# Lead by Example? Custom-Made Examples Created by Close Others Lead Consumers to Make Dissimilar Choices

JENNIFER K. D'ANGELO
KRISTIN DIEHL
LISA A. CAVANAUGH

Prior to customizing for themselves, consumers often encounter products customized by other people within their social network. Our research suggests that when encountering a custom-made example of an identity-related product created by an identified social other, consumers infer this social other was motivated to express uniqueness. After making this inference, consumers are also motivated to express uniqueness, particularly when the example was created by a close versus distant social other. Consumers express uniqueness through their own customization choices, choosing fewer options shown in the example or choosing fewer best-selling options. Consumers sometimes even pay a monetary cost or sacrifice preferred choices in order to make their own product unique. Further, this effect dissipates when motivations other than expressing uniqueness are inferred about a social other (e.g., for functionally related products). Across eight studies that span different product contexts, involve real choices, and isolate the underlying theoretical mechanism (i.e., motivation to express uniqueness), our research documents the unique role of custom-made examples, demonstrates the importance of social distance for customization choices, and identifies a novel path explaining when and why individuals express uniqueness.

*Keywords*: customization, social distance, social influence, social network, need for uniqueness, product examples

I magine running into a close friend wearing a pair of Vans sneakers. While talking to your close friend, you discover your friend customized these sneakers (i.e., the sneakers were custom-made). You later visit the Vans website to customize your own sneakers and see your close friend's custom-made sneakers displayed as an example along with your friend's Instagram handle. When customizing your own pair, how likely are you to make customization choices (e.g., color scheme) that are similar to your close friend's choices? Would your own customization choices change if this had happened with a more distant acquaintance instead?

Our research suggests that the source of a custom-made example shapes consumers' psychological motives and customization choices in novel and important ways. Specifically, we focus on situations where the source is an identified member of an individual's social network (i.e., a

known, in-group member) and is either socially close (e.g., a friend) or distant (e.g., an acquaintance). Our research finds that when the source of a custom-made example is a close other (vs. a more distant other), consumers exhibit *less* choice similarity with that example. We define choice similarity as the overlap between an individual's customization choices and the custom-made example. We show that lower choice similarity is driven by heightened motivation to express uniqueness.

Customization has become an increasingly important domain to study, as consumers can customize an ever-growing number of products. For example, consumers can design their own sneakers (vans.com/custom-shoes), create their own protein bar (youbars.com), or formulate their own fragrance (uniquefragrance.com). In fact, industry experts view mass customization as the future of retailing (Pardes 2019; Witte 2018). The customization literature has shown that customizing products yields many benefits for marketers, such as higher willingness to pay (WTP), increased purchase intentions, and more positive attitudes toward the product (Franke, Keinz, and Steger 2009; Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010; Moreau and Herd 2010; Valenzuela, Dhar, and Zettelmeyer 2009). Consumers also benefit, as customization provides a sense of engagement, accomplishment, and emotional bonding with the product (Atakan, Bagozzi, and Yoon 2014; Buechel and Janiszewski 2014; Dellaert and Stremersch 2005; Mugge, Schoormans, and Schifferstein 2008).

However, customizing a product is much more effortful than purchasing a standard, off-the-shelf product. Hence, consumers generally require more guidance when creating custom-made products (Moreau and Herd 2010). For guidance and inspiration during customization, consumers can look to examples of what *other* consumers previously created. Consumers can encounter these custom-made examples when interacting with social others in everyday life, as in our opening scenario, and when observing purchases shared on social media (Valsesia and Diehl 2018). Moreover, marketers regularly feature custom-made examples that other consumers previously created (Spaulding and Perry 2013).

Two components are integral to the custom-made examples consumers encounter: 1) the design of the example and 2) the source of the example. For example, when encountering a pair of custom-made sneakers on Vans.com, consumers see the design of the custom-made example. Importantly, in the age of peer-to-peer marketing (Jespersen 2016), consumers can often also see who created these sneakers—that is, the example source (e.g., when a social media handle or profile is shown). Marketers have unprecedented access to information about individuals' online social networks, and they generally utilize this information to target individuals with purchases made by identified social others in the target's social network (Constine 2013). Marketers, however,

need to understand whether targeting close or more distant connections is more effective.

We argue that when individuals encounter a custom-made example of an identity-related product created by an identified social other, they infer that this social other was motivated to express uniqueness, since customizing identity-related products is a way consumers express uniqueness (Kaiser, Schreier, and Janiszewski 2017). We predict that, after making this inference, individuals behave in kind, also being motivated to express uniqueness through their own customization choices. We predict and show that this is particularly true when the example is created by a close rather than distant other, as individuals are more influenced by the motivations of those closer to them (Loersch et al. 2008). Subsequently, individuals make customization choices that are *less* similar to the custom-made example, sometimes even paying a monetary cost or sacrificing preferred choices in order to express uniqueness. This effect holds for both public and private usage situations, suggesting that anticipated negative reactions from the example source do not drive our findings. Further, we identify boundary conditions when individuals infer a social other's motivation to be something other than expressing uniqueness.

Our research makes several important theoretical and managerially relevant contributions. First and foremost, this research deepens our understanding of the role of social distance of an identified social other in the customization process. Extensive prior work on social influence has contrasted the influence of in-groups and out-groups. We focus squarely on in-group members and contrast the influence of close versus distant others. We do so in the context of customization, which previously has focused either on marketers presenting unidentified examples (Franke, Keinz, and Schreier 2008) or on identified social others providing evaluative feedback on an individual's design (Hildebrand et al. 2013; Schlager et al. 2018). Further, while customization is often viewed as a way for individuals to match their own, internal preferences, we show that the example source can externally influence individuals' customization choices. Notably, this occurs sometimes even to the detriment of consumers matching their own preferences.

In addition, our research builds on and contributes to literature on optimal distinctiveness (Brewer 1991). In our contribution to the literature, we take a "constructs to phenomena approach" (Lynch et al. 2012, 474) and link theories predicting when individuals adopt social others' motivations to the context of customization. By doing so we identify a novel path explaining when and why individuals express uniqueness. That is, prior work has generally regarded an individual as having an inherent motivation to express uniqueness and thought of social others' choices as providing a frame of reference from which individuals could differentiate themselves (Ariely and Levav 2000;

Chan, Berger, and Van Boven 2012). In our context, the social other's choices (i.e., that constitute the custom-made example) can externally heighten an individual's motivation to express uniqueness; hence, a social other's choices are not merely a frame of reference but a source of motivation for one's own choices.

With regard to the customization literature, we also contribute in several important ways. First, given its substantive and theoretical importance, we investigate the influence of custom-made examples. Existing work has primarily focused on the effect of *ready-made* product examples (i.e., off-the-shelf products or products designed for mass appeal; Moreau and Herd 2010). The current research is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to document the unique influence of a *custom-made* example, where consumers know the example was created by an identified social other for that social other's own use. Second, we investigate how a custom-made example influences an individual's *motives* and customization *choices*. Prior work on customization has mostly emphasized downstream consequences of customization—that is, studying consumers' valuations of the final product (e.g., satisfaction, WTP; see Townsend, Kaiser, and Schreier 2015 for a review). Our focus differs in that we are interested in the underlying motivations, psychological processes, and choices that occur prior to final product valuations. Nevertheless, we also demonstrate subsequent revenue implications of understanding these processes.

Across eight studies that involve actual and consequential customization, isolate the underlying psychological mechanism (i.e., motivation to express uniqueness) through mediation and moderation, and rule out a salient alternative explanation, we provide novel evidence for how a custom-made example created by an identified social other shapes an individual's customization choices. Our studies also span a wide range of product categories (e.g., technology, music, housewares), which underscores the generalizability and managerial importance of our findings.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Customizing a product can be a difficult and confusing process for consumers (Hildebrand, Häubl, and Herrmann 2014; Huffman and Kahn 1998) due to a lack of product expertise (Dellaert and Stremersch 2005; Puligadda et al. 2010; Valenzuela et al. 2009) or poor insight into their own preferences (Franke et al. 2009). Given this difficulty, consumers may benefit from external guidance by the marketer or others (Hildebrand et al. 2014), which may take the form of providing examples (Franke et al. 2008; Moreau and Herd 2010). An example can be designed by a professional for mass appeal or can feature a product that was customized by a previous consumer (i.e., a custom-made example). We specifically investigate the latter

context of a custom-made example created by an identified social other.

## The Impact of Social Others in Customization

While frequently used by marketers, academic research on providing examples during the customization process has been relatively sparse. To the best of our knowledge, only one prior article (Franke et al. 2008) has examined custom-made examples attributed to other consumers and found that such examples can play a vital role in individuals' *valuations* of their own customized products. However, custom-made examples in that prior work were part of a "community library" and hence associated with a community at large, not with an identified social other (Franke et al. 2008). We believe the example source (i.e., the identified social other who created the custom-made example) plays a critically important role in the customization process and investigate how the social distance of the example source affects customization choices.

## A Custom-Made Example Leads to Inferences about Expressing Uniqueness

People regularly try to infer the motivations driving social others' actions (Dik and Aarts 2008; Hassin, Aarts, and Ferguson 2005). For example, in Nook et al. (2016), after observing that social others made relatively large charitable donations, participants inferred that these social others were motivated to be generous. We suggest that a custom-made example created by a social other is another vehicle individuals may use to infer a social other's motivation, in this case inferring a motivation to express uniqueness. Expressing uniqueness is important in consumer contexts and has been defined as pursuing differentiation from others through consumer goods for the purpose of establishing one's self- and social image (Tian et al. 2001).

Customization can facilitate expressions of uniqueness (Lynn and Snyder 2002), and one motivation for why people customize may be to express uniqueness (Franke and Schreier 2008). However, while those prior insights pertain to consumers' internal motivations and objectives, our novel predictions focus on the *inferences* consumers make from observing others' choices. We expect that individuals will generally (though not always) infer from a custom-made example that an example source who customized a product was motivated to express uniqueness.

## Inferred Motivation Affects an Individual's Own Motivation

Prior literature suggests that inferring social others' motivations can activate the same motivations in oneself (Aarts, Gollwitzer, and Hassin 2004; Friedman et al. 2010). For instance, in the previously mentioned charitable

giving study, after having inferred that a social other was motivated to be generous, participants were more likely to engage in generous behaviors themselves (e.g., writing empathetic notes to distressed individuals; Nook et al. 2016).

In addition to the motivation to be charitable, prior research has also examined performance-related motivations (e.g., earning more money; Aarts, Gollwitzer, and Hassin 2004; Dik and Aarts 2008; Friedman et al. 2010; Loersch et al. 2008). However, to the best of our knowledge, our work is the first to examine how inferences about motivations to express uniqueness affect one's own motivations, and does so in a consumption context. We predict that when encountering a custom-made example, individuals infer that the social other was motivated to express uniqueness, which in turn heightens an individual's own motivation to express uniqueness.

Critically, the body of work we build on suggests that individuals align with the underlying *motivations* they infer were guiding social others and do not merely mirror the specific *actions* of social others (Friedman et al. 2010; Loersch et al. 2008; Nook et al. 2016). Prior work also suggests that if individuals were in the same setting as the social other (e.g., donating to the same charity), aligning with the social other's motivations would lead them to take actions that mirror that of the social other (e.g., donating larger amounts to the charity; Nook et al. 2016). We, however, demonstrate a novel finding where aligning with the social other's motivations (i.e., to express uniqueness) actually leads individuals to take actions that are *less* similar to the actions observed in the social other, even in the same setting (e.g., customizing the same product).

## Social Distance of the Social Other Influences Individuals' Responses to Inferred Motivations

Some prior work points to the importance of social distance (i.e., whether a person is a close or distant other) in interpersonal contexts (Cavanaugh, Gino, and Fitzsimons 2015; Tu, Shaw, and Fishbach 2015; Ward and Broniarczyk 2011). In that work, both close and distant others are known and identified social others with whom the individual has an existing positive relationship. Neither belongs to a dissociative out-group, but rather, they differ along social distance within an individual's in-group. A close other is someone with whom one has strong ties, such as a family member or friend. A distant other is someone with whom one has weak ties (e.g., a casual acquaintance) but is neither a stranger nor a disliked person belonging to an out-group. Other research has at times grouped these types of social others together, which may obscure important differences. In the context of consumers' social networks, social distance may be an important factor to examine.

