

REVIEW



The feeling of preference: Metacognitive experiences promoting preference expression

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Abstract

Building on a review of pertinent literature, we draw attention to *preference-expressive choice* – decisions that appear to reveal a well-established individual preference – and propose that such choices can be shaped by a distinct epistemic metacognitive state: the *feeling of preference* (FOP). FOP is the perception that one has, or should be able to form, a preference in a given domain, even before encountering specific options and without retrievable prior preferences. Building on research in metacognition, preference fluency, and preference expression, we theorize likely antecedents and consequences of FOP and test its viability in the context of the compromise effect, where having a preference often entails “picking a side” rather than choosing the middle option. Across multiple studies, FOP – situationally triggered by preference-related cues – reduced compromising and increased preference-expressive choice, independent of preference retrieval, certainty, or social desirability. Identifying FOP as a distinct driver of choice integrates and extends existing theory on metacognition and decision-making, and highlights it as a promising, underexplored piece of the puzzle in understanding when, why, and how people feel ready to make bold and self-expressive choices.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, research in consumer psychology has increasingly recognized the role of metacognition in (non-habitual) decision-making. Metacognitive influences have been implicated in preference formation and consumer choice, using constructs such as processing fluency (Schwarz, 2004), preference fluency (Novemsky et al., 2007), and confidence in judgment (Tormala & Petty, 2004). These studies suggest that subjective cognitive experiences that accompany the process of making a decision can shape the decision itself, sometimes as much as the objective values of options' attributes.

This paper proposes that certain metacognitive experiences foster what we term preference-expressive choice: choices that, regardless of their true basis, feel as if they stem from a genuine, a priori personal preference, rather than from uncertainty, compromise, or the absence of an opinion. We use *preference expression* to describe

“bold” choice behaviors that signal confidence, commitment, or identity through the act of choosing, in contrast to their “timid” alternatives (Maimaran & Simonson, 2007). This includes selecting extreme over compromise options (Dhar & Simonson, 2003; Simonson, 1989), committing to a choice rather than deferring it to seek more information (Dhar, 1997), and choosing unique, individuating options over more normative or majority-endorsed ones (Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). Though these behaviors are distinct, we argue that they share a common underlying feature: they all carry the subjective impression of preference articulation.

We propose that a specific subset of metacognitive experiences, such as the feeling of knowing (Koriat, 1993), preference fluency (Novemsky et al., 2007), and a new umbrella construct we introduce, *the feeling of preference*, can increase the likelihood of these preference-expressive behaviors. Importantly, these experiences do not merely reflect the accessibility or strength of underlying preferences (e.g., habitual preferences that can be easily retrieved). Instead,

they function as subjective metacognitive signals that one has a preference or should be able to form one in the current context, even prior to evaluating specific options. When such a feeling is present, individuals are more likely to approach choice as a preference-expressive act; when absent, they are more likely to hedge, defer, or select middle-of-the-road options.

We propose that such feelings of preference can impact a broad array of specific choice behaviors, as illustrated above. However, to empirically demonstrate this framework, we focus on the compromise effect as a conceptual test case. The compromise effect—people's tendency to prefer a middle option in a three-alternative set (Simonson, 1989)—has been interpreted as a sign of preference uncertainty and justification concerns, as opposed to the expression of a strong preference (Dhar & Simonson, 2003; Song & Simonson, 2008). We suggest that a metacognitive feeling of preference—i.e., subjective perceptions of preference-expression readiness—reduces compromise/intermediate choices and increases the selection of “extreme” options that prioritize one attribute over others. In this way, compromise behavior reflects not just tradeoff reasoning or normative preference but the absence of a metacognitive experience that would beget stronger, more individuating action.

To recap, we build a theoretical account of metacognitive influence on preference expression, introduce the notion of a metacognitive *feeling of preference*, and link it to prior work on related constructs. We then present a series of studies that demonstrate the impact of the feeling of preference as it relates to choices of middle options.

2 | PREFERENCE-EXPRESSIVE CHOICE

Many choice behaviors that have traditionally been studied in isolation may share common psychological underpinnings. Across domains, decisions such as choosing rather than deferring, selecting extreme rather than compromise options, choosing a risky over a safe option, opting for unique instead of conventional alternatives, and favoring novel over familiar ones can be viewed as falling along a *preference-expression continuum*. At one end are relatively “bold” choices that seem to reflect a firm, idiosyncratic preference — potentially signaling confidence, distinctiveness, or commitment. At the other end are seemingly “timid” alternatives, which tend to accommodate social norms, situational pressures, or perceived ambiguity (Berger & Heath, 2007; see Maimaran & Simonson, 2007 for more on the bold-timid distinction in choice).

What unites these “bold” decisions is not their content, but how they may be subjectively interpreted. They are the kinds of choices that feel like expressions of an internal preference — actions that assert, “I know what I want.” In contrast, middle-of-the-road, deferring, or socially safe choices often feel more like decisions made in the absence of a strong internal signal or as a way to defer commitment or hedge against potential criticism (Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). While well-established, inherent, and even heritable preferences (Simonson, 2008; Simonson & Sela, 2011) may underlie either type of choice, our conjecture is that preference-expressive behaviors are

more likely to be associated with or at least signal to oneself and/or others the presence of a clear, accessible preference, while non-expressive (non-habitual) choices are more likely to indicate uncertainty, conformity, or reliance on external justifications.

For example, selecting an extreme option that prioritizes one attribute over others often signals confidence and conviction, while selecting the compromise may signal caution or an attempt to avoid regret, consistent with self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). Choosing a hedonic, harder-to-justify option can express personal desire or identity, whereas selecting a practical or utilitarian alternative may indicate concern about how the choice will be perceived. Trying something new may reflect curiosity or individuality, whereas sticking with what is known may signal a preference for safety or social proof. Across these domains, preference-expressive choices are not just about what is chosen, but also about the felt source or driver of the choice—they are imbued with the sense that the decision is grounded in “what I want,” rather than “what makes sense” or “what is expected.”

