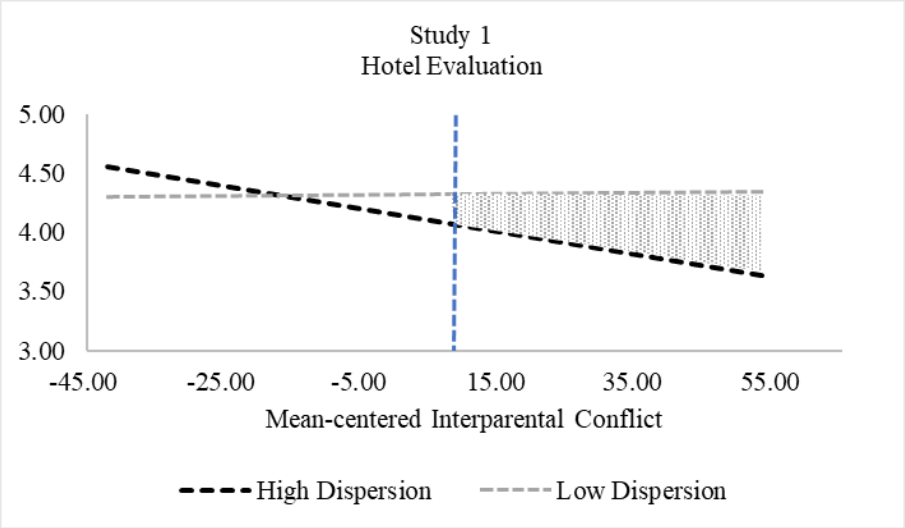
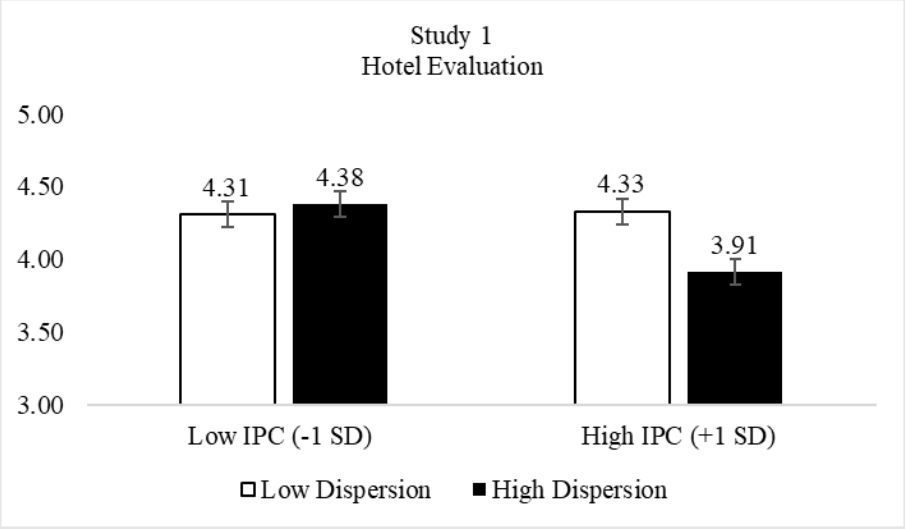


Figure 2



Study 1 Results (Figures 1, 2): High IPC participants evaluated the hotel less favorably in the high (vs. low) review dispersion condition; low IPC participants exhibited no difference in evaluations between two review dispersion conditions.