Our conceptualization of social distance focuses on the individual's distance from an identified in-group member

(i.e., close vs. distant other) but does not examine the impact of strangers or out-group members on customization choices. We deliberately focus on close and distant others because a custom-made example is typically encountered within one's social network, which is usually insulated from dissociative out-groups. Our conceptualization thus departs from literature on optimal distinctiveness, which typically uses dichotomous groups (i.e., in-groups vs. out-groups) as the frame of reference (Berger and Heath 2007; Chan et al. 2012). In contrast, our work is situated within the in-group and focuses on the individual's social distance from an identified in-group member, ranging from a close other to a distant other.

Our conceptualization is also related to network theory, where the role of strong versus weak ties has been of great interest (Granovetter 1973). We suggest this distinction may also play an important role in customization. The network literature has suggested that for marketers, weak ties can be more effective in introducing novel information and products to individuals (Burt 2004). Applying these findings, marketers might use a custom-made example created by a distant other to inform individuals of products they could customize. However, strong ties are generally more influential in getting individuals to adopt new products (Brown and Reingen 1987; Lopez and Sicilia 2013), which may instead lead marketers to use a custom-made example created by a close other to encourage individuals to opt in to customizing. Because both a distant other and a close other may enter into the customization process, we investigate how variations in social distance of the example source shape individuals' customization choices.

We build on prior studies that suggest psychological closeness to a social other increases the likelihood that one pursues the motivations inferred from that social other (Loersch et al. 2008; Wessler and Hansen 2016). While individuals may infer comparable motivations to express uniqueness from a close and a distant other who customized, we predict that individuals will be more compelled to express similar motivations when the example source is a close (vs. distant) other. In order to fulfill their own motivation to express uniqueness, we expect individuals will make customization choices that are less similar to what others have chosen, such as deviating from the custom-made example. Another way to express uniqueness, as we will show, could be to make customization choices that are less similar to the choices that most consumers in general have made (e.g., avoiding best-sellers). A schematic representation of our conceptual model can be found in figure 1.

## When Consumers Infer Motivations Other than Expressing Uniqueness

Our theoretical framework posits that consumers generally infer from a custom-made example that a social other was motivated to express uniqueness. However, we

**FIGURE 1**

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
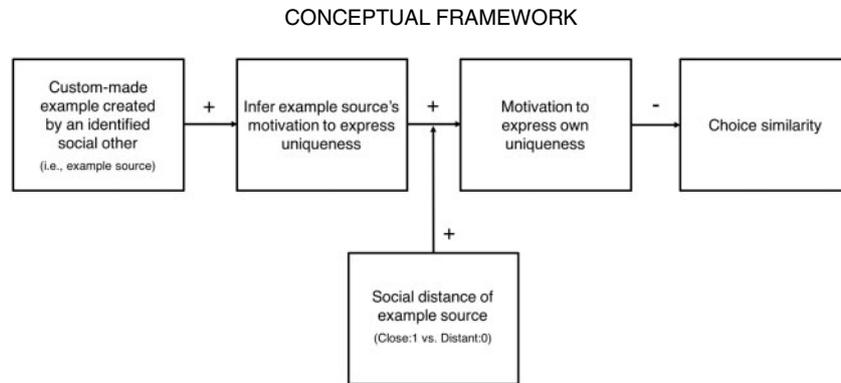


acknowledge that other motivations may also be inferred from a custom-made example. For instance, while consumers often customize identity-related product aspects to express uniqueness, other times they customize functionally related product aspects to achieve better product fit (Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal 2011). We predict that depending on the type of customization focus (i.e., identity- or functionally related), individuals may make different inferences about the social other's motivation. Accordingly, if consumers infer a social other's motivation to be something other than expressing uniqueness (e.g., if they infer a more functionally related motivation), consumers should adopt that inferred motivation and act accordingly (e.g., by choosing more functionally related options rather than expressing uniqueness). We also examine instances where motivations other than uniqueness are inferred and highlight these as important boundary conditions for the proposed uniqueness-driven findings.

## Motivation to Express Uniqueness versus Mitigating Negative Reactions

We predict that individuals will make customization choices that are less similar to a custom-made example created by a close, versus distant, other due to heightened motivation to express uniqueness. A salient alternative explanation may suggest that individuals anticipate a close other will react more negatively to being copied than a distant other. White and Argo (2011) found that when individuals saw their own style mimicked by another person (i.e., that person bought the exact same product), they responded more negatively when the mimicker was a coworker who was a friend (vs. a coworker they disliked). Negative reactions were most prominent when significant effort had been expended to acquire the product that was copied. While we focus on social distance among generally liked social others, White and Argo's (2011) findings may lead

one to expect that, when customizing, consumers minimize choice similarity as a preemptive strategy to mitigate negative reactions from close others. While this is possible, we propose that anticipated negative reactions do not explain why consumers choose less similarly to a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) other for two important reasons.

First, using the terminology of our research, White and Argo (2011) focus on the perspective of the example source, while our research focuses on the perspective of the individual customizing the product (i.e., the mimicker in White and Argo 2011). While both perspectives are important, we focus on the perspective of the individual customizing, as these individuals are often the intended target of marketing activities and the source of future revenues. Custom-made examples are often shared with individuals to promote customization (i.e., inspire more people to customize for themselves), but little is known about the inferences these examples trigger and their subsequent influence on the customization process. We examine whether there may be a misalignment between how individuals anticipate an example source will react and what White and Argo (2011) found to be the true reactions of the example source.

We suggest that even though a close other who is mimicked may react more negatively than a distant other, we do not expect individuals who are customizing a product to accurately anticipate this reaction. Individuals often cannot accurately predict the true feelings of social others (Frith and Frith 2006). Moreover, as White and Argo (2011) also note, research has consistently shown positive consequences of mimicking a social other (Tanner et al. 2007). Hence, anticipating more negative reactions from a close (vs. distant) other seems less likely. Furthermore, close friendships are generally characterized by mutual positive sentiments (Hendrick and Hendrick 2006; McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal 1997). Given the

generally positive experiences individuals have had with close others, individuals may in fact expect a distant other to react more negatively to being copied than a close other.

Second, White and Argo (2011) find that a close other's distinctiveness becomes threatened when another person selects the exact same product already owned by the close other. A customization context allows individuals to partially, rather than completely, copy the example created by a social other, thus maintaining distinctiveness. If individuals exhibit only partial choice similarity (vs. copying the choice in its entirety), they should be even less likely to anticipate negative reactions from social others.

Therefore, we contend that when individuals make their customization choices, they do not necessarily anticipate stronger negative reactions from a close other because of a) the positivity of close relationships and b) partial copying in customization. While individuals may harbor concerns that a social other may react negatively, we predict that these concerns are not stronger when copying a close (vs. distant) other. Hence, we do not expect anticipated negative reactions to explain our choice similarity predictions. However, this is ultimately an empirical question, which we examine systematically across several studies.

## Summary and Experimental Overview

Across eight studies we test our proposed framework using a variety of stimuli and product contexts. Studies 1a, 1b, and 1c establish the overall effect, namely that choice similarity with a custom-made example depends on the social distance of the example source. Studies 2a and 2b provide evidence that these findings are not driven by anticipated negative reactions from the example source. Studies 3, 4, and 5 test our proposed psychological mechanism via both moderation and mediation. Study 3 manipulates the example type (custom-made vs. ready-made) to independently vary motivation to express uniqueness; it also provides mediational evidence of the proposed "motivation to express uniqueness" mechanism. Study 4 examines whether individuals indeed infer from a custom-made example that others were motivated to express uniqueness and whether their own motivation, as well as their customization choices, is affected by these inferences. Further, study 4 demonstrates that individuals may sacrifice their preferences in order to express uniqueness. Study 5 contrasts situations where customization focuses on identity- versus functionally related aspects of a product and examines the effect on inferred motivation and customization choices. Jointly, these findings establish the distinct impact of a custom-made example created by an identified social other during customization.

# STUDY 1A: CUSTOM-MADE EXAMPLES AFFECT CHOICE SIMILARITY FOR CONSEQUENTIAL CHOICES

As a first test of our framework, study 1a examines whether customization choices are affected by the social distance of the example source (i.e., close vs. distant other). We propose that individuals will exhibit less choice similarity with a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) other. In study 1a, participants customize a product they could actually keep to examine the proposed effect for consequential choices.

## Participants and Design

One hundred eighty-eight undergraduates participated in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (close vs. distant example source) in a between-subjects design. Data was excluded for three participants who failed the attention-check question asking them to recall the example source they had encountered (see the web appendix for exact wording), yielding a sample of 185 participants ($M_{age} = 19.8$, SD = 1.25; 52% female). Across all studies we used the same type of attention-check question, asked at the end of the study, to determine which participants to exclude.

## Procedure

Participants imagined themselves running into a social other holding a custom-made notebook (i.e., the custom-made example). In the close example source condition, the social other was a close friend, while in the distant example source condition, the social other was a distant acquaintance. Participants were told to imagine that this close friend [distant acquaintance] was someone they knew well [didn't know well] but [and] didn't see very often. In order to hold constant other factors that could affect choice similarity, we instructed participants to imagine a person of similar age and of their same gender in both conditions. The same instructions were used in all subsequent studies.

Participants then imagined that during the ensuing conversation the example source told the participant, "I customized this notebook at the bookstore. I chose which emojis I wanted to add to the cover of my notebook." Regardless of the example source, all participants saw the exact same example notebook decorated with eight different emojis. To ensure that dislike of the example did not drive choice similarity or dissimilarity, across all studies we pretested the examples to be generally well liked. Pretest procedures for all studies are reported in the web appendix. In this study, the eight emojis used on the example notebook were the most frequently chosen emojis in a

pretest using a separate group of undergraduate respondents ($N = 82$).

Participants saw an image of the custom-made notebook on their computer screen, and also had a physical copy of the example notebook placed on their desk. This allowed participants to reference the example if they wished. All participants then learned that they would customize their own notebook, which they could keep. Participants were given a sticker sheet filled with 28 different emojis (i.e., the options participants could choose from), including the eight used on the example notebook. Participants then selected eight emojis from the sticker sheet for their own notebook that they could take with them when leaving the lab.

## Measures

After participants had customized their own notebook, a research assistant collected the used sticker sheets and, for each participant, recorded the missing emoji stickers (i.e., those used to customize the notebook). The number of emojis used on each notebook that were the same as those on the example served as the measure of choice similarity (0–8). Note that while our choice similarity measure is a count measure, for ease of exposition we will report ANOVA results. The same patterns of results and statistical conclusions hold when we use Poisson regression; those results for the current and all subsequent studies are reported in the web appendix. Participants provided demographics and a few other responses. All measures taken for this and other studies can be found in the web appendix.

## Results and Discussion

Supporting our predictions, a one-way ANOVA revealed that if the custom-made notebook was ostensibly created by a close friend, participants chose fewer emojis that were identical to the example ($M = 2.91$, SD $= 1.39$) than if the example was created by a distant acquaintance ($M = 3.51$, SD $= 1.21$; $F(1, 183) = 9.72$, $p = .002$, $\omega_p^2 = .045$).

As predicted, study 1a provides initial evidence that individuals customize differently as a function of the social distance of the example source who created the custom-made example. If the source was a close (vs. distant) other, participants made fewer customization choices that were identical to those of the example. Notably, study 1a illustrates that this occurs for consequential decisions (i.e., participants could keep their notebooks) and when participants simply imagine the social other (i.e., participants would not endure actual negative reactions from copying that person).