Prior research has mostly examined what pushes people toward or away from such preference-expressive behavior by focusing on contextual and situational factors. For example, when people can easily generate justifications for a particular option, they are more likely to choose it, even if it is riskier, more extreme, or more idiosyncratic (Sela & Berger, 2012b; Sela et al., 2009; Shafir et al., 1993; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). Other work has examined the influence of transient mindsets and motivational states (e.g., regulatory orientation, self-focused attention, or decision frames: Higgins, 1998; Chernev, 2004; Maimaran & Simonson, 2011; Song & Sela, 2023), or individual differences in traits like self-monitoring or need for uniqueness (Baumeister, 1982; Goukens et al., 2009; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Of particular note, priming people with the concept of boldness has been shown to increase their likelihood of making preference-expressive choices—such as choosing extreme, risky, or hedonic options—even when the underlying preferences are the same (Maimaran & Simonson, 2007).

This past work has emphasized how external (e.g., decision frames) and internal (e.g., motivational, attentional) cues shape whether people choose in ways that appear consistent with personal preferences. We extend this literature by turning the spotlight toward metacognitive experiences—subjective perceptions regarding one's own preference readiness—as internal signals that shape whether people feel able to express a preference through choice. In the next section, we examine how metacognitive experiences such as fluency, confidence, and the feeling of knowing may play this role.

3 | METACOGNITION AND PREFERENCE-EXPRESSIVE CHOICE

The idea that people construct preferences on the fly, rather than retrieve them from stable memory, is now well-established in behavioral decision research (though see Simonson, 2008 for a discussion of its boundaries). While foundational work in this literature emphasized how people evaluate and integrate the attributes of choice options (see Bettman et al., 1998; Lichtenstein & Slovic, 2006, for reviews), more

recent research has shifted attention to how individuals experience and interpret the construction process itself—how metacognitive experiences shape what they choose (e.g., Novemsky et al., 2007; Schrift et al., 2011; Sela & Berger, 2012a; see Schwarz, 2004 for a review).

We propose that certain metacognitive experiences can influence whether people make a preference-expressive choice versus avoid commitment, compromise, defer, or fall back on convention. We next discuss two constructs in the existing literature — preference fluency and the feeling of knowing—as illustrations of metacognitive experiences that can promote preference-expressive choice. We briefly review key findings pertaining to these respective phenomena and then introduce a broader construct we call the Feeling of Preference (FOP), which synthesizes elements of these phenomena while offering a unifying perspective.

3.1 | Preference Fluency

Preference fluency refers to the subjective cognitive experience that accompanies the evaluation of options and the construction of preferences (Novemsky et al., 2007). Importantly, it captures incidental feelings of ease or difficulty during decision-making—arising not because people truly know or do not know what they want, but because of extraneous factors such as a noisy decision environment, cognitive or perceptual load, or even the mere expectation that the choice will be difficult. When the process of choosing feels fluent—smooth, efficient, and unproblematic—people are more likely to interpret that ease as a signal that a strong, coherent preference exists. Conversely, when choice is accompanied by incidental disfluency, they are more likely to infer that they lack a clear preference.

These interpretations carry downstream behavioral consequences. Preference fluency increases commitment, reduces deferral, and generally promotes bolder choices—such as selecting options with more extreme attribute values. In contrast, preference disfluency often leads to more hedged or compensatory strategies such as compromise choices or to postponing the decision altogether (Sela & Berger, 2012a). For example, imagining how difficult it would be to generate multiple arguments in favor of a particular option can produce disfluency, which is then misattributed to internal uncertainty about one's preferences (Novemsky et al., 2007). Thus, rather than influencing the actual accessibility of preferences, preference fluency functions as a metacognitive signal about whether a preference exists and is ready to be expressed.

3.2 | The Feeling of Knowing

The feeling of knowing (FOK) refers to the subjective experience of believing that one has access to a specific piece of information, even when it cannot be immediately retrieved (Koriat, 1993). Often associated with the “tip of the tongue” phenomenon (Koriat & Lieblch, 1974), FOK is an epistemic phenomenon, a metacognitive judgment about the state of one's memory and knowledge. While it

sometimes precedes successful recall, it can also arise independently — as a standalone perception of mental availability.

Importantly, FOK can shape downstream behavior even when the target knowledge remains out of reach. When people believe they know—or should know—the answer to a question, they are more likely to persist in trying to retrieve it, to invest effort, and to resist giving up prematurely (Barnes et al., 1999). In such moments, the signal is not about *what is known* but about what feels like it *ought to be knowable*. This perception has been shown to influence strategy selection, search persistence, and choice deferral (Koriat, 2000; Spehn & Reder, 2000). Notably, this same dynamic extends beyond knowledge recall to preference formation. When people believe they should know what they want—say, which product fits their taste, or which attribute matters most—they are more likely to continue searching and to resist settling for easy or conventional solutions (Sela & Berger, 2012a).

We propose that FOK provides a compelling analogy for preference construction. Just as individuals can feel they should know the answer to a factual question, they may also feel they should have a preference—even when that preference is not yet accessible. This metacognitive sense, akin to a FOK for choice, can prompt individuals to act more decisively and expressively, nudging them toward bolder, more individuating choices. The felt sense that “I should know what I want” may promote preference-expressive choice over compromise or deferral. And like traditional FOK, it can be triggered by incidental cues such as fluency, familiarity, or recollections of prior decisiveness.

3.3 | The Feeling of Preference

We propose the Feeling of Preference (FOP) as a novel metacognitive construct: the subjective sense that one has—or ought to have—a preference in a given situation, even before evaluating specific options or accessing stored attitudes. A FOP can arise from preference fluency or a feeling of knowing, as discussed above, or be activated through other triggers addressed below. It reflects a perception of preference-readiness and shapes whether individuals approach decisions as opportunities to express internal priorities versus hedge, defer, or conform.

Like preference fluency and the feeling of knowing, FOP is not tied to the accessibility or strength of any particular judgment. Rather, it is an epistemic metacognitive judgment: a sense that a preference exists—or should exist—and is available for expression. As such, FOP can emerge in the absence of a formed attitude, even before a choice set is encountered.