Figure 3

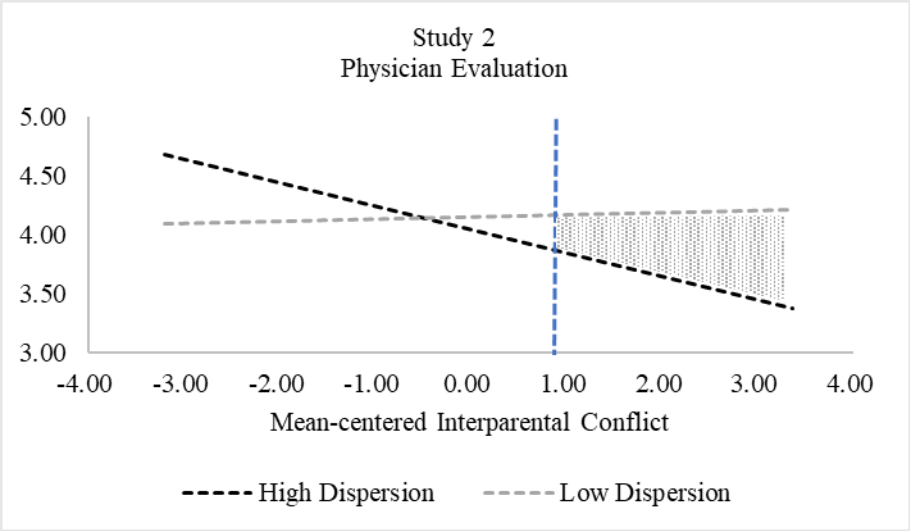
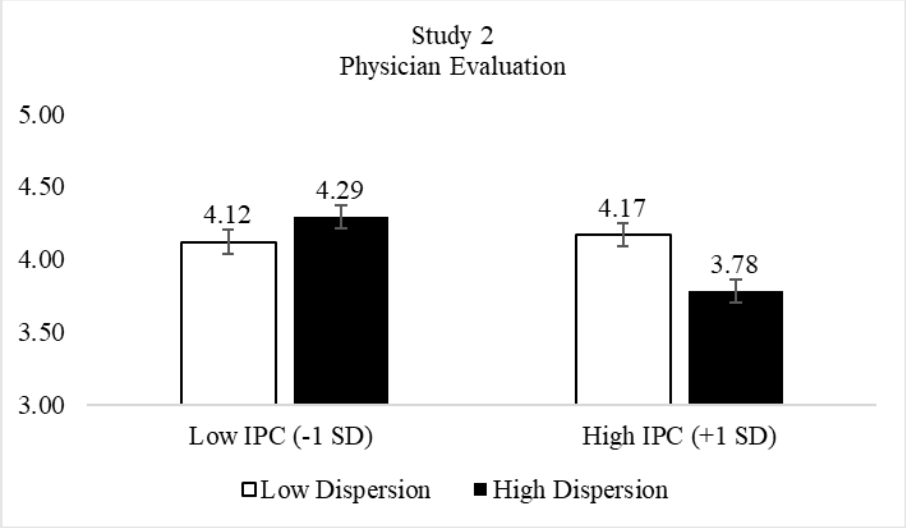
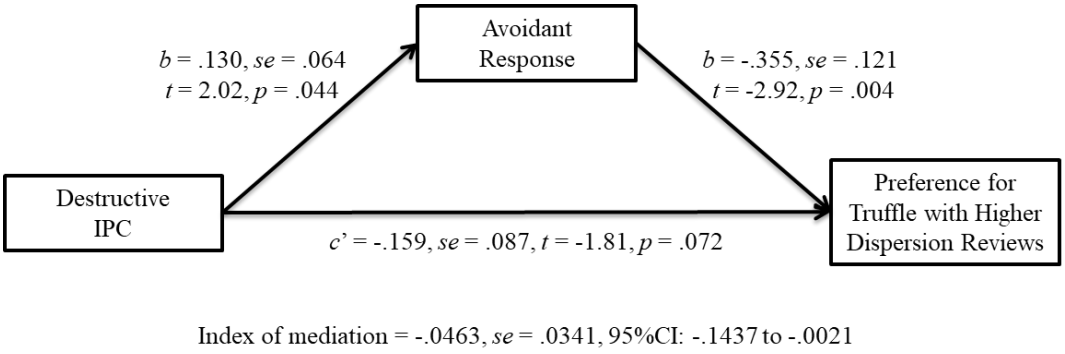


Figure 4



Study 2 Results (Figures 3, 4): High IPC participants evaluated the physician less favorably in the high (vs. low) review dispersion condition; low IPC participants exhibited no difference in evaluations between two review dispersion conditions.

Figure 5



Index of mediation = -.0463, *se* = .0341, 95%CI: -.1437 to -.0021

Study 4 Results (Figure 5): as IPC score increases, individuals are less likely to choose the truffle with more dispersed reviews; this effect is driven by a conflict avoidant response.

Figure 6

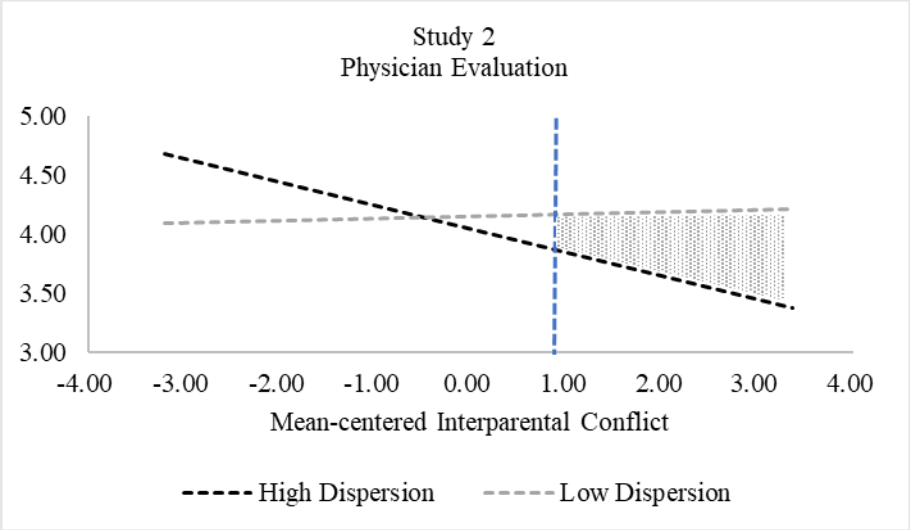
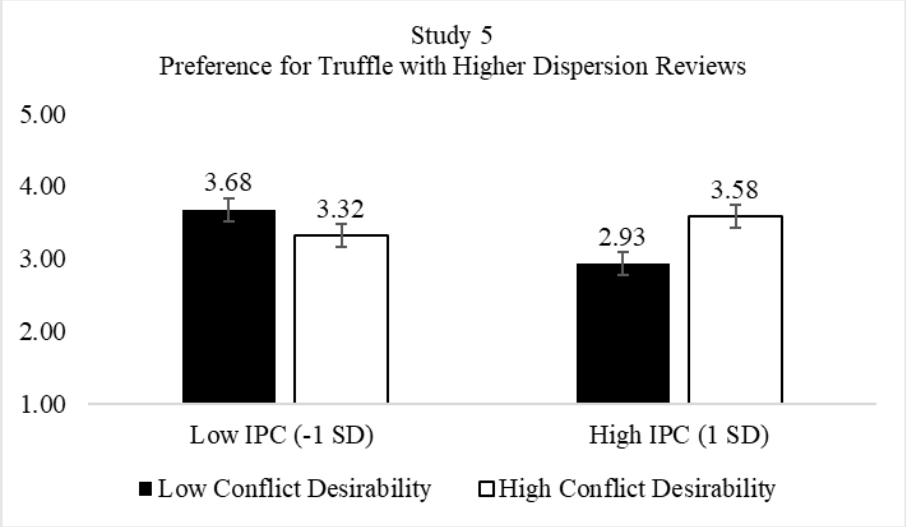