## STUDY 1B: CUSTOM-MADE EXAMPLES DECREASE CHOICE SIMILARITY FOR MORE COMPLEX CUSTOMIZATION TASKS AS WELL

In study 1b, we wanted to conceptually replicate the effect of example source on choice similarity using a more elaborate customization context that further reflects the complexities of real-world customization. Moreover, while participants customized their notebook starting from a blank slate in study 1a, in other customization contexts (e.g., Zazzle.com), individuals can begin the customization process with the custom-made example as the starting point. We mirror the latter approach in this study, with participants using the example source's design as a starting point that they can then alter. Participants customized a phone case using an online customization tool that allows them to alter a number of product dimensions (e.g., change colors, add images, and insert text). As before, participants' choices were consequential, as five participants actually received the phone case that they designed.

## Participants and Design

Undergraduate students ($N = 187$) participated for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (close vs. distant example source) in a between-subjects design. Three participants who failed the attention-check question were excluded, for a final sample of 184 participants ($M_{age} = 20.0$, SD $= 1.90$; 53% female).

## Procedure

Participants imagined themselves running into either a close friend or a distant acquaintance who carried a custom-made phone case. That social other mentioned having customized the case by choosing which color, images, and text to add to the outside and inside of the case. The example case was identical across conditions and had been constructed to be well liked based on a pretest among a separate group of undergraduates ($N = 72$). The example referenced symbols and slogans of the university (University of Southern California) that the participants attended.

Participants then imagined that the social other had sent them a link to the customization website, where participants could customize the outside and the inside of their own phone case with different colors, images, and text (see figure 2). Prior to customizing, participants went through a tutorial that explained how to alter the different customizable dimensions. For instance, while the example phone case prominently featured one particular image, participants had access to a library of different images and were free to change the focal image, add other images, or not include any images. Following the tutorial, participants

**FIGURE 2**

STUDY 1B: WEBSITE USED TO CUSTOMIZE PHONE CASES WITH DIFFERENT COLORS, IMAGE DESIGNS, AND TEXT
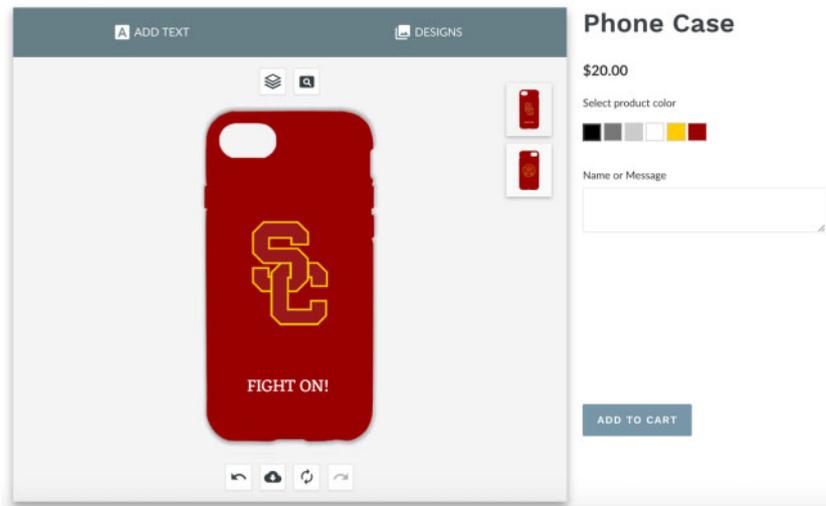


accessed a customization website we had created. Participants were shown their social other's customized phone case, which was the starting point for designing their own phone case.

## Measures

To measure choice similarity, two undergraduate coders, blind to our predictions, independently coded the similarity of each participant's case with the example along 10 dimensions (see table 1). If, for a particular dimension, a participant made the same choice as what was present in the example, it was coded as 1. If the participant deviated from the example on a particular dimension, it was coded as 0. For example, if a participant chose the same color as the example phone case, it was coded as 1; choosing any other color was coded as 0. The two coders exhibited high reliability on all coded dimensions (all Cohen's Kappa > .7); we resolved any discrepancies using the decision of a third coder. The sum of similarities across these dimensions served as the measure of choice similarity (choice similarity measure statistics: minimum: 0, maximum: 10; $M = 5.88$, SD = 1.91).

Note that participants could customize additional dimensions (they could rotate images, choose different text fonts, etc.). However, these dimensions could not be coded for all participants. For example, if a participant did not include any text, text font could not be coded. Hence, our measure of choice similarity includes only dimensions that could be coded across all participants. Follow-up analyses on the additional dimensions that were measurable for only a subset of participants are reported in the web appendix.

To examine whether participants were aware of how similar their choices were to the example, participants rated how similar they felt their phone case was to their close friend's [distant acquaintance's] case on a nine-point scale (1 = Not at all similar, 9 = Very similar).

## Results

*Actual Choice Similarity.* A one-way ANOVA predicting choice similarity revealed that participants customized their phone cases to be less similar to a custom-made example created by a close friend ($M = 5.45$, SD = 1.99) relative to a distant acquaintance ($M = 6.32$, SD = 1.73; $F(1, 182) = 10.04$, $p = .002$, $\omega_p^2 = .045$). This pattern was the same for the outside of the phone case (range 0–6; $M_{close} = 2.50$, SD = 1.25 vs. $M_{distant} = 3.07$, SD = 1.17; $F(1, 182) = 10.03$, $p = .002$, $\omega_p^2 = .047$) and, though weaker, for the inside of the phone case (range 0–4; $M_{close} = 2.94$, SD = 1.30 vs. $M_{distant} = 3.25$, SD = 1.02; $F(1, 182) = 3.13$, $p = .079$, $\omega_p^2 = .011$).

*Perceived Choice Similarity.* Paralleling findings for actual choice similarity, participants perceived their own phone case to be less similar to the custom-made example created by a close friend ($M = 3.80$, SD = 2.12) than a distant acquaintance ($M = 4.45$, SD = 2.10; $F(1, 182) = 4.24$, $p = .041$, $\omega_p^2 = .017$).

## Discussion

Study 1b replicates our findings in a more complex customization context, where individuals are able to customize numerous product dimensions in a variety of ways.

**TABLE 1**

STUDY 1B: OVERVIEW OF PHONE CASE DIMENSIONS CODED FOR CHOICE SIMILARITY WITH THE EXAMPLE

| | Dimension participants could customize | Description of choice similarity with the example (if yes: coded as 1, else 0) |
|---|---|---|
| **Phone case body** | Color | Participant kept the same phone case color as shown in the example. |
| **Outside of phone case** | Number of images | Participant included exactly one image. |
| | Type of image | Participant included the same image as in the example. |
| | Presence of a focal image | Participant included a focal image. |
| | Number of text phrases | Participant included exactly one text phrase. |
| | Type of text phrase | Participant included the same text phrase as in the example. |
| **Inside of phone case** | Number of images | Participant included exactly one image. |
| | Type of image | Participant included the same image as in the example. |
| | Presence of a focal image | Participant included a focal image. |
| | Number of text phrases | Participant did *not* include a text phrase. |

In support of our predictions, and replicating study 1a, we find that when an example is created by a close (vs. distant) other, individuals customize their own product to be less similar to that example.

Jointly, our first two studies establish that the example source does indeed affect individuals' customization choices. Our framework predicts that the customization choices individuals make are a way of expressing uniqueness. In studies 1a and 1b, individuals could express uniqueness by choosing fewer of the choices already made by their close (vs. distant) other. Beyond choosing less similarly to a close other, our framework would also predict that individuals could express uniqueness in other ways, such as deviating from choices that most others in general make—that is, from "best-sellers." Marketers often label products as best-sellers to drive sales (Goodman et al. 2013). In the context of customization, however, labeling customization choices as best-sellers may reduce sales, as these choices may be viewed as impeding consumers' expressions of uniqueness. We investigate this prediction in study 1c.

## STUDY 1C: ENCOUNTERING A CUSTOM-MADE EXAMPLE DECREASES CHOICE OF BEST-SELLERS

In study 1c, we test whether individuals choose fewer options identified as best-sellers after encountering a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) other. Unlike the previous studies, in this study participants were told that the choices made by the social other were unavailable for them to choose. Hence, all of the individuals' customization choices would be different from the social other, but some of the available options were labeled best-sellers. Based on our framework, we predict that individuals who encounter a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) other choose fewer options labeled best-sellers.

### Participants and Design

Participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; $N = 200$) participated in exchange for $.50. Participants were required to be based in the United States for this and all subsequent studies when using MTurk. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (close vs. distant other) in a between-subjects design. Twelve participants who failed the attention-check question, and four participants who recorded a duplicate IP address, were excluded for a final sample of 184 participants ($M_{age} = 36.8$, SD = 12.51; 42% female).

### Procedure

Participants imagined speaking to a close friend or a distant acquaintance who was holding a custom-made mug. Participants were then asked to customize their own mug but were told that the patterns chosen by their social other were currently unavailable. Hence, they would not see any of their social other's chosen patterns. Participants had 30 patterns to choose from, including six labeled as a best-seller. The six best-sellers were identical across conditions and had been identified as the most frequently chosen patterns in a pretest ($N = 150$). Participants then customized their own mug, selecting six patterns. We used the number of chosen patterns labeled as a best-seller (0–6) as our dependent measure.

### Results and Discussion

A one-way ANOVA revealed that if participants encountered a close friend who had customized a mug, they chose fewer best-sellers ($M = 1.17$, SD = 1.18) than if they encountered a distant acquaintance ($M = 1.63$, SD = 1.58; $F(1, 182) = 5.10$, $p = .025$, $\omega_p^2 = .022$) who had customized a mug.

This finding is in line with our prediction that, after learning a close other customized, individuals may experience stronger motivations to express uniqueness. In study

1c, participants could *not* choose anything their social other had chosen. Thus, these findings further suggest that anticipated negative reactions from choosing too similarly to a close other do not drive our findings.

Overall, we find that encountering a custom-made example created by a close other leads individuals to choose less similarly to what others have previously chosen. We argue that this is due to a heightened motivation to express uniqueness. However, another explanation may be that people anticipate greater negative reactions when choosing similarly to a close (vs. distant) other. While the first three studies provide initial evidence against this alternative explanation, studies 2a and 2b specifically test for and rule out this alternative explanation. In study 2a, we measure how participants anticipate their close (vs. distant) other will react to their customization choices, as well as how they themselves expect to feel. In study 2b, we explicitly manipulate whether or not participants expect others will know about their customization choices.

## STUDY 2A: DO PEOPLE ANTICIPATE GREATER NEGATIVE REACTIONS FROM COPYING CUSTOMIZATION CHOICES OF A CLOSE VERSUS A DISTANT OTHER?

While a close other who was mimicked may react more negatively than a distant other (White and Argo 2011), in order for these reactions to be reflected in customization choices, individuals who are customizing, and hence who are doing the mimicking, would need to anticipate these negative reactions. We predict that individuals do not anticipate negative reactions from a close other. Rather, we predict that individuals anticipate relatively more negative reactions from a distant compared to a close other. We also suspect that a social other's negative reactions may not be as much of a concern in a customization context because individuals tend to exhibit partial, not complete, choice similarity with a social other. To test this idea explicitly, study 2a also manipulates the extent to which individuals copy a social other.

In addition to measuring anticipated negative reactions by others, study 2a also measures expected embarrassment, as well as feelings of staying true to oneself. If individuals expect to feel greater embarrassment or feel less true to themselves after mimicking a close (vs. distant) other, this could potentially explain why they choose less similarly to a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) other. Because this study uses a number of measures from previous literature and tests an alternative explanation, we preregistered this study including our measures, planned analyses, and sample size; for pre-registration information, see osf.io/rd5xz.

## Participants and Design

Participants from MTurk ($N = 750$) participated in exchange for \$0.50. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 10 conditions in a 2 (example source: close vs. distant) $\times$ 5 (extent of choice similarity: 0% vs. 25% vs. 50% vs. 75% vs. 100%) between-subjects design. After we excluded 32 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample consisted of 718 participants ($M_{age} = 36.7$, SD = 12.17; 54% female).

