A preference for preference: Lack of subjective preference evokes dehumanization

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Preference
Dehumanization
Mind perception
Identity

ABSTRACT

The current research examines the link between subjective preferences and humanity. Six studies (n = 2920) find that people dehumanize others who are perceived to lack subjective preference. Establishing the basic effect, a person without preferences is perceived as less human than someone with preferences, which is driven by the perception that the person lacks a distinct identity (Studies 1–4). The effect occurs regardless of whether the preference is positive or negative (Study 3) and is observed through measured (Studies 1–3) and manipulated distinctiveness (Study 4). Examining downstream consequences, a service representative lacking preference was evaluated more negatively, which was stronger for tasks requiring human mindfulness (i.e., creativity and emotion; Study 5). The dehumanization effect extends beyond person perception to negatively affect perceptions of the work a person produces (Study 6). Overall, the present article identifies a novel determinant of dehumanization and discusses implications for social interactions and impression management.

1. Introduction

Preferences (i.e., favorite hobbies, aesthetic preferences, and personal life goals) are an essential part of our identities (e.g., Allport, 1937; Blok, Newman, & Rips, 2005; Gelman, Heyman, & Legare, 2007; Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998; Haslam, Bastian, & Bissett, 2004), making us who we are. Because of preferences’ personal and idiosyncratic nature, people generally enjoy expressing their preferences to other people, even when no choice is at stake (He, Melumad, and Pham, 2019). For example, companies often publish “fun-fact” information about their employees’ preferences on their websites (“Justin likes film noir”) and job seekers commonly offer such personal details about their hobbies and entertainment preferences on their resumes to make themselves more memorable to hiring committees.

Although such self-expression is common, people are not always forthcoming with how they truly feel. People hold back their preferences for a number of reasons. They may fear that their preference will be negatively evaluated by others, that they will be seen as imposing their preference on a group, for example, when deciding on dessert “for the table” at dinner, or, in a business context, that revealing personal information on a website will be seen as unprofessional or a little too folksy. In many cases, people may not have a strong preference to begin with. Whatever the reason, people sometimes fail to reveal their subjective preferences in interpersonal situations in which such expressions are expected.

How does failing to express a subjective preference – partiality for one alternative over others – affect others’ perception of us? Although prior research has provided some evidence regarding when people will withhold preferences or mimic others’ choices (Anderson, 2003; Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992; Dhar, 1996; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000), the literature does not provide insight into how people react to someone who does not appear to have a preference at all. The present research fills this gap and challenges the presumed benefits of withholding preference. We suggest that because holding a preference is an important part of what makes us human, specifically that it is a component of possessing an individual, personal identity, when we fail to express our preferences, we are perceived as less human. Consequently, people who fail to express a subjective preference are evaluated negatively, with implications for evaluations of workers and the work they produce, especially for work that requires the capabilities of a human mind.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.01.002
Received 10 January 2020; Received in revised form 28 December 2020; Accepted 6 January 2021
Available online 10 February 2021
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2. Preferences and identity

2.1. Preferences as a form of self-expression

On its face, the notion that people at times withhold information about their preferences may appear at odds with existing work on identity, which has found that people desire to be unique, both inwardly and outwardly to others, and behave in ways that set themselves apart from other people ( Brewer, 1991; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Because our likes and dislikes are highly idiosyncratic, expressing them allows us to further our uniqueness goals and differentiate ourselves from others (Breakwell, 1986; Brewer, 1991; Maslach, 1974; Vignoles, Chryssochou, & Breakwell, 2000). For example, people use and display unique products to distinguish themselves from the masses (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001) and discontinue using goods once their adoption becomes widespread (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Crucially, however, this desire for distinctiveness is balanced by a countervailing need for belonging that motivates us to assimilate with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Vignoles et al., 2006), prompting conformity. We strive to optimally satisfy both opposing needs simultaneously (Brewer, 1991; 2003), but, depending on the context, we may be motivated to prioritize the fulfillment of one need at the expense of the other (Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010). For example, when people are out of sync with others, they experience social exclusion (Wooley, Fishbach, and Wang 2020), which can lead them to mimic the behavior of others to restore feelings of belonging, thereby inhibiting their uniqueness (Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008).