Figure 7



Study 5 Results (Figures 6, 7): high IPC participants prefer the truffle with high dispersion reviews more in the high (vs. low) conflict desirability condition; low IPC participants exhibited no significant difference in preference between the two conflict desirability conditions.

Appendix A: Scale Measures

Interparental Conflict (IPC) Scale

Please take a moment to recall your childhood before the age of 12 and tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements about your childhood.

Please note: "Parents" refers to caregivers who served the role of parents when you were growing up. (0 to 100):

Frequency Dimension:

1. I never saw my parents arguing or disagreeing.
2. They may not think I knew it, but my parents argued or disagreed a lot.
3. My parents were often mean to each other even when I was around.
4. I often saw my parents arguing.
5. My parents hardly ever argued.
6. My parents often nagged and complained about each other around the house.

Intensity Dimension:

1. My parents got really mad when they argued.
2. When my parents had a disagreement, they discussed it quietly.
3. When my parents had an argument, they said mean things to each other.
4. When my parents had an argument, they yelled a lot.
5. My parents hardly ever yelled when they had a disagreement.
6. My parents broke or threw things during an argument.
7. My parents pushed or shoved each other during an argument.

Resolution Dimension:

1. When my parents had an argument they usually worked it out.
2. Even after my parents stopped arguing they stayed mad at each other.
3. When my parents disagreed about something, they usually came up with a solution.
4. When my parents argued they usually made up right away.
5. After my parents stopped arguing, they were friendly toward each other.
6. My parents still acted mean after they had an argument.

Childhood Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Please take a moment to recall your childhood before the age of 12, and tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements about your childhood (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree)

1. I felt my family was relatively wealthy compared to others my age.
2. I grew up in a relatively wealthy neighborhood.
3. My family had enough money for things when I was growing up.

Product Evaluation (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

Please tell us what how you would evaluate this hotel (study 1):

1. 1 = unfavorable 2 3 4 5 6 7 = favorable
2. 1 = bad 2 3 4 5 6 7 = good
3. 1 = unlikely to try it 2 3 4 5 6 7 = likely to try it

Please tell us what how you would evaluate this physician (study 2):

1. 1 = unfavorable 2 3 4 5 6 7 = favorable

2. 1 = bad 2 3 4 5 6 7 = good
3. 1 = would definitely not make an appointment 2 3 4 5 6 7 = would definitely make an appointment

Please tell us what how you would evaluate this battery case (study 6):

1. 1 = unfavorable 2 3 4 5 6 7 = favorable
2. 1 = bad 2 3 4 5 6 7 = good
3. 1 = unlikely to buy it 2 3 4 5 6 7 = likely to buy it

Chronic interpersonal conflict experience (study 1)

Please tell us, in general (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

1. I rarely experience conflict with other people.
2. I experience a lot of interpersonal conflict on a day-to-day basis.
3. I often find myself engaged in conflict with other people.

Mediator: Conflict Avoidance (study 4)

1. The truffle with mixed reviews should be kept away.
2. The truffle that contains mixed reviews can make me feel uncomfortable.
3. The truffle that is tainted by the reviewers' disagreements might be less favorable.

Appendix B: Stimuli in Studies 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Study 1 Product Descriptions

Low Review Dispersion Condition

The room decoration was a little outdated. The bathroom was clean but the fridge in the room only kept food cool not cold. Although the first refrigerator did not work at all, they replaced it within 10 mins. The food was good. Overall, we recommend it.