## Procedure

Participants imagined speaking to a coworker who was either a close friend or a distant acquaintance. This coworker had customized the mug they were holding by choosing which patterns to add to the mug. Note that, unlike in previous studies, participants in this study did not see a picture of the example. Participants then imagined they customized a mug for themselves and subsequently told their close [distant] coworker that they ended up choosing none of (0%), a few of (25%), half of (50%), most of (75%), or the exact same (100%) patterns as that coworker. As in White and Argo (2011), this coworker finds out about the copying directly from the mimicker, but, given our customization context, also learns the extent of copying (i.e., choice similarity) that took place.

## Measures

After reading the scenario, participants were asked how their close [distant] coworker would feel about them having copied 0% [25% / 50% / 75% / 100%] of their close [distant] coworker's mug using a nine-point scale (1 = Very negatively, 9 = Very positively). In addition to this measure of negative emotional reaction, we also measured anticipated negative behavioral reactions using the four-item disposal intentions measure from White and Argo (2011); participants indicated how likely they thought their close [distant] coworker would be to dispose of, throw out, pack away, and give away the mug on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all likely, 7 = Very likely). The four items were averaged into one composite measure ($\alpha = .94$).

Next, using the imagined embarrassment measure from Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo (2001), participants indicated how embarrassed, awkward, and uncomfortable they would feel about their customization choices on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very). The three items were averaged into one composite imagined embarrassment measure ($\alpha = .95$). Finally, participants indicated to what extent they agreed that they stayed true to their own style with their customization choices on a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

## Results

*Anticipated Negative Reaction.* The anticipated negative reaction measure was recoded so that higher values reflected greater anticipated negative reaction from the social other. The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of example source, such that participants anticipated that a close coworker would react less negatively ($M = 3.81$, SD $= 1.86$) than a distant coworker ($M = 4.73$, SD $= 1.81$; $F(1, 708) = 46.95$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .060$). Furthermore, the main effect of extent of choice similarity was also significant ($F(4, 708) = 6.31$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .029$). A follow-up linear trend test revealed that the greater the extent of choice similarity (i.e., the more a participant copied the custom-made example), the greater the anticipated negative reaction from the example source ($F(1, 708) = 12.74$, $p = .0004$, $\omega_p^2 = .016$). The interaction of example source and the linear trend was marginally significant ($F(1, 708) = 3.44$, $p = .064$, $\omega_p^2 = .003$), reflecting the finding that greater copying led to more anticipated negative reaction when copying the distant other ($F(1, 708) = 14.34$, $p = .0002$, $\omega_p^2 = .018$), while extent of choice similarity had no effect when copying the close other ($F(1, 708) = 1.51$, $p = .22$).

*Anticipated Disposal Intentions.* The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of extent of choice similarity on anticipated disposal intentions ($F(4, 708) = 9.75$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .047$). A linear trend test revealed that the more the example was copied, the more likely participants thought the example source would dispose of the mug ($F(1, 708) = 38.87$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .050$). The main effect of example source was not significant ($M_{\text{close}} = 1.58$ vs. $M_{\text{distant}} = 1.70$, $F(1, 708) = 2.37$, $p = .124$), perhaps due to low disposal intentions in general. Furthermore, the interaction of example source and the linear trend of extent of choice similarity was marginally significant ($F(1, 708) = 3.69$, $p = .055$, $\omega_p^2 = .004$), reflecting the finding that extent of choice similarity the distant example source heightened anticipated disposal intentions more ($F(1, 708) = 32.40$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .042$) than copying the close example source ($F(1, 708) = 9.56$, $p = .002$, $\omega_p^2 = .012$). Thus, while White and Argo (2011) found greater disposal intentions when the example source was mimicked by a close (vs. disliked) coworker, our results suggest that those customizing do not anticipate greater disposal intentions for a close (vs. distant) coworker.

*Imagined Embarrassment.* The ANOVA revealed a marginal main effect of example source, such that participants would feel less embarrassed after copying a close coworker ($M = 2.75$, SD $= 1.79$) compared to a distant coworker ($M = 2.97$, SD $= 1.94$; $F(1, 708) = 2.97$, $p = .085$, $\omega_p^2 = .003$). The main effect of extent of choice similarity was significant ($F(4, 708) = 40.34$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .180$), and a linear trend test revealed that participants would feel more embarrassed the more they copied the custom-made example ($F(1, 708) = 157.82$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .179$). The interaction of example source and the linear trend of choice similarity was not significant ($F(1, 708) = 1.19$, $p = .275$).

*True to One's Style.* The ANOVA revealed only a significant main effect of extent of choice similarity on feelings of staying true to one's style ($F(4, 708) = 59.48$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .246$). A linear trend test revealed that participants would feel less true to their own style the more they copied the custom-made example ($F(1, 708) = 222.73$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .238$). The main effect of example source ($F < 1$) and the interaction of example source and the linear trend of extent of copying ($F < 1$) were not significant.

## Discussion

We find that individuals anticipate greater negative reactions when mimicking a distant other, relative to a close other. Hence, anticipated negative reactions cannot explain why individuals customize their products to be less similar to a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) other. Moreover, individuals expect to be less embarrassed mimicking a close (vs. distant) other, which also cannot account for the observed customization choices.

In addition, individuals may expect negative reactions to not be of great concern, in general, because of the customization context. In our other studies, individuals, on average, choose less than half of the same choices as those shown in a custom-made example. Study 2a shows that, compared to copying a social other's example in its entirety, anticipated negative reactions, disposal intentions, embarrassment, and feelings of being less true to one's self are all lower in customization situations where individuals copy examples only partially. To further examine the effect of a social other knowing one's customization choices, in study 2b we manipulate whether the customized products are used in public or in private.

## STUDY 2B: DOES IT MATTER WHETHER A CUSTOM-MADE PRODUCT IS USED PUBLICLY OR PRIVATELY?

If consumers customize less similarly to a close other's custom-made example because they anticipate negative reactions for doing so, one would expect to replicate our previous findings (i.e., less choice similarity) only when customized products are used in public, but not when they are used in private. If, however, as we posit, less choice similarity is driven by motivation to express uniqueness, we expect the observed pattern (i.e., less choice similarity with the custom-made example created by a close other) to arise regardless of whether the product is used publicly or privately.

## Participants and Design

Participants from MTurk ($N = 400$) participated in exchange for $0.50. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (example source: close vs. distant) × 2 (usage setting: public vs. private) between-subjects design. After we excluded 26 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample consisted of 374 participants ($M_{age} = 37.3$, SD = 12.36; 53% female).

## Procedure

As in study 1c, participants imagined a coworker who was either a close friend or distant acquaintance talking about the mug they had customized (i.e., the custom-made example). The patterns on the example mug were the six most frequently chosen patterns in the pretest previously described in study 1c.

All participants learned they would customize their own mug. Participants in the public condition were told they intended to keep this mug on their work desk, which was located in an area of the office with high foot traffic. Therefore, the participant's close [distant] coworker and many other people were likely to see the participant's custom mug. In contrast, participants in the private condition were told they intended to keep their mug on their home desk, which was located in a home office to which only they had access. Therefore, neither participants' close [distant] coworker nor many other people were likely to see participants' customized mug. Participants then selected six patterns from a set of 30 different patterns, including the six patterns used on the example mug.

## Measures

The number of patterns chosen that were the same as those on the example served as the measure of actual choice similarity (0–6). Participants also responded to the perceived similarity measure used in study 1b on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all similar, 7 = Very similar). As a manipulation check of the usage setting, participants indicated the likelihood that their close [distant] coworker would find out which mug patterns participants chose on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all likely, 7 = Very likely).

## Results

*Manipulation Check.* As intended, participants indicated it would be significantly more likely for their coworker to find out their customization choices in the public ($M = 5.24$, SD = 1.51) than in the private condition ($M = 3.98$, SD = 1.99; $t(372) = 6.92$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .111$).

*Actual Choice Similarity.* Supporting our predictions, a two-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of example source ($F(1, 370) = 16.44$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .040$). Participants exhibited less choice similarity with the example when it was ostensibly created by a close coworker ($M = 1.48$, SD = 1.21) than by a distant coworker ($M = 2.06$, SD = 1.56). Further, a main effect of usage setting ($F(1, 370) = 4.42$, $p = .036$, $\omega_p^2 = .009$) showed that participants exhibited less choice similarity with the example when their own mug was used publicly ($M = 1.62$, SD = 1.48) compared to privately ($M = 1.92$, SD = 1.34). Importantly, and as predicted, the interaction was not significant ($F < 1$), suggesting that participants exhibited less choice similarity with a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) coworker, regardless of whether the product was used publicly or privately.

*Perceived Choice Similarity.* A two-way ANOVA predicting perceived choice similarity revealed a main effect only of example source ($F(1, 370) = 6.78$, $p = .01$, $\omega_p^2 = .015$). In line with their actual choices, participants perceived their own mug as less similar to the custom-made example created by a close coworker ($M = 3.08$, SD = 1.60) relative to a distant coworker ($M = 3.51$, SD = 1.59). The main effect of usage setting ($F(1, 370) = 2.59$, $p = .108$) and the interaction effect were not significant ($F < 1$).

## Discussion

If anticipated negative reactions from a close other were to decrease choice similarity, then we should see this decrease occur in public but not in private usage settings. However, that is not the pattern of results observed. While a public setting reduces choice similarity overall, importantly, study 2b replicates our previous findings that people make less similar choices to an example created by a close (vs. distant) other in both public and private settings.

Our studies demonstrate that anticipated negative reactions from a close other cannot account for our findings. Instead, we propose that individuals infer that a social other created a custom-made product (i.e., the example) to express uniqueness. When this social other is close (vs. distant), individuals themselves experience greater motivation to express uniqueness, thus decreasing choice similarity with the example. The subsequent studies provide evidence for this motivation to express uniqueness mechanism via both moderation and mediation.

## STUDY 3: CUSTOM-MADE EXAMPLES INCREASE MOTIVATION TO EXPRESS UNIQUENESS EVEN WHEN COSTLY

We propose that encountering a custom-made example heightens motivation to express uniqueness more when the custom-made example is created by a close versus a distant other. We test this prediction in study 3 not only by measuring motivation to express uniqueness but also by

contrasting custom-made examples with ready-made examples. Because ready-made examples are designed by retailers for mass appeal and bought off the shelf, we expect individuals will be less likely to infer that a social other who bought a ready-made product was motivated to express uniqueness. In turn, we predict that individuals themselves will be less motivated to express uniqueness and subsequently will choose more similarly to the example, especially when the example source is a close other.

Regardless of example type seen, all participants in study 3 subsequently engaged in customization. Engaging in customization in and of itself may trigger motivations to express uniqueness, our proposed mechanism. Thus, allowing all participants to customize isolates the effects of custom- versus ready-made examples on motivation to express uniqueness over and above any effect of engaging in customization. Furthermore, study 3 examines whether our findings generalize beyond customizing aesthetic dimensions and also uses an incentive-compatible setup to examine an important downstream consequence: willingness to spend more money for unique choices. If a custom-made example indeed heightens motivations to express uniqueness, individuals may be willing to spend more to acquire choices that differ from the example.

## Participants and Design

Due to the relevance and appeal of the focal stimulus (i.e., recent hit songs) skewing toward a younger demographic, participation was restricted to those between the ages of 18 and 34 ($M_{age} = 27.8$, SD = 4.17; 49% female). Participants from MTurk ($N = 984$) completed the study in exchange for $.50 and a chance to win the product they customized. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (example source: close vs. distant) × 2 (example type: custom-made vs. ready-made) between-subjects design. After we excluded 48 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample consisted of 936 participants. This sample size was chosen based on the results of a pilot study, which suggested this sample size was needed to test for the predicted interaction with 80% power.

## Procedure and Measures

Participants imagined coming across a Facebook post from either a close friend or a distant acquaintance named Taylor. They were presented with a screenshot of this Facebook post and saw that Taylor was listening to a playlist. The playlist featured six songs, with each song's title and artist listed (see figure 3). This list of songs was identical across conditions and had been constructed based on a pretest among other MTurk participants ($N = 80$). Pretest participants saw a total of 50 song titles, drawn from Billboard's top 10 summer hits of the years 2011 to 2015. Based on the artist(s) and title alone, 26 songs were rated

as highly familiar by pretest participants. To ensure likeability of the example, we used the six most liked songs among this set of 26 highly familiar songs for the example playlist.