We suggest that FOP often functions as a readiness signal. Just as FOK can prompt knowledge-expressive behaviors even when the relevant information is inaccessible, FOP can prompt preference-expressive behaviors even in the absence of accessible preferences—leading individuals to choose assertively, select extreme options, or resist compromise. The individual acts as if a strong preference exists, even when the underlying attitude may be weak or inchoate.

FOP can be triggered by a wide range of antecedents. Some are metacognitive, such as decision fluency or a FOK-like impression that

a preference is accessible. Others are motivational or identity-based—for instance, when people are primed with uniqueness or authenticity motives, or when they are primed to express a preference. We argue that such motivations may promote preference-expressive behavior (e.g., Goukens et al., 2009; Maimaran & Simonson, 2011; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000) not only through self-presentational or identity-based mechanisms, but also by activating an epistemic perception that one likely has or can form a genuine preference. Perceptions of subjective expertise, which are schematically associated with increased accessibility of preferences (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Hadar et al., 2013), may also bring to mind the belief that one holds an a priori preference in the relevant domain.

A third class of antecedents is episodic and memory-based. Individuals may recall a prior decision in which they felt decisive, and that feeling—rather than any specific content—can transfer to the present task. For example, the cognitive experience of confidently choosing hiking boots may carry over to a subsequent, unrelated decision like selecting a hiking jacket, even if the relevant attributes differ. Consistent with research on episodic accessibility and metacognitive transfer (Labroo et al., 2008; Schwarz, 1998; Winkelman & Cacioppo, 2001), we propose that this residual sense of decisiveness can elevate FOP, increasing the likelihood of preference-expressive choice across domains.

In this way, FOP is both domain-general and transferable. It is not a feature of the options themselves, but of how the individual construes their ability to choose. Cultural and social schemas (e.g., masculinity norms that valorize decisiveness; Nikolova & Lambertson, 2016), social comparison cues (Hadar et al., 2013), and abstract beliefs about agency may all signal that one ought to have an opinion—reinforcing FOP and increasing the likelihood of preference-expressive strategies.

3.4 | FOP versus Other Metacognitive Constructs

While FOP draws conceptually from constructs such as fluency and FOK, it extends beyond them in scope and function. It is not merely an inference about the ease of a response or memory strength, but a more general epistemic metacognitive experience: the felt sense that a genuine, personal preference is “in there” and ready to be expressed. This state shapes downstream choice behavior not by changing the content of preferences, but by influencing whether people act as if a preference is already in place. Some of the conceptual distinctions between FOP and other related metacognitive phenomena can be defined as follows:

3.4.1 | Fluency

As discussed, preference fluency refers to cognitive ease experienced during choice (Novemsky et al., 2007). Although fluency may trigger FOP, FOP is not a real-time experience of ease but an a priori belief in the existence of a preference or the ability to form or articulate one. Our findings later (e.g., Studies 1B and 1C below) show effects that cannot be explained by fluency alone.

3.4.2 | Feeling of knowing

The feeling of knowing (Koriat, 1993) is a metacognitive state tied to retrieval: when related information is accessible, people infer they probably know the answer. FOP differs in that preferences have no “correct” answer, and FOP can arise even before options are considered (the conceptual equivalent of posing questions in a FOK context). Unlike the parasitic nature of the feeling of knowing, FOP is not contingent on experiences of information accessibility or on attempting to retrieve a preference and can manifest even when it is clear that no preferences or attitudes exist in memory.

3.4.3 | Subjective knowledge

As previously noted, subjective knowledge can serve as an antecedent of FOP through the schematic association between expertise and the ability to articulate a clear preference. Yet it is conceptually distinct from FOP itself. Subjective knowledge or expertise reflects people's beliefs about how much they know in a domain (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Hadar et al., 2013). FOP, by contrast, concerns the ability to decide or know what one wants, independent of familiarity with attributes or options. Empirically, our experiments document effects that subjective knowledge alone cannot explain (Studies 1A–2), even as we use subjective knowledge in other contexts as a trigger of FOP (Studies 3A–3C).

3.4.4 | Attitude certainty

Attitude certainty is a secondary cognition — a tag of confidence attached to an existing attitude (Petrocelli et al., 2007). FOP instead concerns the expectation that a preference can emerge, even in the absence of any underlying attitude. Certainty typically follows cognitive activity that validates or clarifies an attitude (e.g., defending it against attack, finding social consensus; Tormala & Petty, 2004; Visser & Mirabile, 2004). FOP, in contrast, may arise even for unfamiliar targets and prior to encountering options. Consistent with this distinction, we predict and find that FOP does not necessarily increase certainty or confidence in subsequent choices.

In sum, FOP is conceptually and empirically distinct from subjective knowledge, the feeling of knowing, fluency, and attitude certainty. While different, these states may, under some conditions, contribute to the activation of FOP.

4 | COMPROMISING VERSUS EXTREMENESS SEEKING AS A TEST CASE

How might a Feeling of Preference (FOP), once activated, shape choice behavior? We propose that FOP increases the likelihood of preference-expressive choice. To evaluate this claim, we focus on a well-established decision paradigm that cleanly distinguishes between preference-expressive and hedging behavior: the compromise effect

(Simonson, 1989). In this paradigm, individuals choose among three options that vary on two tradeoff dimensions, with one option occupying a middle position between the extremes. People tend to gravitate toward the middle, or “compromise” option, more than they would if it were offered alongside just one of the extremes (Simonson & Tversky, 1992). This tendency often reflects tradeoff-based reasoning: weighing both attributes and selecting the most balanced alternative. Of course, some intermediate choices, such as reduced-fat milk, may reflect stable, habitual preferences that are not influenced by FOP or preference uncertainty.

Importantly, choosing the compromise option often signals a lack of strong underlying preferences. The compromise is most likely to be chosen when people are unsure what matters to them (Amir & Levav, 2008; Levav et al., 2010; Simonson, 1989) and competes most directly with the option to defer choice altogether (Dhar & Simonson, 2003). By contrast, selecting an extreme option reflects the prioritization of one attribute over another — a by-definition hallmark of preference-expressive choice (Maimaran & Simonson, 2011).