2.2. Person perception from expressed preferences

Beyond their role in self-expression, preferences concurrently inform peoples’ interpersonal judgments; people make inferences and form impressions of us based on what we like and dislike. For example, people infer our personalities from information about our taste in music, choice of bedroom and office décor, clothing preferences, and even email addresses (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2008; Burroughs, Dreww, & Hallman, 1991; Gosling, Ko, Mannarrelli, & Morris, 2002; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006; Rentfrow, McDonald, & Oldmeadow, 2009). Sometimes these attributes set us apart from others, and at other times they cause us to blend in with those with whom we share the same characteristics (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Whether others individuate us or categorize us into a social group depends largely on the perceivers’ motivations, as well as on the ease with which our attributes fit into different social categories (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). For example, someone who likes to mountain bike might be characterized as an ‘outdoorsy’ type of person to the extent that this category easily comes to mind. This information, in turn, influences others’ subsequent expectations of, and responses to, our behavior in future interactions (e.g., Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Brewer & Silver, 1978).

Thus, people use preferences to express themselves and achieve different goals they have, such as the dueling desires to stand out versus blend in. Regardless of the reason for expressing preferences, preferences can allow people to both differentiate from and relate to others because people attend to and make inferences about others based on what they like and dislike. Given that preferences are a crucial component of identity formation and person perception, we examine inferences people make about others who do not hold a preference. Specifically, we examine whether people who withhold preferences are perceived as less unique, and whether this leads people to dehumanize those who withhold a preference.

3. Conceptualizations of dehumanization

Before turning to the process by which lacking preferences may influence person perception, we first address what it means to dehumanize others. At its most basic level, dehumanization involves “denial of a mind” – the perception that a person is unable to think or feel (Gray, Gray & Wegner, 2007; Haslam, 2006; Keiley, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cottrell, 2015, 2015; Leyens et al., 2003; Waytz & Epley, 2012). Although early work on dehumanization was confined to documenting cases of extreme or overt prejudice, for example, associated with group violence and even genocide, more recent work has begun to examine more subtle versions of dehumanization that can occur in everyday interpersonal and intergroup settings (Haslam & Bain, 2007; Haslam et al., 2005; Leyens et al., 2003). For example, people tend to dehumanize themselves and others after experiencing social ostracism (Bastian & Haslam, 2010), and socially connected individuals tend to dehumanize more socially distant others (Waytz & Epley, 2012).

Traditionally, this literature distinguishes between two forms of dehumanization, animalistic and mechanistic, each of which deny a person different human attributes. Animalistic dehumanization is characterized by the denial of attributes that separate humans from animals, that is, perceiving someone as less civil, moral, or capable of higher order cognition, but still able to express emotion. This form of dehumanization typically arises at the intergroup level and is often discussed in the context of race and in situations dealing with immigration and genocide (Chalk & Jonassohn, 1990; Kelman, 1976). For example, immigrants are commonly compared to animals and infectious diseases, and Black players have been treated as apes and pummeled with bananas during European football games (McGowan & Gittings, 2014). Treating a person as an animal denies that person higher order cognition, but not the experience of emotions (i.e., anger).

Dehumanization can also take on another, mechanistic form, which is characterized by the denial of attributes that separate humans from machines. Victims of mechanistic dehumanization are commonly perceived as less feeling and attributed “robotic” traits such as coldness and rigidity. Such mechanistically dehumanized entities are also speculated to be lacking individuality (Haslam, 2006). Compared to animalistic dehumanization, this form more commonly occurs in interpersonal situations, as it indexes the extent to which we see relatedness (or lack thereof) in others (Haslam et al., 2005; Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Bain, 2007) and is typically discussed in the context of technology and medicine (Christoff, 2014; Haque & Waytz, 2012; Montague & Matson, 1983). For example, successful businesspeople are often likened to robots incapable of experiencing emotions and medical patients’ bodies are seen as malfunctioning machines that need to be repaired (Haque & Waytz, 2012). These examples of mechanistic dehumanization highlight that one’s perception of feeling is deficient.