While the example playlists were identical across conditions, those in the custom-made condition were told that Taylor created a customized "My Custom Songs of Summer" music playlist featuring six songs. In contrast, those in the ready-made condition were told that Taylor bought the "iTunes Songs of Summer" music playlist featuring six songs.

All participants then customized their own playlist by selecting six different songs from the pretested set of 26 highly familiar songs. Songs were identified by the song's artist, title, and price and were listed in alphabetical order by artist's first name. Participants learned that, as a special promotion, the six songs on the example playlist were all priced at $.99. All other songs were priced at $1.29. Thus, if participants wanted to choose any song that was not part of the example in order to create a more unique album, they would have to spend more money. Participants were told that they had the chance to actually receive the songs they chose as well as any money left over after using a $10 iTunes gift card, making their choices incentive-compatible. Note that the maximum amount a participant could spend on six songs was $7.74 (six songs priced at $1.29 each). Hence, a $10 gift card was sufficient to express utter uniqueness (i.e., select only songs that were not part of the example). In line with prior research on effective incentive structures (Charness, Gneezy, and Halladay 2016), participants had approximately a 10% chance of receiving their choices. After completion of the study, 100 participants (10.7%) were randomly selected and received a monetary "bonus" (between $10 to $11.80) via MTurk to cover purchasing their songs and the leftover gift card amounts. The bonus was sometimes larger than the $10 described in the scenario to reflect the higher prices actually charged on iTunes.

As before, the number of songs individuals selected that were identical to those used in the example served as the measure of choice similarity (0–6). To measure respondents' own motivations to express uniqueness, after the customization task participants responded to four uniqueness items adapted from the four-item "Self-Attributed Need for Uniqueness Scale" (Lynn and Harris 1997). Participants indicated how they felt while customizing their playlist (e.g., "While selecting songs for my playlist, I felt a need to be unique"; see web appendix for all items) using seven-point scales (1 = Not at all, 7 = Extremely); items were averaged into one measure ($\alpha = .88$).

## Results

*Choice Similarity and Money Spent.* A two-way ANOVA (example source × example type) predicting

**FIGURE 3**

STUDY 3: TAYLOR'S FACEBOOK POST FEATURING THE CUSTOM-MADE (TOP) AND READY-MADE (BOTTOM) SONG PLAYLIST EXAMPLE
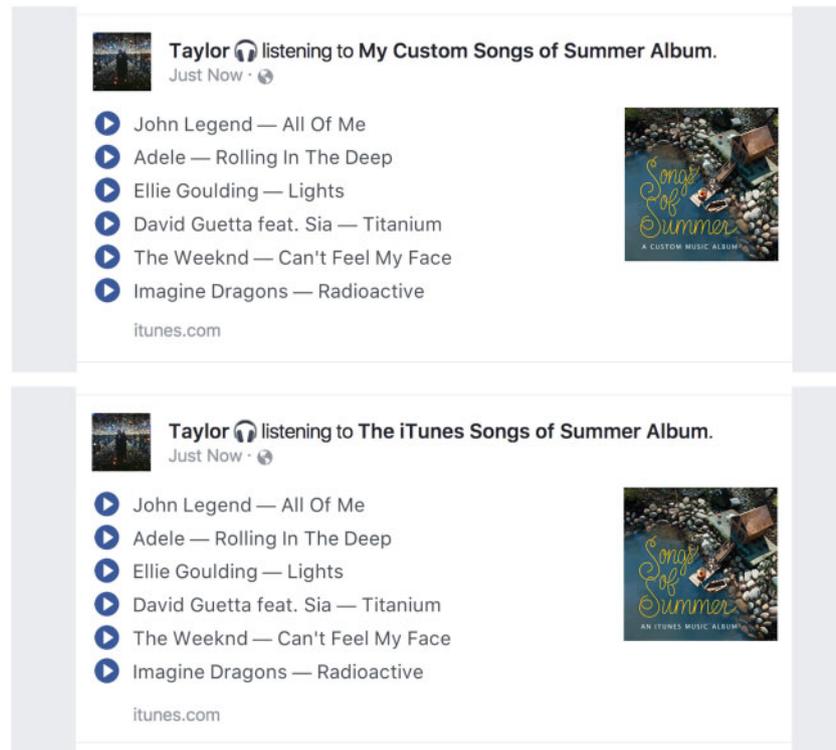


choice similarity revealed no main effect of example source ($F < 1$) but a marginally significant main effect of example type ($F(1, 932) = 3.06$, $p = .081$, $\omega_p^2 = .002$). That is, participants exhibited less similarity with a custom-made example ($M = 2.58$, SD $= 1.67$) than with a ready-made example ($M = 2.77$, SD $= 1.57$).

Importantly, the interaction of example type and example source was significant ($F(1, 932) = 12.52$, $p = .0004$, $\omega_p^2 = .012$; see figure 4, left panel). In line with our predictions, and replicating our previous findings, those who saw a custom-made playlist from a close other exhibited less choice similarity ($M = 2.43$, SD $= 1.65$) than those who saw a custom-made playlist from a distant other ($M = 2.74$, SD $= 1.69$; $F(1, 932) = 4.66$, $p = .031$, $\omega_p^2 = .004$). This also meant that participants who saw a close other's custom playlist spent more money ($M = \$7.01$) than those who saw a distant other's playlist ($M = \$6.92$).

However, the opposite was true for ready-made examples. Those who saw a ready-made playlist from a close other exhibited greater similarity with the example playlist ($M = 2.98$, SD $= 1.66$) than those who saw a ready-made playlist from a distant other ($M = 2.56$, SD $= 1.45$;

$F(1, 932) = 8.06$, $p = .005$, $\omega_p^2 = .008$). This also meant that those who saw a close other's ready-made playlist spent less money ($M = \$6.85$) than those who saw a distant other's ready-made playlist ($M = \$6.97$).

*Motivation to Express Uniqueness.* A two-way ANOVA (example source × example type) predicting motivation to express uniqueness revealed no main effect of example source ($F (1, 932) = 1.35$, $p = .245$) but a main effect of example type ($F(1, 932) = 15.03$, $p = .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .015$). Participants felt more motivated to express uniqueness after encountering a custom-made example ($M = 3.39$, SD $= 1.74$) relative to a ready-made example ($M = 2.96$, SD $= 1.68$).

The interaction was also significant ($F (1, 932) = 20.80$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .021$; see figure 4, right panel). Those who saw a custom-made playlist created by a close friend felt significantly more motivated to express uniqueness ($M = 3.58$, SD $= 1.74$) relative to one created by a distant acquaintance ($M = 3.21$, SD $= 1.73$; $F(1, 932) = 5.86$, $p = .016$, $\omega_p^2 = .005$). In contrast, those who saw a ready-made playlist purchased by a close friend were less motivated to

**FIGURE 4**

STUDY 3: EFFECTS OF EXAMPLE TYPE AND EXAMPLE SOURCE ON CHOICE SIMILARITY (LEFT), WITH POSSIBLE RANGE 0–6, AND MOTIVATION TO EXPRESS UNIQUENESS (RIGHT), MEASURED ON A SEVEN-POINT SCALE
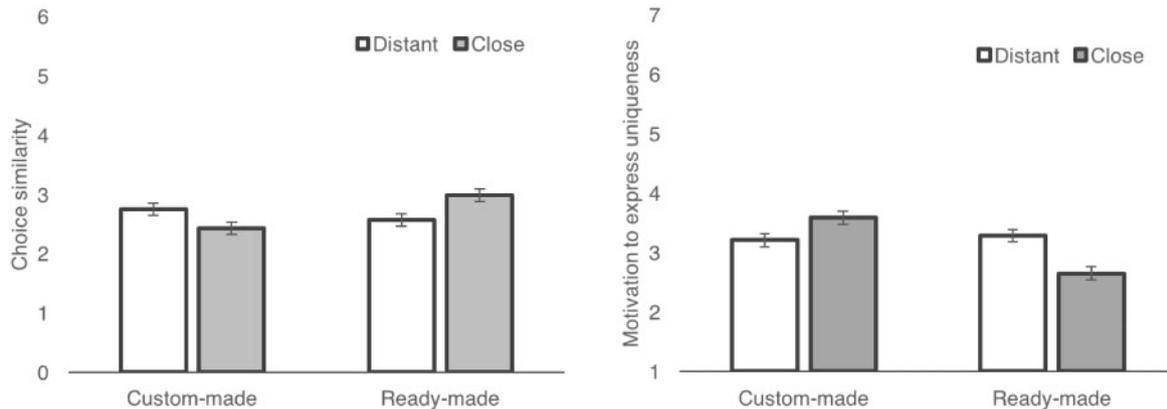


express uniqueness ($M = 2.65$, SD $= 1.61$) relative to those who saw one purchased by a distant acquaintance ($M = 3.28$, SD $= 1.70$; $F(1, 932) = 16.14$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .016$).

*Mediated Moderation.*  We next examined the indirect effect of motivation to express uniqueness on choice similarity (PROCESS model 8; 10,000 bootstraps; Hayes 2013). The zero-order correlation between motivation to express uniqueness and choice similarity was $r = -.16$ ($t(934) = -5.00$). The conditions were coded as follows: example type (ready-made: 0, custom-made: 1) and example source (distant: 0, close: 1). The moderation index was significant ($b = -.136$, SE $= .044$, CI$_{95}$: $-.241$, $-.064$), providing a formal test that motivation to express uniqueness mediates the moderation.

Supporting our framework, within the custom-made example condition, the indirect effect of example type on choice similarity via motivation to express uniqueness was significant ($b = -.051$, SE $= .025$, CI$_{95}$: $-.110$, $-.010$). This suggests that when encountering a custom-made example created by a close friend (vs. distant acquaintance), participants were more motivated to express uniqueness, and greater motivation to express uniqueness decreased choice similarity.

Within the ready-made example condition, the indirect effect was also significant but of opposite sign ($b = .085$, SE $= .029$, CI$_{95}$: $.039$, $.155$), suggesting that when encountering a ready-made example purchased by a close friend (vs. distant acquaintance), participants felt relatively less motivation to express uniqueness, and less motivation to express uniqueness increased choice similarity, as indicated by the positive indirect effect.

## Discussion

Using an incentive compatible setup, study 3 replicates our finding that individuals customize products to be less similar to a custom-made example created by a close other than by a distant other. They do so even at a monetary expense. Furthermore, study 3 provides evidence that this effect is due to a motivation to express uniqueness. When individuals encounter a custom-made example, they feel greater motivation to express uniqueness and choose less similarly if the example is created by a close versus distant other. However, we find a reversal of this effect when individuals encounter a ready-made example. This may be because when a close other is actually willing to buy a ready-made product in an identity-related category, individuals infer less of a motivation to be unique. In turn, individuals may be less motivated to express uniqueness themselves, which heightens choice similarity. In study 4 we explore additional boundary conditions to further establish the underlying psychological mechanism. To do so, we independently manipulate the inferred motivation from a custom-made example to examine how this affects one's motivation to express uniqueness and subsequent customization choices.

## STUDY 4: THE EFFECT OF MOTIVATION TO EXPRESS UNIQUENESS VERSUS OTHER MOTIVATIONS ASCRIBED TO CLOSE OTHERS

We predict that because customization is closely tied to motivations to express uniqueness, individuals naturally infer from a custom-made example that the example source was motivated to express uniqueness. We further predict

that this inference heightens motivations to express uniqueness in individuals themselves, causing them to choose less similarly to a custom-made example, even if it means sacrificing their own preferences. However, individuals could also infer different motivations from a custom-made example; for example, one may infer that social others customized to merely match their preferences (Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010), without any other motivations or concerns. Inferring this type of motivation should not heighten individuals' own motivations to express uniqueness. Rather, in this case, if individuals align themselves with their social other's motivation, they should simply strive to match their own preferences, even if what they like is what a social other has already chosen (i.e., the example). In this study, participants always encountered an example created by a close other. We manipulated the close other's motivation for customizing (i.e., to express uniqueness from others vs. to match one's preferences) and compared the effects of these explicitly stated motivations to the situations we are interested in—that is, where motivation has to be inferred from the example.