We hypothesize that activating FOP — whether via priming, fluency, epistemic memory cues, or identity salience — will reduce compromise choices and increase the selection of extreme options. A compromise paradigm, therefore, offers a tightly controlled setting for testing the downstream consequences of FOP on preference-expressive choice.

The next section presents seven illustrative tests of FOP's role in the compromise effect, corresponding to the different classes of antecedents discussed above. The first three studies examine FOP induced by episodic priming. The fourth study tests similar effects using conceptual priming. The final three studies investigate FOP elicited through the activation of an expertise schema.

5 | ILLUSTRATIVE EMPIRICAL TESTS: EPISODIC PRIMING

One implication of the notion of FOP is that it is a state of mind that may be primed, for example, by the memory of being decisive. In particular, calling to mind a prior situation in which a clear preference was expressed may impact another unrelated decision, even if the expression of preferences has no logical basis.

We examined this implication in the empirical tests described next. We induced FOP by asking participants to recall a past experience in which they decided based on a strong inner preference. Consistent with our account of metacognitive transfer as one possible route to FOP, we expected this recollection to momentarily activate a nonspecific feeling of preference.

5.1 | Study 1A: Consequential Preference Expression

5.1.1 | Method

Participants ($N = 87$; mean age = 24; 65% female) were students who completed the study for extra course credit, as part of a session

that included unrelated studies conducted by other researchers. They were randomly assigned to one of two priming conditions (FOP episodic prime vs. control).

Participants were told that the researchers were interested in learning about people's life experiences. In the Feeling of Preference (FOP) prime condition, participants were asked to take a moment to think about a situation in which their decision or behavior was strongly influenced by their personal beliefs, values, or principles, and to briefly describe that situation in writing. Participants in this condition described a broad range of situations, including, for example, “When I bought my car, I didn't agree to pay more than the kbb recommended price no matter what,” “I found a nice mobile phone someone left on the train, but I followed my personal values and gave it back to him,” and “I was offered to cheat on school exams but I refused to take it.” In the control condition, participants were asked to reflect on all the beverages they had consumed in the preceding 24 hours, and to briefly describe them in writing.

After completing the priming task, participants were told that, as an additional token of appreciation for their participation, they would receive a free pen. They were asked to choose one of three pen options that varied on two attributes: ink smoothness and ink capacity (see the appendix). After selecting their preferred option on a computer screen, they were instructed to collect their chosen pen from the experimenter. Our focal dependent variable was the choice of the middle option that had moderate smoothness and capacity values, rather than one of the two extremes. Finally, participants rated their certainty and confidence in their choice ($r = .82$; averaged to an index). They then received their chosen pen and left the lab.

5.1.2 | Results

As predicted, participants were more likely to select the compromise option in the control condition (65.9%) than in the preference prime condition (41.9%; $\chi^2[1] = 5.06, p = .02$). There was no effect of condition on the confidence index ($F[1, 85] = 1.16, p = .29$).

Consistent with our metacognitive transfer proposition, recalling an unrelated decisive episode reduced selection of the compromise option and increased the tendency to “pick a side.” This finding supports the idea that priming FOP fosters behavioral tendencies aligned with preference-expressive choice. Still, one might question whether recalling a decisive episode activated attitudes toward particular attributes or traits that then tilted preferences toward one of the two focal attributes (capacity or smoothness) and away from the middle option. The next two studies address this possibility by examining choice contexts in which participants could not plausibly retrieve attitudes or preferences tied to specific product attributes.

5.2 | Study 1B: Preference Expression in the Absence of Retrievable Preferences

This test employed the same episodic priming design used in Study 1A. Participants ($N = 84$; mean age = 31; 31% female), recruited from



Amazon Mechanical Turk, were randomly assigned to one of two episodic priming conditions used in Study 1A. Then, they chose among hypothetical options with attribute dimensions that held no inherent meaning for them. If evoking FOP reduces compromising in such a novel and unrelated decision context, it would provide strong support for our metacognitive transfer proposition and help rule out retrieval-based accounts.

5.2.1 | Method

After completing the priming task (similar to Study 1A), participants proceeded to an ostensibly unrelated task in which they were asked to choose among hypothetical product options. The task was introduced as follows: “On the next page, you will be asked to make a product choice. The product you will be asked to consider is hypothetical, namely, it does not really exist. However, we ask that you make the best choice you can as if the product is meaningful to you.” On the next page, participants were presented with the following choice problem:

“Skimbles are very useful products. Most skimbles vary on two main attributes: atmority and predorsity. Atmority values typically range from 2 to 18, whereas predorsity ranges from 5 to 33. Imagine you were shopping for skimbles and had to choose among the following options:

	Skimble A	Skimble B	Skimble C
Atmority	16	10	4
Predorsity	8	19	30

Which option would you choose?”

Choice of the middle option served as the main dependent variable. At the end of the study, participants were probed for suspicion and asked whether they believed the first task was related to the second, or if it had influenced their choice. None of the participants indicated any awareness of a connection between the tasks, and none reported that the priming task affected their decision.

5.2.2 | Results

Consistent with the idea that selecting the middle option often reflects the absence of a clear preference for a specific attribute, the vast majority of participants (73.4%) chose Skimble B. However, this tendency varied as a function of FOP condition: participants were less likely to select the middle Skimble after reflecting on an unrelated situation in which their decision had been guided by strong personal preferences (64.1%) compared to those who completed the control task (82.2%; $\chi^2[1] = 3.55, p = .06$).

5.3 | Study 1C: Replication and Process Evidence

Study 1C sought to replicate the findings of Study 1B and provide preliminary evidence regarding the underlying process. Using a similar design, we again manipulated FOP through an episodic priming task and assessed whether it influenced preference-expressive choice.