4. Preferences and perceived humanity

As noted above in our discussion of person perception, people make inferences about our identity from our preferences, that is, what social categories we belong to and what makes us distinctive. Central to the present research is recognition that being seen as holding a distinct identity, in turn, is an important part of what makes us seem human. Indeed, a major factor thought to cause dehumanization is deindividuation (Kelman, 1976; Zimbardo, 1969; Haslam, 2006). When an individual is anonymized or stripped of their personal identity, they are more likely to be dehumanized. People attribute more mind to a distinct individual than to an individual that is perceived to be similar to a group (Morewedge et al., 2013), and conversely, framing a group in terms of its individual members, as opposed to the overall group, substantially increases mind perception (Cooley et al., 2017). This suggests that perceptions of others’ humanity are intimately connected with perceptions of their individuality, such that being indistinctive can lead to dehumanization by others.

More specifically, we predict that lacking a preference causes mechanistic dehumanization, rendering one’s outward identity indistinct or generic. Subjective preferences serve as cues from which others make inferences about a person’s identity. A person without a
preference is perceived as generic, such that their identity appears substitutable with that of others, increasing their similarity to automatons. Indeed, whereas animalistic dehumanization denies one a restrained mind, mechanistic dehumanization denies one a unique mind, rendering one shallow, passive, and as a result, effectively fungible.

The prediction that lacking a subjective preference leads to mechanistic dehumanization is foreshadowed by prior work. For example, research has found that uniforms, which reduce distinctiveness and increase perceived fungibility, trigger mechanistic dehumanization (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014). Furthermore, whereas intergroup settings lend themselves to animalistic dehumanization, the interpersonal contexts we study more commonly facilitate mechanistic dehumanization, as originally theorized by Haslam (2006). Indeed, mechanistic dehumanization represents a perception of lack of relatedness that negatively impacts meaningful social interactions.

In sum, we theorize that lacking preference for a specific choice outcome reduces the uniqueness of a person’s identity. Hence, we predict and test whether the effect of preference on mechanistic dehumanization is driven by perceived distinctiveness: A person who lacks (vs. has) preference is perceived as less distinct, which mediates the relationship between preference and mechanistic dehumanization.

This predicted role of distinctiveness stands in contrast to the ease of categorizing one’s identity. When making inferences about others, people focus on what sets a person apart from everyone else (i.e., what makes them distinct), but at the same time, they also try to get a clear sense of who the person is in order to categorize them into social groups. We reason that distinctiveness and clarity of identity are two separate components in person perception (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). To illustrate, person A, who has a commonplace preference for football among other team sports is likely perceived as less distinct than person B, who has a more unusual preference for korfbal. However, the identity of person A, who possesses the commonplace preference, may be perceived more clearly, such that the perceivers can more easily categorize person A as being a specific “type” of person they are familiar with (i.e., the football fan). In this way, perceptions of distinctiveness at the individual level could diverge from clarity regarding that identity’s “category” at the group level. We accordingly measure both distinctiveness and clarity of identity, with the expectation that personal distinctiveness in particular underlies the predicted effect; lacking a preference causes dehumanization by reducing perceived distinctiveness, as dehumanization occurs when people deny others a human mind. On the other hand, perceived clarity is less likely to affect dehumanization, as the ability to easily categorize people matters more for affiliation goals than attributions of human mindfulness.

Our theory hinges on the idea that lacking preference dehumanizes because it shows that one’s identity is indistinct or generic, regardless of whether that preference is positive or negative. We accordingly test whether both positive preferences (liking a particular option) and negative preferences (disliking a particular option) serve to differentiate one from others. As such, we address an alternative explanation that this effect is driven by valence – that failing to express a preference is dehumanizing because it is perceived as more negative than expressing a preference. We expect greater dehumanization when lacking a preference than when holding a negative preference (i.e., “anti-preference”). That is, we posit that without preference to distinguish one from others, regardless of whether the preference is positive or negative, indifference causes one to outwardly assume a generic identity, becoming more substitutable and thus subtly more robotic in the eyes of others. This outcome suggests that even stating a negative preference, that is, the option one likes the least, could prevent dehumanization, which might be especially useful when one is nervous about revealing a potentially unpopular preference.