Customer service was average. I was a little disappointed as the front desk said I could call down to preorder a taxi cab from my room but when I tried and woman at the front desk said she did not have an extension for them. When I called them a second time, though, it worked. The taxi arrived just in time.

The food at the restaurant was acceptable and they generally had friendly staff. My only complaint was the bathroom looked pretty old and in need of renovation, but it was clean.

High Review Dispersion Condition

Customer service was poor. I was disappointed as the front desk said I could call down to preorder a taxi cab from my room but when I tried the woman at the front desk said she did not have an extension for them. I walked down from my room, and in 30 degree weather called and waited for the taxi.

The room decoration was a little outdated. The bathroom was clean but the fridge in the room only kept food cool not cold. Although the first refrigerator did not work at all, they replaced it within 10 mins. The good was good. Overall, we recommend it.

The food at the restaurant was good and they generally had friendly staff. My only compliant was the bathroom looked a bit old and in need of renovation, but it was very clean.

Study 2 Product Descriptions

Low Review Dispersion Condition

Dr. Joshua Zuckerman, MD

Specialties: Emergency Medicine, General Practice

Likelihood to Recommend Dr. Zuckerman - 3.0/5.0 based on 82 reviews

★★★☆☆

Tells you what you want to hear with promises of help, but does not deliver.

★★★☆☆

Overall good experience. There are times I have waited longer than 45mins to see him but when he gets to me, he doesn't rush me along.

★★★☆☆

on time, thorough, informative, and gave me recommendations to maintain my health.

High Review Dispersion Condition

Dr. Joshua Zuckerman, MD

Specialties: Emergency Medicine, General Practice

Likelihood to Recommend Dr. Zuckerman - 3.0/5.0 based on 82 reviews

★☆☆☆☆

Tells you what you want to hear with promises of help, but does not deliver.

★★★☆☆

Overall good experience. There are times I have waited longer than 45mins to see him but when he gets to me, he doesn't rush me along.

★★★★★

on time, thorough, informative, and gave me recommendations to maintain my health.

Study 3 Product Descriptions

Truffle A – version 1

Reviewer 1: ★★★☆☆
Pretty good flavor. Not the best I've had. Might consider buying it in the store.

Reviewer 2: ★★★☆☆
This is OK. Taste is creamy but is a little messy to eat.

Reviewer 3: ★★★☆☆
I don't like the appearance, but the chocolate taste is fine.

Truffle A – version 2

Reviewer 1: ★★★☆☆
I don't like the appearance, but the chocolate taste is fine.

Reviewer 2: ★★★☆☆
This is OK. Taste is creamy but is a little messy to eat.

Reviewer 3: ★★★☆☆
Pretty good flavor. Not the best I've had. Might consider buying it in the store.

Truffle B – version 1

Reviewer 1: ★☆☆☆☆
I do not like it, greasy.

Reviewer 2: ★★★☆☆
Looks and tastes OK. Not the best or the worst, but OK.

Reviewer 3: ★★★★★
One of the best chocolate truffles I've ever tasted. Where can I buy it?

Truffle B – version 2

Reviewer 1: ★★★★★
One of the best chocolate truffles I've ever tasted. Where can I buy it?

Reviewer 2: ★★★☆☆
This is OK. Taste is creamy but is a little messy to eat.

Reviewer 3: ★☆☆☆☆
I do not like it, greasy.

Studies 4 and 5 Product Descriptions

Version 1

Truffle A

Reviewer 1: ★☆☆☆☆
I do not like it, greasy.

Reviewer 2: ★★★☆☆
Looks and tastes OK. Not the best or the worst, but OK.

Reviewer 3: ★★★★★
One of the best chocolate truffles I've ever tasted.
Where can I buy it?

Truffle B

Reviewer 1: ★★★☆☆
Pretty good flavor. Not the best I've had. Might consider buying it in the store.

Reviewer 2: ★★★☆☆
This is OK. Taste is creamy but is a little messy to eat.

Reviewer 3: ★★★☆☆
I don't like the appearance, but the chocolate taste is fine.

Version 2

Truffle A

Reviewer 1: ★☆☆☆☆
I do not like it, greasy.

Reviewer 2: ★★★☆☆
Looks and tastes OK. Not the best or the worst, but OK.

Reviewer 3: ★★★★★
One of the best chocolate truffles I've ever tasted.
Where can I buy it?

Truffle B

Reviewer 1: ★★★☆☆
Pretty good flavor. Not the best I've had. Might consider buying it in the store.

Reviewer 2: ★★★☆☆
This is OK. Taste is creamy but is a little messy to eat.

Reviewer 3: ★★★☆☆
I don't like the appearance, but the chocolate taste is fine.

Study 5 Conflict Desirability Instructions

High Conflict Desirability Condition

"To progress, society needs need human interaction, conflict, argument, and debate."

Try to think of three reasons in support of the statement. That is, three reasons for why you feel that conflict is necessary and desirable.