In addition, we included two process measures: one to directly capture the subjective feeling of preference and another to assess an alternative explanation based on increased choice certainty. Recall that, based on our conceptualization, FOP is distinct from certainty or confidence in a judgment, as these constructs refer to properties of specific attitudes, judgments, or decisions (Tormala & Rucker, 2017). In contrast, FOP can arise in the absence of any formed preferences—it reflects the metacognitive sense that one can or should be able to form a preference. To empirically assess this distinction, we directly measured how certain participants felt about their choices.

5.3.1 | Method

Participants (N = 213; mean age = 34; 49% female), recruited via MTurk, were randomly assigned to one of the same two priming conditions used in Studies 1A and 1B. After completing the priming task, they completed the same skimble choice task from Study 1B.

Following their choice, participants were asked to explain why they selected the option they did. This explanation was entered in a free-response text box. On the next screen, participants saw the text they had written, followed by a list of five statements derived from a pretest. They were asked to select the statement that best matched the reasoning they had just described. Four of the statements reflected an absence of preference for a specific attribute (e.g., “I had no preference and that option seemed reasonable,” “I chose completely randomly,” “That option seemed the most balanced,” and “That option had good values”). One statement reflected a feeling of preference: “I had a vague intuition that the option I chose was somehow better or that one attribute was more important than the other.” Based on their selection, participants were coded as “1” if they chose the feeling-of-preference statement and “0” if they chose one of the others.

Finally, participants rated how certain and how confident they felt about their choice, using 7-point scales adapted from Tormala and Petty (2002). These ratings were used to examine whether the priming manipulation affected general decision certainty, independent of FOP.

5.3.2 | Results

Consistent with Study 1B, most participants in Study 1C (85.0%) selected the compromise option (i.e., skimble B). However, replicating Study 1B, participants were marginally significantly less likely to choose the compromise option after recalling FOP in an unrelated context (80.6%) than after completing the control task (89.5%; $\chi^2[1] = 3.35, p < .067$).

We next examined the process underlying this effect. Analysis revealed that participants in the FOP prime condition were more likely to explain their choice in terms of a vague feeling of preference (44.4%) than those in the control condition (31.4%; $\chi^2[1] = 3.83$, $p = .05$). A bootstrapping mediation analysis with 5,000 samples suggested that the effect of our preference prime on choice was mediated by this self-reported FOP ($ab = -.082$, 90% CI $[-.24, -.003]$).

Condition had no effect on decision certainty and decision confidence (both F 's $< .3$, p 's $> .50$). This finding casts doubt on an alternative explanation based on preference certainty.

5.4 | Studies 1A–1C: Discussion

The first three studies show three important things. First, consistent with our framework, we directly induced a Feeling of Preference (FOP) by asking participants to reflect on a situation in which they had previously experienced that feeling. Consistent with our metacognitive transfer proposition, the results suggest that activating FOP reduced the tendency to compromise, shifting behavior toward more preference-expressive choice. This was demonstrated in both consequential (Study 1A) and hypothetical choices (Studies 1B and 1C).

Second, the findings suggest that FOP can influence decision-making even when individuals lack stored preferences for the specific options or attributes. Because the skimble choice set used in Studies 1B and 1C was entirely unfamiliar and devoid of real-world meaning, participants could not have retrieved stable attitudes from memory. This speaks to the transferable, nonspecific nature of FOP.

It is worth noting that the results in both Studies 1B and 1C reached only marginal significance ($p < .10$). While the replication indicates that the effect is present, it is not a strong one – perhaps unsurprising given the tenuous basis for expressing any preference in this highly abstract context. Still, the hypothetical and stylized nature of these studies, which may have made them less relatable for participants, suggests that they constitute a conservative test of FOP's influence on preference-expressive choice.

Third, the results of Studies 1B and 1C cannot be explained by preference retrieval-based mechanisms, which helps distinguish them from the Feeling of Knowing and preference fluency effects. Unlike FOK or preference fluency – which reflect metacognitive responses to the ease of retrieving stored information – FOP was activated here through reflection on an unrelated prior experience and generalized to a novel context. Because participants had no prior attitudes toward skimbles, atmority, or predorsity, the effect cannot be attributed to attitude certainty, clarity, or retrieval facilitation. These findings support the distinctiveness of FOP as a metacognitive signal of preference readiness, capable of shaping behavior in the absence of specific preference content.

Study 1C also suggests that the reduction in compromise is associated with a greater tendency to explain one's decision in terms of a feeling of preference, which in turn mediated the effect of the manipulation on choice, providing preliminary process evidence. Notably, a substantial proportion of participants in the control condition (31.4%)

also described their choice in terms of a feeling of preference. This finding suggests that FOP may occur spontaneously and can shape preference-expressive behavior in contexts where no concrete preferences exist. Such findings reinforce the idea that FOP is a naturally occurring epistemic experience—one that may quietly influence choice construction across a wide range of decision domains.

6 | FOP ACTIVATION THROUGH CONCEPTUAL PRIMING

A second class of FOP antecedents involves salient motivations and identity-based cognitions tied to preference expression. Beyond self-schemata (e.g., masculinity or expertise), which are examined in the following section, increasing the accessibility of semantic knowledge related to preference expression should also activate FOP and heighten preference-expressive behavior. In the next study, we primed participants with the general concept of preferences and tested whether this reduced the selection of the compromise option. This operationalization aligns with our view of FOP as an epistemic state that can be triggered by accessible motivations and self-perceptions related to expressing inner preferences.

6.1 | Study 2: Conceptual Priming

6.1.1 | Method

Participants ($N = 91$; mean age = 29; 39% female), recruited from MTurk, were randomly assigned to one of two priming conditions (preference vs. control). The priming task was described as a test of cognitive skills. Participants saw a list of fourteen scrambled six-word strings (see the appendix for complete stimuli). Their task was to identify five words in each string that formed a complete sentence and to copy the remaining non-fitting word into a box (e.g., copying the word “Tuesday” from the string “going Tuesday rain to it is”).