5. Consequences of dehumanization from lacking preference

Given the association between preferences and mechanistic dehumanization via perceptions of distinctiveness, lacking preference might have downstream consequences for one’s professional reputation. Indeed, information on preferences is often communicated professionally on businesses’ websites that provide personal profiles of their employees and is also commonly conveyed during the job interview process, during which candidates are often wined and dined and where interviewers are assessing perceived fit with the company culture. In such situations, professionals often mispredict what they should convey about themselves to increase their chances of getting hired (Woolley & Fishbach, 2018).

In settings such as this, we predict that lacking a preference will have dire consequences for people’s professional reputation. Crucially, we expect that the reputational harm a dehumanized person suffers will depend on the specific qualities and characteristics perceived as necessary to perform the task. Given that lacking preference causes mechanistic dehumanization, people may judge those without preference more harshly on tasks perceived as requiring a human mind. Our prediction draws on research suggesting that people trust automatons less for subjective (vs. objective) tasks (Castelo, Bos, & Lehmann, 2019) and that they are more willing to endow robots with cognitive (vs. emotional) abilities (Gray et al. 2007). We thus reasoned that lacking preference would more negatively impact someone’s reputation when the task requires more mindful activities, such as creative idea generation (i.e., those that are subjective and perceived as being performed less successfully by a robot). Conversely, the effect of lacking a preference on negative evaluations should attenuate for tasks not perceived as requiring a human mind, as is the case for a technical job requiring number-crunching. Indeed, perceived lack of humanity is less relevant to anticipated performance on such a task, given that a calculator, for example, could perform similarly well.

Moving beyond perceptions of the person, we also anticipate that lack of preference will degrade perceptions of the work that said person produces. Recent research on intention-based contagion suggests that objects designed by a person are believed to acquire their essence, even if the person did not physically touch the objects (Stavrova, Newman, Kulemann, & Fetchenhauer, 2016). For example, a sweater designed by an immoral person, such as Hitler, is valued less than one designed by someone described as moral or neutral. This research suggests that dehumanizing a person via a lack of preference will further affect evaluations of this person’s work, weakening its perceived value and causing it to take on mechanistically dehumanized properties, such as genericity (i.e., similar to how robots are perceived as generic and undifferentiated). We expect this effect to be particularly relevant for jobs requiring a human mind (e.g., interior design or architecture), the success of which are determined by the designer’s ability to be open-minded, responsive to another’s needs, and creative.

5.1. Definition of preference

In our studies, we operationalize “preference” as partiality for one alternative over others, constrained by the options at hand. This definition renders the notion of having preference context dependent, a limitation we address in the General Discussion but that also warrants consideration here. For instance, for a diner eating out with a group, lacking preference over dessert is defined over the set of desserts central to the choice for the last course. Moreover, the choice decisions used in each of our studies assume alternatives that are sufficiently numerous.

1 Although machines are increasingly able to personalize and perform functions that are more emotional, such as creating art or music, what is important for the theory is that people hold the assumption that machines are less able to perform these tasks than humans (Castelo, Bos, & Lehmann, 2019).
and with appreciable variability. Choice decisions that involve only a few alternatives that are highly similar to one another may not evoke dehumanization. For example, someone who does not have a preference for wine when presented with a choice between only Merlot and Pinot Noir may not be dehumanized to the same extent as when the choice involves many alternatives from a larger category (such as all beverages) because the former choice set is small and the options are relatively undifferentiated.