Low Conflict Desirability Condition

"To progress, society needs human interaction, agreement, collaboration and consensus.

Try to think of three reasons in support of this statement. That is, three reasons why you feel that agreement is necessary and desirable.

Web Appendix A: Pilot Study Details

We conducted a pilot study (pre-registered at https://aspredicted.org/1PG_VGX) among Mechanical Turk panelists who received a small payment for participation (N = 200, 57.5% male, median age = 32; 19 panelists were excluded based on preregistered criteria, leaving N = 181 for analysis). We wished to test whether dispersion review signals interpersonal conflict. Participants were randomly assigned to either a high or low review dispersion condition in which two reviews were presented exhibiting low or high dispersion (please see stimulus below).

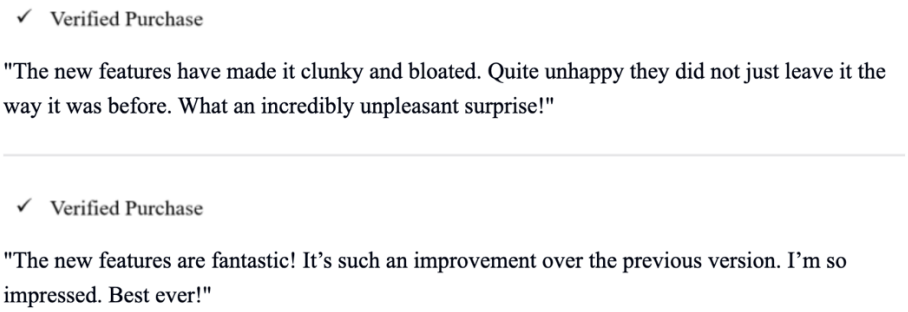
Visual Stimulus Presented to all Participants in Pilot Study:

Packed With New Features!

- Electric Lunch Box for Car and Home (New Product/Upgrade)
- 3 in 1 Dual Power Supply 12V 24V 110V Portable Food Warmer
- 1.5L Large Capacity Removable Stainless Steel Heating Lunch Box

Low Review Dispersion Condition (order of reviews counterbalanced):

High Review Dispersion Condition (order of reviews counterbalanced):



Participants then completed the 23-item Perceived Conflict scale (e.g., "To what extent do you believe the product reviewers are" 1 = friendly, 7 = hostile; α = .95) of Stern, Sternthal and Craig (1973) as well as the 5-item Relationship Conflict scale (e.g., "The atmosphere here is charged with hostility," 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; α = .92; cited in Friedman, Currall, & Tsai, 2000).

Results showed that high (vs. low) dispersion reviews elicited perceptions of greater interpersonal conflict (Perceived Conflict scale: $M_{\text{High\_Dispersion}} = 3.66$ vs. $M_{\text{Low\_Dispersion}} = 3.25$, $F(1,179) = 5.83$, $p = .017$). Additionally, results showed that the high (vs. low) dispersion

reviews elicited directionally greater perceptions of Relationship Conflict ($M_{\text{High\_Dispersion}} = 3.52$ vs. $M_{\text{Low\_Dispersion}} = 3.21$, $F(1,179) = 3.20$, $p = .075$). More detailed results are in Table A1 below.

Table A1. Pilot Study Results for Individual Items in Perceived Conflict and Relationship Conflict Scales

Scale or Item	mean (SE) for Low/High Dispersion	*F*(1, 179)	*p-value*
23-item Interpersonal Conflict scale (Stern 1973); α= .95	**3.25 (.12)/3.66 (.12)**	**5.83**	**.017**
1. Anxious to make a satisfactory purchase/Not anxious to make a satisfactory purchase	3.74 (.18)/3.77 (.17)	.00	.926
2. Not greedy/Greedy	3.95 (.20)/4.08 (.19)	0.225	.636
3. Flexible/Rigid	3.44 (.19)/3.85 (.18)	2.33	.128
4. Friendly/Hostile	**2.98 (.19)/3.74 (.18)**	**7.77**	**.006**
5. Not antagonistic/Antagonistic	**3.88 (.18)/4.48 (.17)**	**5.70**	**.018**
6. Not disparaging/Disparaging	3.64 (.18)/4.21 (.17)	5.01	.026
7. Not malicious/Malicious	3.66 (.18)/4.08 (.18)	2.59	.109
8. Desire to give and take/Stubborn	3.43 (.17)/3.84 (.16)	2.88	.091
9. Conciliatory/Not conciliatory	**3.24 (.16)/3.84 (.16)**	**6.58**	**.011**
10. Responsive/Unresponsive	**2.91 (.18)/3.42 (.17)**	**3.93**	**.049**
11. Empathetic/Ruthless	3.57 (.17)/3.95 (.16)	2.371	.125
12. Fair/Unfair	2.86 (.18)/3.17 (.18)	1.73	.189
13. Willing to compromise/Unwilling to compromise	3.27 (.17)/3.62 (.17)	2.04	.155
14. Benevolent/Tyrannical	3.36 (.15)/3.56 (.15)	0.813	.368
15. Open/Deceptive	**2.88 (.18)/3.49 (.17)**	**5.72**	**.018**
16. Cooperative/Not cooperative	**2.85 (.17)/3.38 (.16)**	**4.96**	**.027**
17. Trustworthy/Dishonest	3.12 (.17)/3.27 (.16)	0.441	.507
18. Realistic/Unrealistic	2.88 (.17)/3.28 (.16)	2.76	.098
19. Broad minded/Narrow minded	3.28 (.17)/3.48 (.16)	0.728	.395
20. Encouraging/Frustrating	**2.99 (.17)/3.64 (.17)**	**7.03**	**.009**
21. Helpful/Harmful	**2.79 (.18)/3.29 (.17)**	**3.97**	**.048**
22. Supportive/Trying to obstruct	**2.79 (.17)/3.31 (.16)**	**4.39**	**.037**
23. Permissive/Resisting	3.24 (.16)/3.62 (.16)	2.61	.107