In the preference prime condition, each scrambled string included one word related to preferences (e.g., opinion, attitude, preference, principle, conviction, believe). In the control condition, the equivalent words were unrelated to preference (e.g., bird, expedite, biking, enlighten, embrace, funniest).

Following the priming task, participants completed a series of four ternary choice problems adapted from prior research (microwave ovens, lawnmowers, cordless phones, and portable BBQ grills). Choice of the middle option in each replicate served as the within-subjects dependent variable.

6.1.2 | Results

A repeated-measures GLM analysis on choice, with prime as a between-subjects factor and product type as a within-subjects factor, revealed the predicted main effect of the preference prime ($F[1, 89]$

TABLE 1 Choice of the Middle Option as Function of Prime (Study 2).

	Preferences Prime	Neutral Prime
Microwave ovens	42.9%	49.0%
Lawnmowers	50.0%	79.6%
Cordless phones	31.0%	40.8%
BBQ grills	59.5%	67.3%

= 5.56, $p = .02$). There was no main effect of product ($F[1, 89] = 1.30$, $p = .26$) and no interaction between prime and product ($F[1, 89] = 0.16$, $p = .72$). As shown in Table 1, the predicted pattern was observed across all four choice problems. The contrast in the lawnmowers problem was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 8.82$, $p = .003$, whereas the contrasts for the other problems were not statistically significant when analyzed individually (p 's > .30).

These results provide further support for our proposition, using a different approach to FOP activation. Increasing the accessibility of the general notion of preference influenced choice, reducing the tendency to select the compromise or middle option. It is unlikely that our manipulation altered participants' preexisting preferences for microwave ovens or lawnmowers; rather, the salience of the concept of preference appears to have activated a feeling of preference, which in turn made participants more likely to reject the compromise and select one of the extreme options.

7 | FOP ACTIVATION THROUGH AN EXPERTISE SELF-SCHEMA

Studies 3A–3C illustrate another antecedent of FOP that is based on our conceptualization—expertise self-schema. Prior work has shown that expertise is associated with increased accessibility of preferences (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Thus, thinking of oneself as an expert is likely to activate a schematic representation of holding or possessing the ability to form a preference in the focal domain – even before evaluating the specific attributes of the options. We predicted that participants would experience a stronger FOP and consequently compromise less often when they felt greater subjective experience in the category, regardless of their real expertise.

In Study 3A, we manipulated subjective expertise through social comparison (Hadar et al., 2013). In Studies 3B and 3C, participants were asked to mentally simulate having expertise in the target product category. We predicted both operationalizations would increase the choice of extreme options, in line with our FOP propositions. Study 3C additionally tests a self-presentation alternative account.

7.1 | Study 3A: Social Comparison

7.1.1 | Method

We manipulated subjective expertise using a social-comparison cue. Consistent with prior work on subjective expertise (Clarkson

et al., 2013), Mturk participants ($N = 113$; mean age = 34; 58% women) were randomly assigned to either a low or a high prior experience condition. Participants made three consecutive choices from unrelated choice sets (BBQ grills, lawnmowers, and flashlights; see appendix).

Before each respective choice, participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale how many times they had previously made a similar choice. Using a manipulation adapted from prior research (Clarkson et al., 2013), we varied perceived prior experience by altering the scale anchors. In the high relative frequency condition, the anchors reflected low levels of experience (1 = never; 7 = a few times). In the low relative frequency condition, the anchors reflected relatively high experience (1 = a few times; 7 = multiple times). Choice of the middle option served as the dependent measure.

7.1.2 | Results

We predicted that participants would be less likely to choose the compromise option when the scale suggested they had a relatively higher level of experience in that product category. The results support this prediction (Table 2).

7.2 | Study 3B: Imagined Expertise

7.2.1 | Method

Participants ($N = 88$; mean age = 30; 53% women), recruited from Mturk, were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions: subjective expertise vs. control. All participants read the following scenario (the bracketed information appeared only in the subjective expertise condition):

Imagine you would like to buy binoculars. [Assume that you have already had extensive experience with different types of binoculars over many years, and therefore you are extremely familiar with how various binoculars differ in terms of magnification, objective aperture, materials, and mechanism types. You are also very knowledgeable regarding how these different attributes combine and contribute to overall binoculars quality.] You are considering the three following binoculars. These options differ only in terms of magnification power (range: 6x - 14x) and objective aperture (range: 25mm - 65mm). Which option would you choose?

	Option A	Option B	Option C
Magnification	8x	10x	12x
Objective aperture	45 mm	35 mm	25 mm

TABLE 2 Choice of the Middle Option as Function of Subjective Expertise (Study 3A).

	High Subjective Experience	Low Subjective Experience	
BBQ Grills	42.6%	62.7%	$\chi^2(1) = 4.58, p = .032$
Lawnmowers	29.6%	54.2%	$\chi^2(1) = 6.99, p = .008$
Flashlights	48.1%	67.8%	$\chi^2(1) = 4.48, p = .034$

Choice of the compromise option served as the focal dependent variable. After entering their selection, participants rated on a 7-point scale how certain they were of their selection.

7.2.2 | Results

Analysis revealed that participants in the subjective expertise condition were less likely to choose the compromise option compared to the control condition (53.5% vs. 75.6%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.69, p = .03$). Consistent with our conceptualization regarding potential triggers of FOP, merely imagining having expertise decreased the likelihood of choosing the compromise option in the same product category.

Subjective expertise decreases, rather than increases, certainty ($M_{\text{expertise}} = 3.09$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.73$; $F[1, 86] = 3.65, p < .06$), which was uncorrelated with choice ($r = -.03, p = .79$). Thus, the effect does not appear to be driven by decision certainty.

7.3 | Study 3C: Replication and Test of a Self-Presentation Account

Although we attribute the effects demonstrated thus far to the Feeling of Preference (FOP) and have already examined several potential alternative explanations, one additional possibility warrants further testing. Specifically, one may wonder if the reduction in compromising reflects a self-presentational motivation to appear knowledgeable – that is, to demonstrate that one holds a preference. That is, our manipulations might increase the perceived social desirability of preference expression, activating a goal to signal decisiveness or avoid compromising. Although we believe that social motivations may sometimes trigger a feeling of preference, FOP itself is an epistemic metacognitive experience, irrespective of what triggered it.