6. Overview of studies

Six studies examined the effect of lacking preference on mechanistic dehumanization, with downstream consequences for work evaluations. Study 1 first tested whether indifference leads to dehumanization and whether this is mediated by perceptions of having a distinct identity. To test this, we adopted a scenario from Strohminger and Nichols (2014). This prior research demonstrated that lacking preference reduces perceptions of identity. We extended this to a novel hypothesis, examining whether such lack of preference causes dehumanization. Study 2 conceptually replicated and extended this basic effect to an everyday decision context. Study 3 tested whether lacking preference leads to dehumanization compared with holding a positive preference (i.e., most liked option) and with holding an “anti-preference” (i.e., most disliked option), thereby addressing alternative accounts based on good-naturedness or positivity associated with favoring an option. Study 4 additionally shows that generic preference leads to greater dehumanization than unique preference. We thus provide process evidence for the underlying role of distinctiveness through mediation (Studies 1–3) and moderation (Study 4).

Studies 5 and 6 examine important downstream consequences predicted by our theory. Study 5 examined whether the effect alters perceptions of a person’s reputation and whether this is stronger for tasks perceived to require a human mind (i.e., creative vs. technical tasks). Study 6 then examined whether the effect extends beyond the self to assessments of a person’s work. All survey materials and data have been posted to an online repository (https://osf.io/mpq1j/?view_only=4d5ed9b2f40b6ca745a6dd20849154). We report additional analyses and supplemental studies in the Online Supplement. Table 1 provides a summary of studies.

7. Study 1: Lack of preference causes dehumanization (the brain transplant)

We examine the prediction that having a preference (vs. not) leads to perceptions of distinctiveness, which causes perceptions of humanity. Participants read a scenario adapted from Strohminger and Nichols (2014), which described a patient who underwent partial brain transplant surgery following brain trauma. We manipulated whether the transplant recipient was described as experiencing no cognitive change after undergoing surgery (control condition) or as losing all of his preferences and desires, effectively becoming indifferent (indifference condition). We then measured animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization of the transplant recipient. We predicted that lacking preference evokes dehumanization, such that participants would rate the recipient as significantly less human if he becomes indifferent post-surgery than if he experiences no psychological change. We expected this effect to be stronger for mechanistic dehumanization, which is more typically found in interpersonal contexts, compared with animalistic dehumanization.

We further examined our proposed mediator – distinctiveness (i.e., how generic or distinct an individual is perceived), along with an alternative mediator, ease of categorizing the person (i.e., whether they have a clear idea of who this person is). Our theory predicts that perceived distinctiveness, but not clarity, underlies the effect.

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### 7.1. Method

#### 7.1.1. Participants

A total of 105 US-based Mechanical Turk workers (58.10% men; $M_{age} = 34.83, SD = 10.91$) participated for $0.35. We pre-determined this sample size to have over 80% power to detect a small to medium sized interaction effect (e.g., $\eta^2_p = 0.06$) based on a pilot study.

#### 7.1.2. Procedure

Study 1 employed a 2 (cognitive impairment condition: control vs. indifference; between-subjects) $\times$ 2 (dehumanization: mechanistic vs. animalistic; within-subject) mixed model design. All participants read one of two versions of the Study 1 scenario used by Strohminger and Nichols (2014), which described a man named Jim who was severely injured in a car accident and had to undergo brain surgery with varying results. Participants in the control condition read that, post-surgery, Jim “thinks and acts the same way as before the accident.” Participants in the indifference condition read that Jim “no longer has any preferences - he doesn’t have any of the likes or dislikes he had before the accident. Aside from this, he thinks and acts the same way as before the accident.”

After reading the story, participants answered a comprehension check question about the type of cognitive impairment (if any) Jim experienced after his surgery. As our main measure of dehumanization, participants rated post-surgery Jim on 17 measures designed to gauge blatant dehumanization (Haslam, 2010; Kteily et al., 2015), 6 of which measured mechanistic dehumanization ($\alpha = 0.83$): (1) mechanical and cold, (2) lacking in passion, (3) superficial, lacking in depth, (4) emotional, responsive and warm (reverse-coded), (5) passive, submissive, (6) open-minded, able to think clearly about things (reverse-coded) and 11 of which measured animalistic dehumanization ($\alpha = 0.85$): (1) mature, responsible (reverse-coded), (2) rational and logical (reverse-coded), (3) backward, primitive, (4) savage, aggressive, (5), barbaric, cold-hearted, (6) unsophisticated, (7) refined and cultured (reverse-coded), (8) lacking self-restraint, like animals, (9) scholarly, cerebral (reverse-coded), (10) coarse, boorish, (11) lacking morals ($1 = \text{not at all}; 7 = \text{extremely so}$). The items were presented in two blocks (animalistic vs. mechanistic), with items randomized within each block. Block order was counterbalanced.