5-item Relationship Conflict scale (Cox 1998); α = .92	**3.21 (.12)/3.52 (.11)**	**3.20**	**.075**
1. The atmosphere here is charged with hostility.	3.17 (.14)/3.53 (.13)	**3.14**	**.078**
2. Backbiting is an occurrence.	3.21 (.14)/3.45 (.13)	1.58	.210
3. One party is undermining the other.	3.15 (.14)/3.63 (.13)	6.19	.014
4. There are feelings of hostility between the two parties.	**3.33 (.14)/3.55 (.13)**	**1.28**	**.258**
5. Much "plotting" is taking place "behind the scenes."	3.23 (.13)/3.44 (.12)	1.31	.254

Web Appendix B: Additional Regression Results Studies 1, 2, 4, 5

	Regression Results	**Regression Results with Parental Divorce as a Covariate**	**Regression Results with Parental Divorce as a substitute for IPC**	**Regression Results with Childhood SES as a Covariate**	**Regression Results with Childhood SES as a substitute for IPC**
Review Dispersion (Low = -1, High = 1)	b = -.0864, se = .0619 t = -1.39, p = .1637	b = -.0859, se = .0620 t = -1.38, p = .1663	b = -.1195, se = .0643 t = -1.85, p = .0642	b = -.0855, se = .0617 t = -1.38, p = .1668	b = -.0937, se = .0619 t = -1.51, p = .1306
Scale-centered IPC	b = -.0046, se = .0025 t = -1.82, p = .0693	b = -.0040, se = .0027 t = -1.50, p = .1327	N/A	b = -.0033, se = .0026 t = -1.27, p = .2035	N/A
Mean-centered IPC x Review Dispersion	b = -.0050, se = .0025 t = -2.00, p = .0461	b = -.0050, se = .0025 t = -1.98, p = .0475	N/A	b = -.0053, se = .0025 t = -2.11, p = .0349	N/A
Parental Divorce (No = -1, Yes = 1)	N/A	b = -.0391, se = .0684 t = -.57, p = .5680	b = -.0768, se = .0643 t = -1.19, p = .2335	N/A	N/A
Parental Divorce x Review Dispersion	N/A	N/A	b = -.0917, se = .0643 t = -1.42, p = .1549	N/A	N/A
Scale-centered Childhood SES	N/A	N/A	N/A	b = .0673, se = .0379 t = 1.77, p = .0765	b = .0759, se = .0367 t = 2.06, p = .0395
Mean-centered Childhood SES x Review Dispersion	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	b = . 0046, se = .0367 t = .12, p = .8995

Table B1. Study 1 Results: Tests of parental divorce and childhood SES as covariates and as substitutes for IPC

	Regression Results	Regression Results with Parental Divorce as a Covariate	Regression Results with Parental Divorce as a substitute for IPC	Regression Results with Childhood SES as a Covariate	Regression Results with Childhood SES as a substitute for IPC
Review Dispersion (Low = -1, High = 1)	b = -.0549, se = .0623 t = -.88, p = .3788	b = -.0642, se = .0623 t = -1.03, p = .3039	b = -.0249, se = .1050 t = -.23, p = .8125	b = -.0565, se = .0625 t = -.90, p = .3666	b = -.0639, se = .0634 t = -1.00, p = .3150
Scale-centered IPC	b = -.0905, se = .0489 t = -1.85, p = .0656	b = -.1052, se = .0495 t = -2.12, p = .0347	N/A	b = -.0937, se = .0494 t = -1.89, p = .0593	N/A
Mean-centered IPC x Review Dispersion	b = -.1077, se = .0489 t = -2.20, p = .0287	b = -.1174, se = .0490 t = -2.39, p = .0176	N/A	b = -.1063, se = .0491 t = -2.16, p = .0314	N/A
Parental Divorce (No = -1, Yes = 1)	N/A	b = .1665, se = .1013 t = 1.64, p = .1017	b = .0866, se = .1050 t = .82, p = .4104	N/A	N/A
Parental Divorce x Review Dispersion	N/A	N/A	b = .0541, se = .1050 t = .51, p = .6069	N/A	N/A
Scale-centered Childhood SES	N/A	N/A	N/A	b = -.0159, se = .0319 t = -.49, p = .6193	b = -.0193, se = .0339 t = -.57, p = .5693
Mean-centered Childhood SES x Review Dispersion	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	b = -. 0232, se = .0339 t = -.68, p = .4945