Study 3C tests this social desirability account by examining whether the effect of priming preferences is moderated by the social context of the decision—specifically, whether it is made in public or private. Prior research suggests that when a choice behavior is driven by social signaling, it is amplified under social visibility (Maimaran & Simonson, 2011; Ratner & Kahn, 2002; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). In contrast, our conceptualization predicts no such interaction: if FOP is a metacognitive experience rather than a social motivation or self-presentational phenomenon, its effects should persist regardless of public visibility.

7.3.1 | Method

Participants ($N = 162$; mean age = 31; 31% women) were randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects conditions in a 2 (subjective expertise: high vs. control) \times 2 (social scrutiny: high vs. neutral) design. Each participant made a series of four choices involving product categories previously used in our studies (lawnmowers, BBQ grills, cordless phones, and microwave ovens).

We manipulated perceived expertise using the method described in Study 3B, i.e., asking participants to imagine they had extensive experience with the product category and were knowledgeable about how different attributes contribute to overall quality. We manipulated social scrutiny using a procedure adapted from Tetlock et al. (1989): Participants in the high scrutiny condition were told: “Your choices might be used to illustrate effective or ineffective decisions in future studies. For example, we may show the choices you made to other respondents and ask them to judge the quality of your decisions.” Participants in the neutral condition received no such message.

7.3.2 | Results

A repeated measures analysis on choice of the middle option, with subjective expertise and social scrutiny as between-subjects variables and product as a within-subjects variable, revealed the predicted main effect of subjective expertise ($M_{\text{high_illusory_expertise}} = .43$ vs. $M_{\text{low_illusory_expertise}} = .53$; $F[1, 158] = 5.39, p = .02$) and a marginal effect of scrutiny ($M_{\text{accountable}} = .52$ vs. $M_{\text{non-accountable}} = .44$; $F[1, 158] = 3.55, p = .06$), with no interaction between the two ($F[1, 158] = .76, p = .39$). Further, neither expertise ($F[1, 158] = .18, p = .67$) nor accountability ($F[1, 158] = .94, p = .34$), or their interaction ($F[1, 158] = .73, p = .40$), interacted with our within-subjects variable, product type. These findings suggest that our scrutiny manipulation was effective, generally *increasing* compromise as prior research would predict (as the compromise option is easier to justify; Simonson, 1989), but it did not moderate the effect of subjective expertise.

7.4 | Studies 3A–3C: Discussion

Consistent with our framework, Studies 3A–3C suggest that subjective perceptions of expertise in a product category, irrespective of objective knowledge, may lead consumers to choose preference-expressive options and avoid compromising. This effect held when

subjective expertise was manipulated using both social comparison (Study 3A) and mental simulation (Studies 3B and 3C). Consistent with the previous studies, decision certainty does not appear to play a causal role.

Study 3C additionally casts doubt on the possibility that these effects are driven by social desirability or a desire to appear as though one holds a preference. If our manipulation of subjective expertise activated the goal of expressing socially desirable preferences, such as a motivation to signal decisiveness, then its effects should have been amplified under conditions of social scrutiny, when participants believed their choices would be evaluated by others. However—despite the fact that social scrutiny itself had the predicted main effect on choice (i.e., increasing compromise choice)—we observed no such interaction. This pattern of results supports our perceptual metacognitive account of FOP and is inconsistent with an explanation based on self-presentation or social desirability.

8 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Some choices seem to say more about our preferences than others. Whether we go with the bold red or the basic black, choose a specialized model or the balanced compromise, take risks or play it safe, or feel ready to commit versus hesitate and gather more information, our selections can feel more or less expressive of well-established underlying preferences. Prior research has shown that this kind of preference-expressive choice is shaped by contextual cues, motivational states, and task-specific factors. In this paper, we introduce another distinct driver: the feeling of preference (FOP).

FOP is an epistemic, metacognitive experience—the sense that one has, or should be able to have, a preference in a given context, even before seeing the actual options and even when no specific preferences or knowledge are retrievable. FOP may reflect various contextual influences, where “contextual” is used more broadly than in the literature on “context effects” (e.g., Huber et al., 1982). For example, exposure to the choices of others, especially if they are skewed in a particular direction, may generate a FOP that is driven by reactance (e.g., Asch, 1956; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975).

The antecedents and manifestations of FOP vary across choice phenomena and other factors. In the current article, we chose to focus on the role of FOP in the context of the compromise effect. Across a series of studies, we showed that this feeling, once evoked, can shape people’s tendency to express preferences, specifically when the choice involves choosing between “picking a side” or compromising.

We began by demonstrating that FOP can be activated through episodic priming, or the recall of prior experiences involving strong preferences or convictions. In consequential decisions (Study 1A) and even in unfamiliar, ambiguous decision contexts—like the abstract “skimbles” task (Studies 1B and 1C)—this activation made participants more likely to prefer one attribute over another rather than settle for the middle. Thus, FOP can be evoked or retrieved in and of itself and applied across unrelated decision contexts. Study 1C provided mediational evidence that this effect was driven by the feeling of preferring

one attribute over another, not by any stored knowledge or attribute familiarity (although we acknowledge these results were marginally significant).

Having established the basic effect, we next examined additional antecedents of FOP. In Study 2, priming the abstract concept of “preference” was sufficient to reduce compromising and promote preference-expressive choice. Studies 3A and 3B yielded similar results when we manipulated participants’ subjective sense of expertise or decision experience—consistent with evidence that expertise is schematically linked to the epistemic self-perception of having clear preferences in the target domain. Across these studies, we ruled out alternative explanations involving memory retrieval, certainty or confidence, social desirability, and experimental demand. Finally, Study 4 replicated the effect and addressed a self-presentation account by testing whether the effect varied with social context. The results showed that the pattern persisted even when social desirability pressures were minimized.