To assess the underlying mechanism, we measured distinct identity: “When you imagine Jim, to what extent does he seem generic or like a distinct individual?” ($1 = \text{generic}, 7 = \text{distinct}$). We also asked participants to rate how clearly Jim fit into the mold for a particular kind of person when they tried to imagine him: “When you try to imagine Jim, to what extent does he seem generic or like a distinct individual?” ($1 = \text{generic}, 7 = \text{distinct}$).

#### 7.2. Results

A repeated-measures ANOVA of preference condition (indifference vs. control) on dehumanization (animalistic vs. mechanistic) revealed a significant interaction, as predicted, $F(1, 101) = 11.13, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.08$ (Fig. 1). A person lacking preference (vs. not) was perceived as significantly more mechanistic ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 3.86, SD = 1.18; M_{\text{Control}} = 2.74, SD = 1.21$), $t(103) = 4.81, p < .001, d = 0.94$, which significantly attenuated for animalistic dehumanization ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 3.32, SD = 1.01; M_{\text{Control}} = 2.62, SD = 1.03$), $t(103) = 2.50, p = .014, d = 0.49$. There was a main effect of dehumanization type ($M_{\text{Mechanistic}} = 3.33, SD = 1.21; M_{\text{Animalistic}} = 2.88, SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 101) = 23.42, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.17$, and no main effect or interactions involving counterbalanced presentation order, $F_{s} < 1.41, ps > 0.238$.

We next examined the underlying mechanism. As predicted, a person lacking preference was perceived as significantly less distinct compared with the control ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 3.62, SD = 1.79; M_{\text{Control}} = 4.88, SD = 1.76$), $t(103) = 3.64, p < .001, d = 0.71$. Clarity showed a similar pattern; an indifferent (vs. control) person’s identity was perceived as significantly less clear ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 4.04, SD = 1.77; M_{\text{Control}} = 4.92, SD = 1.69$), $t(103) = 2.61, p = .01, d = 0.51$.

Our theory predicts that distinctiveness perceptions mediate the relationship between preference (or lack thereof) and dehumanization. In line with our prediction, we found that lack of distinctiveness mediated the effect of indifference (vs. control) on mechanistic dehumanization ($B_{\text{Indirect}} = -0.25, SE = 0.13, 95\% CI = [-0.56, -0.04]$; unless otherwise noted, all mediation analyses used PROCESS Model 4 based on 10,000 resamples; Hayes, 2012), while there was no significant mediation though perceived clarity ($B_{\text{Indirect}} = -0.04, SE = 0.08, 95\% CI = [-0.20, 0.13]$).

#### 7.3. Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that individuals described as lacking preference due to a cognitive impairment were perceived as mechanistically less human than those described as being unimpaired, providing initial support for our main hypothesis. Lacking a preference had a stronger effect on mechanistic dehumanization than on animalistic dehumanization, in line with prior research demonstrating that mechanistic dehumanization more commonly arises in interpersonal situations, whereas animalistic dehumanization more commonly arises in intergroup settings (Haslam et al., 2005, 2006). Moreover, distinctiveness perceptions underlie the effect of lacking preference on mechanistic dehumanization. On the other hand, clarity perceptions did not mediate the effect, suggesting that clarity and distinctiveness tap into separate constructs. We continue to measure clarity in Studies 2–3 (see Online Supplement A for results), but focus our analysis on distinctiveness specifically, as distinctiveness drives the effect of dehumanization.