Table B2: Study 2 Results: Tests of parental divorce and childhood SES as covariates and substitutes for IPC

	Regression Results	**Regression Results with Parental Divorce as a Covariate**	**Regression Results with Parental Divorce as a substitute for IPC**
Presentaion Order (version 1 = -1, version 2 = 1)	b = -.0712, se = .1657 t = -.42, p = .6682	b = -.0684, se = .1659 t = -.41, p = .6810	b = -.0352, se = .1676 t = -.21, p = .8338
Scale-centered IPC	b = -.2114, se = .0908 t = -2.32, p = .0216	b = -.1947, se = .0929 t = -2.09, p = .0382	N/A
Mean-centered IPC x Presentaion Order	b = -.0211, se = .0908 t = -.23, p = .8163	b = -.0258, se = .0910 t = -.28, p = .7774	N/A
Parental Divorce (No = -1, Yes = 1)	N/A	b = -.1487, se = .1695 t = -.87, p = .3820	b = -.2228, se = .1676 t = -1.32, p = .1862
Parental Divorce x Presentaion Order	N/A	N/A	b = -.0464, se = .1676 t = -.27, p = .7825

Table B3. Study 4 Results: Tests of parental divorce as covariate and substitute for IPC

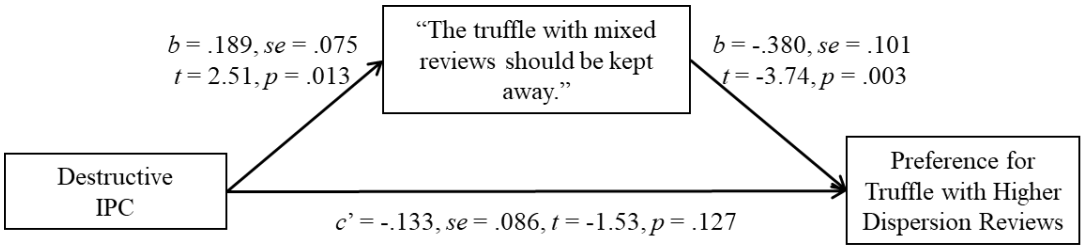
	Regression Results	**Regression Results with Parental Divorce as a Covariate**	**Regression Results with Parental Divorce as a substitute for IPC**
Desirability of Conflict (low = -1, high = 1)	b = .0749, se = .1179 t = .63, p = .5259	b = .0879, se = .1182 t = .74, p = .4578	b = .0790, se = .1195 t = .66, p = .5090
Scale-centered IPC	b = -.0588, se = .0566 t = -1.03, p = .3002	b = -.0418, se = .0582 t = -.71, p = .4733	N/A
Mean-centered IPC x Desirability of Conflict	b = .1215, se = .0566 t = 2.14, p = .0328	b = .1236, se = .0566 t = 2.18, p = .0299	N/A
Parental Divorce (No = -1, Yes = 1)	N/A	b = -.1513, se = .1219 t = -1.24, p = .2155	b = -.1644, se = .1195 t = -1.37, p = .1700
Parental Divorce x Desirability of Conflict	N/A	N/A	b = -.0286, se = .1195 t = -.23, p = .8113

Table B4. Study 5 Results: Tests of parental divorce as covariate and substitute for IPC

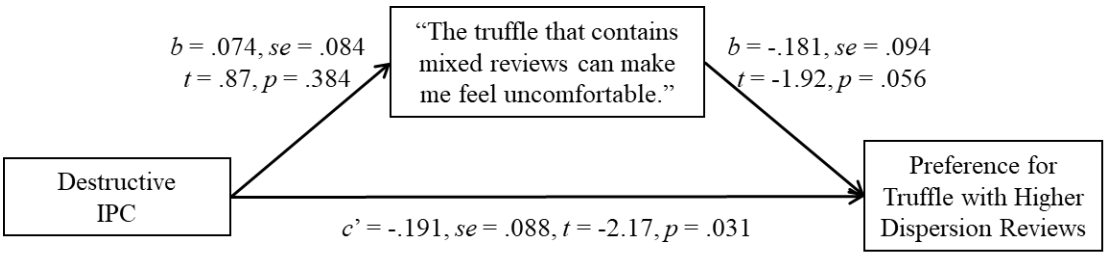
Web Appendix C: Study 4 Additional Analyses