8.1 | Theoretical Implications and Future Research

This work introduces FOP as a new construct in behavioral decision theory: a generalized, epistemic metacognitive state that arises independently of specific stored preferences yet systematically shapes choice. Unlike fluency, attitude certainty, or context effects, which are typically tied to the features of the focal options or targets themselves, FOP can be triggered well before any attributes are evaluated—sometimes by nothing more than a word, a memory, or a shift in perceived expertise.

Importantly, although FOP can be triggered by mechanisms like subjective expertise, fluency, or feelings of knowing, it is not reducible to them. It captures something more general — a readiness to choose, a felt sense that one’s preferences should be available—even when they are not yet formed.

This insight helps explain patterns of choice in domains where people feel they should have a view, even if they do not. While our studies focused on compromise as a clean indicator of preference expression, the implications of FOP are broader. We expect it to influence behaviors such as choice deferral (Dhar, 1997; Novemsky et al., 2007), variety-seeking (Sela et al., 2019), risk-taking, and the selection of unique, unconventional, or non-default options (Maimaran & Simonson, 2011; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). As our conceptualization suggests, FOP may also shed light on other established phenomena, such as the finding that masculine identity reduces compromising (Nikolova & Lambertson, 2016) or that priming courage increases risky choice (Gal & Rucker, 2021). In these cases, FOP offers a unifying account that, while not tied to the specific features of the local context, helps explain the broader pattern (see also Maimaran & Simonson, 2007).

Future research can probe this construct further along several lines: identifying additional antecedents and triggers, examining FOP’s influence across a broader range of decision types, testing potential moderators (e.g., choice for self vs. other; cf. Gal & Rucker, 2021;

Maimaran & Simonson, 2011), and deepening our understanding of its transferable metacognitive nature.

Another fruitful direction is the development of a scale to measure FOP. While the ad hoc mediator in Study 1C provides a proof of concept, a systematic scale-development effort could yield an instrument applicable across diverse experimental paradigms and enable direct tests of our claim that FOP offers a unifying account of seemingly disparate choice behaviors.

In sum, we view FOP as a promising and underexplored piece of the puzzle in understanding when, why, and how people feel ready to make bold, self-expressive choices.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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APPENDIX A: Manipulations and Choice-Sets.

1. Consequential Choice Set Used in Study 1A

Choose your pen!

As additional token of appreciation for your participation in the study, you can choose one of the retractable ballpoint pens below.

All three pens cost about the same and are similar in quality, but they differ in their ink capacity (i.e., writing length) and ink smoothness (i.e., the extent to which they offer effortless writing, rated on a 1–5 star scale).

Which one do you want to get?

	Option A Profile	Option B Inkjoy	Option C Advanced Ink
Ink capacity (writing length)	2.5 miles	1.7 mile	0.9 mile
Ink Smoothness (writing effort)	2.9 stars	3.8 stars	4.7 stars

2. Sentence Unscrambling Task Used in Study 2 (target words underlined)

Control Condition	Preference Prime
me friends <u>bird</u> for care my	me friends <u>principle</u> for care my
very chocolate is <u>expedite</u> this good	very chocolate is <u>faith</u> this good
is solution nice <u>sleepy</u> no there	is solution nice <u>passion</u> no there
<u>bike</u> not my tall ignore do	<u>opinion</u> not my tall ignore do
every <u>color</u> that child knows little	every <u>conviction</u> that child knows little
good <u>enlighten</u> doctor was the very	good <u>believe</u> doctor was the very
guy funniest is the <u>cradle</u> he	guy funniest is the <u>doctrine</u> he
going <u>Tuesday</u> rain to it is	going <u>dogma</u> rain to it is
very <u>educated</u> the heavy was bag	very <u>ideology</u> the heavy was bag
<u>dress</u> times the rang phone several	<u>rule</u> times the rang phone several
you <u>calm</u> here leave can it	you <u>law</u> here leave can it
the outside <u>thought</u> cute went cat	the outside <u>attitude</u> cute went cat
to the <u>echo</u> wanted boy drink	to the <u>policy</u> wanted boy drink
<u>fabulous</u> thought it was she fun	<u>position</u> thought it was she fun

3. Choice-sets Used Across Studies 2–3C

A.1 | Microwave Ovens

Suppose you want to buy a microwave oven and are considering the options below. The options are similar in terms of quality and differ only with respect to price and number of power levels.

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Number of Power Levels	3	4	5
Price	\$40	\$80	\$120

Which option would you choose?

A.2 | Lawnmowers

Suppose you want to buy a lawn mower and are considering the options below. The options are similar in terms of quality and differ only with respect to width (wider mowers cover more ground and increase efficiency) and weight (heavier mowers are harder and slower to maneuver).

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Width	17"	20"	23"
Weight	32 lb	44 lb	56 lb

Which option would you choose?

A.3 | Cordless Phones

Imagine you are shopping for a cordless phone.

The cordless phones you are considering differ by reception range and by price:

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Range	100 ft	70 ft	40 ft
Price	\$90	\$70	\$50



Which option would you choose?

A.4 | BBQ Grills

Imagine that you would like to buy a portable Bar-B-Q grill. The options you are considering differ in terms of their **cooking area** (in square inches) and **weight** (in pounds).

	Option A	Option B	Option C
	Smaller Size	Medium Size	Larger Size
Cooking Area (Range from 250 to 650 sq in)	(350 sq. in)	(450 sq. in)	(550 sq. in)
Weight (lb) (Range from 7 lb to 18 lb)	Lighter Weight (9 lb)	Medium Weight (12 lb)	Heavier Weight (15 lb)
			

Which option would you choose?

A.5 | Flashlights

Imagine that you are going to the store to buy a flashlight. The three models that you are considering differ only in **brightness** (in Lumen units) and **battery time** (in hours):

	Flashlight A	Flashlight B	Flashlight C
Brightness (range: 80–400 Lumen)	110 Lumen	230 Lumen	350 Lumen
Battery Time (range: 10 to 50 hours)	45 hours	30 hours	15 hours
			

Which option would you choose?