## Participants and Design

Participants from MTurk ($N = 420$) completed what was described to them as a set of unrelated studies for $.70. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three close friends' motivation conditions (match one's preferences vs. express uniqueness vs. unstated). After we excluded 16 participants who failed the attention check, the sample consisted of 404 participants. As in study 3, we restricted participants to those between the ages of 18 and 34 ($M_{age} = 28.2$, SD = 4.10; 57% female).

## Procedure and Measures

In our previous studies, examples were constructed to be, on average, well liked (based on pretests). Therefore, when participants chose less similarly than the example, it suggests that they sacrificed their own preferences in order to be unique. However, that was only true on average (i.e., based on the average participant's preferences). In this study, we use custom-made examples matched to each participant's individual preferences, which allows us to assess more precisely whether people sacrifice their own preferences when choosing less similarly. To create these closely matched examples, participants completed three ostensibly unrelated tasks: 1) identifying design patterns that best reflect one's interests, which, unbeknownst to participants, were later used to generate the example (a coaster set); 2) completing a filler task; and 3) encountering the custom-made example and customizing one's own coaster set.

In the first task, participants evaluated 24 different design patterns. Each pattern graphically represented different interests that people commonly identify with (cooking,

beer and wine, traveling, etc.). These patterns had been pretested ($N = 78$) to be similarly aesthetically appealing and to represent interests held by the target population. Participants selected the six patterns that best represented their personal interests (see figure 5 for examples of patterns used).

The six patterns selected by participants (task 1) were then used to create the example that participants saw in the focal task (task 3). Hence, the example matched each participant's individual interests. In order to mitigate recognition that the example featured the exact same patterns participants had previously chosen, we had participants complete a 5 minute reading comprehension filler task (task 2) in between the two focal tasks.

In the third task, participants viewed an Instagram post supposedly posted by a close friend. Participants were told that their close friend had entered a contest held by Zazzle, a retailer specializing in customized products. To enter, the friend had to post an Instagram photo of their customized product, a six-piece coaster set, along with a caption. To manipulate the close friend's motivation for customizing the coaster set, we changed the wording of the caption between conditions. See figure 6 for full captions.

In the match one's preferences condition, the close friend's caption described their motivation as staying true to who they were and making selections that reflect their preferences. In the express uniqueness condition, the close friend's caption described their motivation as expressing uniqueness and standing out from those around them. In the unstated condition, no motivation was provided; the caption simply described the steps the friend took to customize the coaster set. This condition most closely reflected the nature of our earlier studies where the social other's motivation would have had to have been inferred. All participants then selected six out of 24 patterns to customize their own coaster set.

The number of patterns participants chose that were the same as those used in the close friend's example served as the measure of choice similarity (0–6). Participants then answered the same items used in study 3 to measure one's own motivation to express uniqueness ($\alpha = .92$). Finally, as a manipulation check, participants rated to what extent their close friend wanted to 1) match his or her preferences and 2) express uniqueness from others ($1 = $ Not at all, $9 = $ Very much).

## Results

*Manipulation Check.* As intended, participants in the match one's preferences condition inferred their close friend wanted to match his/her preferences ($M = 7.50$, SD $= 2.07$) significantly more than in the express uniqueness ($M = 5.40$, SD = 2.43; $t(401) = 7.77$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .128$) and unstated ($M = 6.12$, SD = 2.16; $t(401) = 5.08$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .058$) conditions. Further, participants in

**FIGURE 5**

**STUDY 4: PATTERNS REPRESENTING DIFFERENT INTERESTS USED IN TASK 1**



Note.—The full set is included in the web appendix.

**FIGURE 6**

**STUDY 4: INSTAGRAM POSTS AND CAPTIONS FOR EACH CONDITION**

the match one's preferences condition inferred that their close friend wanted to express uniqueness from others ($M = 5.89$, SD = 2.41) significantly less than in the express uniqueness ($M = 7.93$, SD = 1.57; $t(401) = 8.26$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .143$) and unstated ($M = 6.44$, SD = 2.04; $t(401) = 2.20$, $p = .028$, $\omega_p^2 = .009$) conditions.

*Choice Similarity.* Recall that, in this study, greater choice similarity also meant choosing more similarly to one's own previously expressed preferences. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the close friend's motivation on choice similarity ($F(2, 401) = 9.84$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .042$). When the close friend was motivated to match his/her own preferences, participants themselves chose significantly more patterns matching the example ($M = 4.37$, SD = 1.68) compared to when the close friend was motivated to express uniqueness ($M = 3.41$, SD = 1.98; $F(1, 401) = 18.07$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .041$) and to the unstated condition ($M = 3.65$, SD = 1.91; $F(1, 401) = 10.25$, $p = .001$, $\omega_p^2 = .022$). There was no significant difference in choice similarity between the express uniqueness and unstated conditions ($F(1, 401) = 1.07$, $p = .302$).

*Motivation to Express Uniqueness.* A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the close friend's motivation on participants' own motivations to express uniqueness ($F(2, 401) = 4.74$, $p = .009$, $\omega_p^2 = .018$). When the close friend was motivated to match his/her own preferences ($M = 3.38$, SD = 1.81), participants were significantly less motivated to express uniqueness than when the close friend was motivated to express uniqueness ($M = 4.01$, SD = 1.83; $F(1, 401) = 7.76$, $p = .006$, $\omega_p^2 = .016$) and the unstated condition ($M = 3.95$, SD = 1.92; $F(1, 401) = 6.32$, $p = .012$, $\omega_p^2 = .013$). There was no difference between the express uniqueness and unstated conditions ($F < 1$).

*Mediation.* We further tested whether the effect of the close friend's motivation on choice similarity is mediated by one's motivation to express uniqueness (PROCESS model 4; 10,000 bootstraps; Hayes 2013). The zero-order correlation between motivation to express uniqueness and choice similarity was $r = -.54$ ($t(402) = -12.89$). The independent variable (motivation condition) was designated as multicategorical, which allowed PROCESS to construct indicator codes, with the match one's preferences condition serving as the reference category. Two indirect effects examined participants' own motivation to express uniqueness (measured) as a mediator: 1) the indirect effect of the express uniqueness condition vs. the match one's preferences condition on choice similarity, and 2) the indirect effect of the unstated condition versus the match one's preferences condition on choice similarity. Contrasting the express uniqueness and match one's preferences conditions, we found that the indirect effect of participants' own motivation to express uniqueness was significant ($b$

$=-.332$, SE = .119, CI$_{95}$: $-.576$, $-.104$). Similarly, contrasting the unstated versus match one's preferences conditions, we found that the indirect effect of participants' own motivation to express uniqueness was significant ($b$ $=-.300$, SE = .120, CI$_{95}$: $-.544$, $-.073$). As indicated by the negative indirect effects, both the unstated and the express uniqueness motivation conditions heightened individuals' own motivation to express uniqueness (relative to the match one's preferences condition), thereby reducing choice similarity with the example created by the close friend, as predicted.

## Discussion

Study 4 finds that individuals' own motivations and choices are affected by what motivated a close other's customization choices. Without any additional information about the source's motivation, simply by knowing that an example was customized, individuals act as if they knew a close other was motivated to express uniqueness. Subsequently, individuals themselves express greater motivation to express uniqueness and make choices that diverge more from an example created by a close other, even if it means sacrificing their own preferences. This study also identifies an important boundary condition of the effect of custom-made examples: when individuals infer that a close other's motivation was something other than expressing uniqueness (e.g., matching one's own preferences), individuals also follow *that* motivational lead and subsequently make different customization choices (e.g., individuals then match their own preferences more).

Study 4 establishes consumers inferring motivations other than expressing uniqueness as a boundary condition that allows us to further examine the underlying psychological mechanism. Still, one could argue that, so far, we only have investigated situations where the main advantage of customization is to express identity. In study 5, we only have investigated situations where a social other customizes for functionally related, rather than identity-related, motivations to examine another potential boundary condition of the underlying motivation-to-express-uniqueness–based mechanism. Specifically, by demonstrating the conditions under which we expect individuals to choose less similarly to others (i.e., identity-related motivation) versus not (i.e., functionally related motivation), we are able to provide further evidence supporting our proposed framework.

## STUDY 5: THE EFFECT OF CUSTOM-MADE EXAMPLES WHEN CUSTOMIZING FOR FUNCTIONALLY RELATED VERSUS IDENTITY-RELATED MOTIVATIONS

Consumers often customize identity-related product aspects in order to express uniqueness. We argue that

individuals infer that a social other who created an identity-related custom-made example was motivated to express uniqueness. However, consumers can also customize functionally related product aspects (e.g., customizing the materials used for shoe insoles). In that case, encountering a custom-made example should not lead individuals to infer that a social other was motivated to express uniqueness to the same extent, and hence individuals' own motivations to express uniqueness should be dampened. Consequently, we predict that choice similarity with a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) other will be lower when customizing for identity-related but not necessarily for functionally related product aspects.

## Participants and Design

Participants from Prolific based in the United States or the United Kingdom ($N = 620$) completed the study in exchange for the equivalent of $0.40. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (example source: close vs. distant) × 2 (customization focus: identity vs. functional) between-subjects design. After we excluded 28 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample consisted of 592 participants ($M_{age} = 36.5$, SD = 12.69; 51% female).

## Procedure and Measures

Participants imagined receiving an invitation for an online video game from either a close friend or a distant acquaintance. Regardless of example source, they were told that they would not compete with that social other in the game. In the invitation, the close friend [distant acquaintance] explained to participants how to create a digital version of themselves to start the game. In the identity condition, participants were told that to create their digital self, they would customize an "identity pack" consisting of six *badges* that helped them distinguish themselves from others in the game. In the functional condition, participants were told that to create their digital self, they would customize an "ability pack" consisting of six *tools* that helped them advance in the game. In both conditions, the close friend or distant acquaintance discussed how they had customized their own identity or ability pack and subsequently shared their pack with participants as an example (see figure 7). The badges [tools] used in the example identity [ability] pack had been constructed based on the most frequently chosen badges [tools] in a pretest with participants from MTurk ($N = 80$).

Participants customized their own pack by selecting six different badges [tools] from a set of 24 choices, including the choices made by the social other. Across functional and identity conditions, the 24 choices were matched in terms of word origin, but the identity condition used the adjective form (e.g., energetic) to better reflect identity characteristics, while the ability condition used the noun form (e.g., energy) to better reflect tools or powers.

The number of choices individuals selected that were the same as those used in the custom-made example served as the measure of choice similarity (0–6). As a manipulation check of customization focus, participants rated to what extent their social other was motivated to 1) express uniqueness from others and 2) succeed at the game (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much).

## Results

*Manipulation Check.*   As intended, participants in the identity condition inferred that their social other was motivated to express uniqueness ($M = 5.10$, SD = 1.39) significantly more than in the functional condition ($M = 3.98$, SD = 1.60; $t(590) = 9.14$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .122$). Further, participants in the functional condition ($M = 5.98$, SD = 1.06) perceived that their social other was motivated to succeed at the game significantly more than in the identity condition ($M = 4.53$, SD = 1.66, $t(590) = 12.62$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .211$).

*Choice Similarity.*   A two-way ANOVA (example source × customization focus) predicting choice similarity revealed no main effect of example source ($F < 1$). As predicted, we find a significant main effect of customization focus ($F(1, 588) = 95.66$, $p < .0001$, $\omega_p^2 = .138$). That is, participants exhibited less similarity with an identity-related example ($M = 1.99$, SD = 1.17) than a functionally related example ($M = 3.00$, SD = 1.35).