Additional Mediation Analyses for Study 4: Individual Scale Items

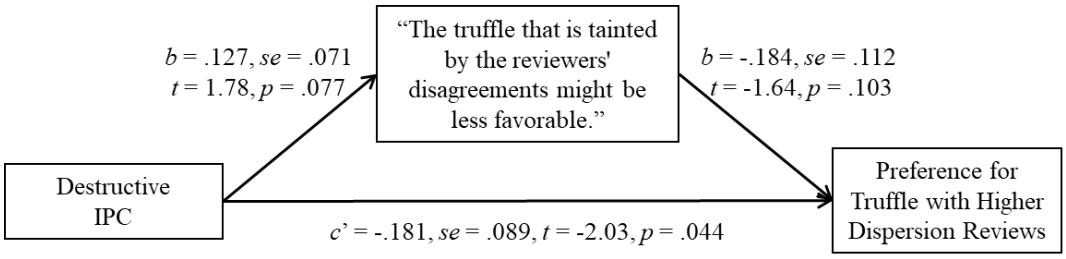
We additionally ran three separate mediation analyses, one for each of the avoidant response items as mediator. The single item that significantly mediated the effect was: "The truffle with mixed reviews should be kept away" (Index of mediation = -.0721, *se* = .0376, 95% CI: -.1687 to .0174; see figures below for details). This result suggests that people with greater exposure to interparental conflict in childhood are indeed motivated to avoid products with mixed reviews.



Index of mediation = -.0721, *se* = .0376, 95%CI: -.1687 to -.0174



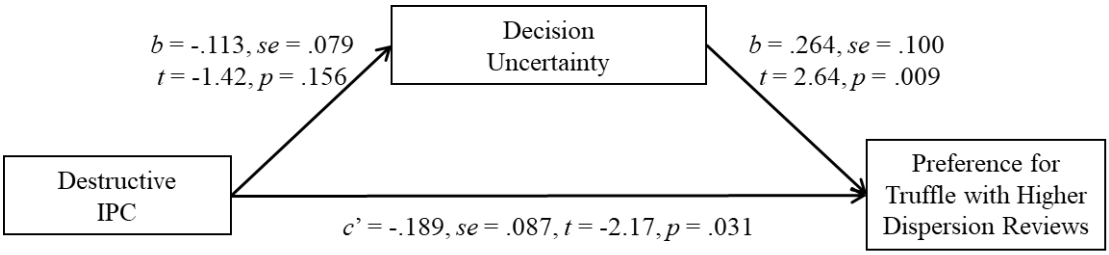
Index of mediation = -.0134, *se* = .0197, 95%CI: -.0761 to .0118



Index of mediation = -.0234, *se* = .0261, 95%CI: -.1053 to .0052

Additional Mediation Analysis for Study 4: 3-item Decision Uncertainty Scale

We also conducted a mediation analysis with decision uncertainty as an alternative mediator (PROCESS macro, Model 4 of Hayes 2018). The results did not yield a significant indirect effect (Index of mediation = -.0301, *se* = .0287, 95%CI: -.1073 to .0101; see figure below for details).



Index of mediation = -.0301, *se* = .0287, 95%CI: -.1073 to .0101

Factor Analysis on Outcome Measures in Study 4

We ran a factor analysis on the three items in the decision uncertainty measure, the three items in the avoidant response measure, and the dependent variable (preference for truffle with higher dispersion reviews), using principal component analysis with varimax rotation. The analysis yielded two factors explaining a total of 72.11% of the variance. The three decision uncertainty items and the three avoidant response items loaded onto separate factors. The first factor (i.e., decision uncertainty) explained 39.9% of the variance; the second factor (i.e., avoidant response) explained 32.2% of the variance. In addition, the dependent variable (i.e., preference for truffle with higher dispersion reviews) did not load highly onto either of these two factors ($r_{dv\_uncertainty}$ = .46; r_{dv_avoid} = -.51), suggestive of sufficient construct discrimination (see tables C1, C2 below for details).

Total Variance Explained									
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.888	41.252	41.252	2.888	41.252	41.252	2.793	39.894	39.894
2	2.160	30.864	72.116	2.160	30.864	72.116	2.256	32.222	72.116
3	0.694	9.919	82.035						
4	0.511	7.300	89.335						
5	0.366	5.232	94.567						
6	0.206	2.940	97.507						
7	0.175	2.493	100.000						
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.									

Table C1. Study 4 Factor Analysis Percent of Variance Accounted For

Rotated Component Matrix		
	Component	
	1	2
I would describe myself as indecisive during the decision.	**0.917**	0.070
I was struggling with the evaluation.	**0.912**	0.147
I felt uncertain about how I evaluate the products.	**0.916**	0.052
The truffle that is tainted by the reviewers' disagreements might be less favorable.	0.214	**0.755**
The truffle that contains mixed reviews can make me feel uncomfortable.	0.137	**0.820**
The truffle with mixed reviews should be kept away.	-0.050	**0.856**
DV: preference for truffle with higher dispersion reviews	0.463	-0.501
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.		
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.		

Table C2. Study 4 Factor Analysis Factor Loadings