Importantly, the interaction of example source and customization focus was also significant ($F(1, 588) = 7.91$, $p = .005$, $\omega_p^2 = .012$; see figure 8). In line with our predictions and replicating our previous findings, those who saw an identity-related custom-made example from a close other exhibited less choice similarity ($M = 1.82$, SD = 1.11) than those who saw one customized by a distant other ($M = 2.15$, SD = 1.21; $F(1, 588) = 5.07$, $p = .025$, $\omega_p^2 = .007$). However, this was not the case for those who saw a functionally related custom-made example; in that situation participants exhibited marginally greater similarity with an example created by a close friend ($M = 3.12$, SD = 1.40) than a distant acquaintance ($M = 2.87$, SD = 1.28; $F(1, 588) = 3.00$, $p = .084$, $\omega_p^2 = .003$).

## Discussion

Study 5 further supports our proposed motivation-to-express-uniqueness–driven mechanism, demonstrating that whether customization focuses on identity- or functionally related aspects impacts the degree of consumers' choice similarity with a custom-made example. When customizing identity-related aspects, we replicate our previous findings that people choose less similarly to a custom-made example created by a close other. However, also as
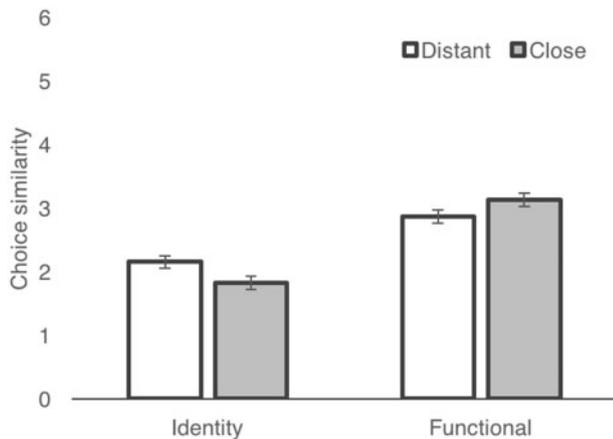
**FIGURE 7**

STUDY 5: CUSTOM-MADE IDENTITY AND ABILITY PACK EXAMPLES CREATED BY THE SOCIAL OTHER



**FIGURE 8**

STUDY 5: EFFECT OF EXAMPLE SOURCE AND
CUSTOMIZATION FOCUS ON CHOICE SIMILARITY



predicted, when customization focused on functionally related aspects, this was not the case; in fact, the effect even reversed. While a full reversal was not predicted, individuals who inferred that the social other was motivated to succeed (rather than express uniqueness) may have perceived a close (vs. distant) other's recommendations as more credible for succeeding in the game themselves. Together, studies 4 and 5 help establish the role of inferring a social other's motivations in our theoretical framework. In line with our proposed psychological mechanism, we show that the inferences individuals make about a social other's motivations can influence individuals' own motivations for customization. Studies 4 and 5 show that when such inferences do not involve a social other motivated to express uniqueness, individuals' own motivation to express uniqueness appears to be dampened and choice similarity with the example increases.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Prior to customizing, individuals often encounter examples of products customized by others. When encountering a custom-made example, individuals not only observe the design of the customized product but also often know the identity of the example source. Our work examines custom-made examples created by identified social others. We identify social distance to the example source as a theoretically important but previously unexplored element of the customization process that can alter motivations and customization choices.

We find that when individuals encounter a custom-made example, they infer that the social other who customized the product was motivated to express uniqueness, regardless of social distance. Individuals then behave in kind by also expressing uniqueness through their customization choices, particularly when the inference was made about a close other, relative to a distant other. Revisiting our opening example, our findings would predict that encountering your close friend (vs. a more distant acquaintance) sporting customized sneakers would heighten your own motivation to express uniqueness and ultimately would lead you to customize your own sneakers to be less similar to your friend's sneakers. In addition to choosing less similarly to the example created by a close other, our findings show that this heightened motivation to express uniqueness leads

consumers to choose fewer best-selling options, increases willingness to pay for unique options, and may even lead consumers to sacrifice their own preferences.

We further highlight important boundary conditions for when individuals infer a social other had motives other than that of expressing uniqueness. For example, if your friend customized functionally related aspects of their shoes (e.g., the shoe insoles), you would not be motivated to express uniqueness to the same extent and would not necessarily customize your own sneakers to be less similar to your friend's. These boundary conditions help demonstrate the general underlying process, which involves inferring a social other's motivation and subsequently enacting that same motivation. We also provide additional support for our theoretical framework by ruling out a salient alternative explanation, namely that individuals choose less similarly to avoid negative reactions from the social other. Overall, our findings shed light on the important role custom-made examples created by an identified social other play in the customization process.

## Theoretical Contributions

Our work makes a number of theoretical contributions to the literature on social influence, customization, and optimal distinctiveness. Importantly, our research adds to the understanding of how social others of varying social distance impact customization choices. A large body of work has contrasted the influence of in-groups and out-groups on individuals. By focusing solely on in-group members and contrasting the influence of close versus distant others within an in-group, we add to the understanding of how different kinds of associative others can influence consumer decisions. We do so in the context of customization, which previously has focused on the role social others play *after* an individual has already customized (Franke et al. 2008; Hildebrand et al. 2013; Schlager et al. 2018) or examined the effect of examples from anonymous strangers (Franke et al. 2008). Social distance is an important yet understudied factor in how people construe situations in general, and our research within the customization context contributes a nuanced understanding of how social distance shapes consumer choice.

Our research further contributes to the work on optimal distinctiveness, which has shown that individuals are internally motivated to express uniqueness because it helps them dissociate from social others (Brewer 1991). We propose and demonstrate that this need can also be *externally* triggered by inferences people make when encountering a custom-made example.

We contribute to the customization literature by documenting the unique influence of a custom-made example, where an identified social other customized the product for their own use. Prior work has mainly focused on ready-made products created for mass appeal (Moreau and Herd 2010; White and Argo 2011). Understanding how consumers react to custom-made examples is an important addition to the literature, as consumers often encounter or seek out such examples prior to customizing.

Further, our work advances research on customization by examining how examples influence individuals' motives and customization choices. In their review of the customization literature, Townsend et. al (2015) indicate that prior work in this area has been primarily managerial in nature, while consumers' psychological processes remain largely unknown. Moreover, prior work on customization has mostly studied consumers' valuations of the final product. We contribute to the literature by documenting when and why different motivations arise and ultimately how these motivations affect customization choices as well as associated consequences (e.g., willingness to pay).

## Marketing Implications

In addition to these theoretical contributions, findings from this research also provide important marketing implications. Our research illuminates the significant influence examples have in shaping consumers' choices. We investigate several characteristics of examples, including the social distance of those who created the example (close vs. distant), the type of product shown in the example (custom-made vs. ready-made), and the focus of the customization (e.g., identity vs. functionally related).

Marketers often have control over characteristics of an example, and firms appear to hold differing views on which components to highlight or use. For instance, in terms of product type, some retailers choose to display ready-made examples (e.g., Ray-Ban.com), while other retailers display custom-made examples (e.g., Vans.com). In terms of customization focus, a product can have both functionally and identity-related aspects and marketers can choose to emphasize one aspect over the other (Chernev et al. 2011). With the prevalence of peer-to-peer marketing, largely enabled by marketers' use of increasingly sophisticated technology, marketers must decide whether to present examples created by close or more distant social others. Our research suggests that marketers' decisions can affect drivers of customization and customization choices.

Which components should marketers use? As our studies demonstrate, examples that feature custom-made, identity-related products created by a close other can motivate individuals to express uniqueness. In some cases, heightening motivations to express uniqueness may be beneficial to marketers (de Bellis et al. 2016). For example, marketers may want to promote the consumption of rare options, such as novel features, flavors of the month, or limited-edition designs. Moreover, as study 3 suggests, marketers may be able to charge a premium to those seeking to make their

products unique. In other cases, however, making a product unique can be detrimental to both marketers and consumers. For example, a luxury handbag may be less effective in signaling status when altered by a consumer (Fuchs et al. 2013). Moreover, as study 4 suggests, expressing uniqueness may come at the cost of sacrificing one's own preferences. In such detrimental cases, marketers may want to feature examples that do not heighten motivations to express uniqueness.

Beyond the examples marketers choose to display to future consumers, our work demonstrates that the ways in which options are presented can also affect customization choices. As study 1c suggests, marketers could strategically shape consumers' customization choices by identifying those options that have been frequently selected by others (i.e., best-sellers) in order to increase sales of less frequently chosen options.

## Future Research

Our research suggests several avenues for future exploration. First, the current work is particularly relevant when marketers can display examples of products other consumers have purchased or created. In reality, marketers need to entice individuals to share their choices as examples. For instance, many clothing retailers try to encourage individuals to submit photos of themselves wearing the retailers' pieces. This raises the question of when individuals are likely to share and talk about their customized products with others in the first place. Because interesting and novel products are often more likely to lead to word of mouth initially (Berger and Schwartz 2011), we may expect that individuals are more prone to share their unique custommade products with others. However, word of mouth can also decrease perceived uniqueness of possessions (Cheema and Kaikati 2010), and consumers dislike being mimicked (White and Argo 2011). Thus, individuals may be less willing to share their customized products with others. Future research should examine this tension to better understand the conditions under which individuals will share customized products they created with both marketers and other consumers.

Also, while our studies provided participants with a large number of choice options, many customization services offer even larger option sets. Future research could examine how enlarging the number of available options affects customization choices. One negative side effect of offering a large number of choices may be increased difficulty for consumers and increased expense for marketers. Similar to what the literature on choice overload has shown for ready-made products (Chernev, Böckenholt, and Goodman 2015), large option sets may reduce the likelihood to customize in the first place, but marketers may mitigate this by providing a custom-made example. Our research purposefully did not examine whether or not

individuals decide to customize in the first place, which, as Townsend et al. (2015) noted, would also be an important decision to investigate in future studies.

In addition, varying the size of the choice set may influence customization satisfaction, similar to how the size of the assortment is an important driver of store expectations and store choice (Diehl and Poynor 2010). In study 1b, we find that individuals liked their product less after encountering a custom-made example created by a close (vs. distant) other, but in study 1c, we find that individuals were generally satisfied with their customized product regardless of example source (for these results, see the web appendix). One critical difference between these two studies was that study 1b offered far more dimensions and options to customize. Because our intended contribution lies in understanding customization choices, not valuations, we did not systematically manipulate the number of customization choices available to further examine this factor. However, given the discrepancy in the findings for these two valuation measures (liking and satisfaction), future research could examine if changing the number of options available affects not just customization choices but also valuations.

Our focus has been on customizing a product for individual consumption, but customized products may also be intended for consumption among multiple people (Kaiser et al. 2017). From custom-made team uniforms to custommade wedding rings, customization often occurs beyond the individual level. It would be interesting and important to explore in what ways customized products made to reflect a group identity differ from those made to reflect a personal identity. Future research may also examine whether aligning with a social other on the underlying motivation can actually foster stronger social bonds and feelings of social connection (Cavanaugh, Bettman, and Luce 2015).

With customization gaining importance in an increasing number of purchase decisions, these and many other interesting questions merit future research. We believe our research provides an important step in better understanding the psychological drivers of customization decisions.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author supervised the collection of data for studies 1a and 1b by research assistants at the University of Southern California Behavioral Lab. Data for studies 1c, 2a, 2b, 3, and 4 was collected on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Data for study 5 was collected on Prolific. The data collection periods are as follows: study 1a in fall 2016; study 4 in fall 2017; studies 1b, 2a, 2b, and 3 in spring 2018; and studies 1c and 5 in summer 2018. The first author conducted primary analyses, and all authors reviewed and discussed the results.

# REFERENCES

Aarts, Henk, Peter M. Gollwitzer, and Ran R. Hassin (2004), "Goal Contagion: Perceiving Is for Pursuing," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87 (1), 23–37.

Ariely, Dan and Jonathan Levav (2000), "Sequential Choice in Group Settings: Taking the Road Less Traveled and Less Enjoyed," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (3), 279–90.

Atakan, S. Sinem, Richard P. Bagozzi, and Carolyn Yoon (2014), "Consumer Participation in the Design and Realization Stages of Production: How Self-Production Shapes Consumer Evaluations and Relationships to Products," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 31 (4), 395–408.

Berger, Jonah and Chip Heath (2007), "Where Consumers Diverge from Others: Identity Signaling and Product Domains," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34 (2), 121–34.

Berger, Jonah and Eric M. Schwartz (2011), "What Drives Immediate and Ongoing Word of Mouth?" *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48 (5), 869–80.

Brewer, Marilynn B. (1991), "The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17 (5), 475–82.

Brown, Jacqueline Johnson and Peter H. Reingen (1987), "Social Ties and Word-of-Mouth Referral Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14 (3), 350–62.

Buechel, Eva C. and Chris Janiszewski (2014), "A Lot of Work or a Work of Art: How the Structure of a Customized Assembly Task Determines the Utility Derived from Assembly Effort," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40 (5), 960–72.

Burt, Ronald S. (2004), "Structural Holes and Good Ideas," *American Journal of Sociology*, 110 (2), 349–99.

Cavanaugh, Lisa A., Francesca Gino, and Gavan J. Fitzsimons (2015), "When Doing Good Is Bad in Gift Giving: Mis-Predicting Appreciation of Socially Responsible Gifts," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 131 (November), 178–89.

Cavanaugh, Lisa A., James R. Bettman, and Mary Frances Luce (2015), "Feeling Love and Doing More for Distant Others: Specific Positive Emotions Differentially Affect Prosocial Consumption," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 52 (5), 657–73.

Chan, Cindy, Jonah Berger, and Leaf Van Boven (2012), "Identifiable but Not Identical: Combining Social Identity and Uniqueness Motives in Choice," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39 (3), 561–73.

Charness, Gary, Uri Gneezy, and Brianna Halladay (2016), "Experimental Methods: Pay One or Pay All," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 131 (Part A), 141–50.

Cheema, Amar and Andrew M. Kaikati (2010), "The Effect of Need for Uniqueness on Word of Mouth," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 47 (3), 553–63.

Chernev, Alexander, Ulf Böckenholt, and Joseph Goodman (2015), "Choice Overload: A Conceptual Review and Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25 (2), 333–58.

Chernev, Alexander, Ryan Hamilton, and David Gal (2011), "Competing for Consumer Identity: Limits to Self-Expression and the Perils of Lifestyle Branding," *Journal of Marketing*, 75 (3), 66–82.

Constine, Josh (2013), "You're Not Just The Product, You're The Ads (And Your Friends Should Thank You)," *TechCrunch*, October 11, https://techcrunch.com/2013/10/11/you-make-ads-better/.

Dahl, Darren W., Rajesh V. Manchanda, and Jennifer J. Argo (2001), "Embarrassment in Consumer Purchase: The Roles of Social Presence and Purchase Familiarity," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (3), 473–81.

de Bellis, Emanuel, David E. Sprott, Andreas Herrmann, Hans-Werner Bierhoff, and Elke Rohmann (2016), "The Influence of Trait and State Narcissism on the Uniqueness of Mass-Customized Products," *Journal of Retailing*, 92 (2), 162–72.

Dellaert, Benedict G. C. and Stefan Stremersch (2005), "Marketing Mass-Customized Products: Striking a Balance between Utility and Complexity," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 42 (2), 219–27.

Diehl, Kristin and Cait Poynor (2010), "Great Expectations?! Assortment Size, Expectations, and Satisfaction," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 47 (2), 312–22.

Dik, Giel and Henk Aarts (2008), "I Want to Know What You Want: How Effort Perception Facilitates the Motivation to Infer Another's Goal," *Social Cognition*, 26 (6), 737–54.

Franke, Nikolaus, Peter Keinz, and Martin Schreier (2008), "Complementing Mass Customization Toolkits with User Communities: How Peer Input Improves Customer Self-Design," *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 25 (6), 546–59.

Franke, Nikolaus, Peter Keinz, and Christoph J. Steger (2009), "Testing the Value of Customization: When Do Customers Really Prefer Products Tailored to Their Preferences?" *Journal of Marketing*, 73 (5), 103–21.

Franke, Nikolaus and Martin Schreier (2008), "Product Uniqueness as a Driver of Customer Utility in Mass Customization," *Marketing Letters*, 19 (2), 93–107.

—— (2010), "Why Customers Value Self?Designed Products: The Importance of Process Effort and Enjoyment," *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 27 (7), 1020–31.

Franke, Nikolaus, Martin Schreier, and Ulrike Kaiser (2010), "The 'I Designed It Myself' Effect in Mass Customization," *Management Science*, 56 (1), 125–40.

Friedman, Ron, Edward L. Deci, Andrew J. Elliot, Arlen C. Moller, and Henk Aarts (2010), "Motivational Synchronicity: Priming Motivational Orientations with Observations of Others' Behaviors," *Motivation and Emotion*, 34 (1), 34–8.

Frith, Chris D. and Uta Frith (2006), "How We Predict What Other People Are Going to Do," *Brain Research*, 1079 (1), 36–46.

Fuchs, Christoph, Emanuela Prandelli, Martin Schreier, and Darren W. Dahl (2013), "All That Is Users Might Not Be Gold: How Labeling Products as User Designed Backfires in the Context of Luxury Fashion Brands," *Journal of Marketing*, 77 (5), 75–91.

Goodman, Joseph K., Susan M. Broniarczyk, Jill G. Griffin, and Leigh McAlister (2013), "Help or Hinder? When Recommendation Signage Expands Consideration Sets and Heightens Decision Difficulty," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 23 (2), 165–74.

Granovetter, Mark S. (1973), "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (6), 1360–13.

Hassin, Ran R., Henk Aarts, and Melissa J. Ferguson (2005), "Automatic Goal Inferences," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 41 (2), 129–40.

Hayes, Andrew F. (2013), *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-based Approach*, New York: Guilford.

Hendrick, Susan S. and Clyde Hendrick (2006), "Measuring Respect in Close Relationships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23 (6), 881–99.

Hildebrand, Christian, Gerald Häubl, and Andreas Herrmann (2014), "Product Customization via Starting Solutions," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 51 (6), 707–25.

Hildebrand, Christian, Gerald Häubl, Andreas Herrmann, and Jan R. Landwehr (2013), "When Social Media Can Be Bad for You: Community Feedback Stifles Consumer Creativity and Reduces Satisfaction with Self-Designed Products," *Information Systems Research*, 24 (1), 14–29.

Huffman, Cynthia and Barbara E. Kahn (1998), "Variety for Sale: Mass Customization or Mass Confusion?" *Journal of Retailing*, 74 (4), 491–513.

Jespersen, Sebastian (2016), "Three Tips for Successful Influencer Marketing: How Brands Can Gain the Trust of Consumers Through Social Influencers," AdAge, June 17, https://adage.com/article/digitalnext/tips-successful-influencer-marketing/304468.

Kaiser, Ulrike, Martin Schreier, and Chris Janiszewski (2017), "The Self-Expressive Customization of a Product Can Improve Performance," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 54 (5), 816–31.

Loersch, Chris, Henk Aarts, B. Keith Payne, and Valerie E. Jefferis (2008), "The Influence of Social Groups on Goal Contagion," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44 (6), 1555–8.

López, Manuela and María Sicilia (2013), "How WOM Marketing Contributes to New Product Adoption: Testing Competitive Communication Strategies," *European Journal of Marketing*, 47 (7), 1089–114.

Lynch, John G. Jr., Joseph W. Alba, Aradhna Krishna, Vicki G. Morwitz, and Zeynep Gürhan-Canli (2012), "Knowledge Creation in Consumer Research: Multiple Routes, Multiple Criteria," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22 (4), 374–485.

Lynn, Michael and Judy Harris (1997), "The Desire for Unique Consumer Products: A New Individual Difference Scale," *Psychology and Marketing*, 14 (6), 601–16.

Lynn, Michael and Charles R. Snyder (2002), "Uniqueness Seeking," in *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, ed. Charles R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez, New York: Oxford University Press, 395–410.

McCullough, Michael E., Everett L. Worthington Jr., and Kenneth C. Rachal (1997), "Interpersonal Forgiving in Close Relationships," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73 (2), 321–36.

Moreau, C. Page and Kelly B. Herd (2010), "To Each His Own? How Comparisons with Others Influence Consumers' Evaluations of Their Self-Designed Products," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36 (5), 806–19.

Mugge, Ruth, Jan P. L. Schoormans, and Hendrik N. J. Schifferstein (2008), "Product Attachment: Design Strategies to Stimulate the Emotional Bonding with Products," in *Product Experience*, ed. Hendrik N. J. Schifferstein and Paul Hekkert, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 425–40.

Nook, Erik C., Desmond C. Ong, Sylvia A. Morelli, Jason P. Mitchell, and Jamil Zaki (2016), "Prosocial Conformity: Prosocial Norms Generalize across Behavior and Empathy," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42 (8), 1045–62.

Pardes, Arielle (2019), "The Perfect Pair Of Pants Is Just a 3D Body Scan Away," *Wired*, February 28, https://www.wired.com/story/bespoke-clothing-3d-body-scans.

Puligadda, Sanjay, Rajdeep Grewal, Arvind Rangaswamy, and Frank R. Kardes (2010), "The Role of Idiosyncratic Attribute Evaluation in Mass Customization," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 20 (3), 369–80.

Schlager, Tobias, Christian Hildebrand, Gerald Häubl, Nikolaus Franke, and Andreas Herrmann (2018), "Social Product-Customization Systems: Peer Input, Conformity, and Consumers' Evaluation of Customized Products," *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 35 (1), 319–49.

Spaulding, Elizabeth and Christopher Perry (2013), "Making It Personal: Rules for Success in Product Customization," Bain & Company, September 16, http://www.bain.com/publications/articles/making-it-personal-rules-for-success-in-product-customization.aspx.

Tanner, Robin J., Rosellina Ferraro, Tanya L. Chartrand, James R. Bettman, and Rick Van Baaren (2007), "Of Chameleons and Consumption: The Impact of Mimicry on Choice and Preferences," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34 (6), 754–66.

Tian, Kelly Tepper, William O. Bearden, and Gary L. Hunter (2001), "Consumers' Need for Uniqueness: Scale Development and Validation," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (1), 50–66.

Townsend, Claudia, Ulrike Kaiser, and Martin Schreier (2015), "User Design through Self-Customization," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Consumer Psychology*, ed. Michael I. Norton, Derek D. Rucker, and Cait Lamberton, New York: Cambridge University Press, 233–54.

Tu, Yanping, Alex Shaw, and Ayelet Fishbach (2015), "The Friendly Taking Effect: How Interpersonal Closeness Leads to Seemingly Selfish Yet Jointly Maximizing Choice," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42 (5), 669–87.

Valenzuela, Ana, Ravi Dhar, and Florian Zettelmeyer (2009), "Contingent Response to Self-Customization Procedures: Implications for Decision Satisfaction and Choice," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 46 (6), 754–63.

Valsesia, Francesca and Kristin Diehl (2018), "See What I Did or See What I Have: Impression Management Using Experiences versus Material Good," working paper, University of Southern California, CA 90089.

Ward, Morgan K. and Susan M. Broniarczyk (2011), "It's Not Me, It's You: How Gift Giving Creates Giver Identity Threat as a Function of Social Closeness," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38 (1), 164–81.

Wessler, Janet and Jochim Hansen (2016), "The Effect of Psychological Distance on Automatic Goal Contagion," *Comprehensive Results in Social Psychology*, 1 (1?3), 51–85.

White, Katherine and Jennifer J. Argo (2011), "When Imitation Doesn't Flatter: The Role of Consumer Distinctiveness in Responses to Mimicry," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38 (4), 667–80.

Witte, Rae (2018), "Three Brands Taking Customization Beyond Personalization to Treat Yourself With," *Forbes*, August 31, https://www.forbes.com/sites/raewitte/2018/08/31/three-brands-taking-customization-beyond-personalization-to-treat-yourself-with/#293046176149.