Study 1 measured dehumanization using previously validated items (Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Kteily et al., 2015). As evidence for the robustness of this effect, we conducted Supplemental Study 1 with 110 participants that assessed alternative measures of dehumanization (see Online Supplement B for full details). Using the same scenario, participants rated how similar post-surgery Jim was to a human on mechanistic dehumanization ($1 = \text{fully robot}; 9 = \text{fully human}$) and animalistic
dehumanization (1 = fully animal; 9 = fully human). Replicating Study 1, we observed a significant interaction between type of dehumanization and preference condition, $F(1, 106) = 7.49, p = .007, \eta^2_p = 0.06$. A person lacking preference was more mechanistically dehumanized (i.e., viewed as more like a robot) than the person in the control condition ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 6.64, SD = 2.03; M_{\text{Control}} = 8.37, SD = 0.88$), $F(1, 108) = 82.04, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.24$, which significantly attenuated for animalistic dehumanization ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 7.34, SD = 1.63; M_{\text{Control}} = 8.46, SD = 1.06$), $F(1, 108) = 18.20, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.14$.

Having demonstrated initial evidence for our predictions using a scenario from the literature (Strohminger & Nichols, 2014) and using both previously validated measures of dehumanization (Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Kteily et al., 2015) as well as our own measures, our next study provides further evidence for this finding in a more realistic setting.

8. Study 2: Lack of preference causes dehumanization (the massage)

In Study 2, participants read a scenario about a person getting a massage. We emphasized the hedonic nature of the choice to address an alternative account for Study 1, that a person lacking preference is dehumanized simply because he is perceived as unfeeling (i.e., that he cannot feel pleasure). To manipulate lack of preference, we described a person who preferred a specific massage or was indifferent between four massage options. We further described preference for a massage (or lack thereof) as a personal belief, ruling out a possible alternative explanation that dehumanization simply comes from social concerns about lacking preference.

After reading this scenario, we assessed mechanistic and animalistic dehumanization and distinctiveness. We predicted that lacking preference evokes mechanistic dehumanization, such that people perceive a person lacking preference as less human than one holding a preference, and that distinctiveness would underlie these perceptions.

8.1. Method

8.1.1. Participants

A total of 402 US-based MTurk workers (57.70% men; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.17, SD = 11.00$) participated for $0.35. We predetermined this sample size to have over 80% power to detect a small to medium sized interaction effect based on a similar pilot study.

8.1.2. Procedure

Study 2 employed a 2 cell (preference condition: indifference vs. preference; between-subjects $\times$ 2 (dehumanization: mechanistic vs. animalistic; within-subject) mixed model design. All participants read a scenario adapted from Botti and McGill (2011). Specifically, they read: “Imagine that a man named John has been working really hard during the semester and achieved important academic successes. He thinks that a professional massage at a local spa renowned for the quality of their massage treatments would represent a great way to reward himself. The local spa has four different massage options to choose from. John is able to choose one of them keeping in mind that his goal is to maximize his enjoyment.”

Participants completed a comprehension check question about John’s goal for visiting the spa. They were then shown four different massage options (Swedish Massage, Deep Tissue Massage, Five Elements Massage, and Reflexology Massage) and short descriptions of each. After viewing the options, participants read that John was familiar with all of the options and chose a massage either based on his preference or the recommendation of the therapist. More specifically, those in the preference condition read: “Upon learning of his four massage options, John realizes that he is familiar with all of them. Although he thinks they all look great, he doesn’t have a preference and is pretty much indifferent among the four options. John goes up to the therapist at the front desk and asks her for her recommendation. John then signs up for Option 1, the Swedish Massage.” Thus, we held the chosen option constant across conditions and manipulated whether John held a preference for this option or not.

We framed this preference as an internal thought to separate preference possession from preference expression so as to remove any ambiguity as to what John’s true preferences (or lack thereof) were over the choice. In other words, we wanted to ensure that participants did not assume that John had a preference he was hiding, but that he truly had no preference.

Participants answered a comprehension check question about how John chose a massage to ensure they understood the scenario. As our main measure of dehumanization, participants rated John on the 17 dehumanization measures from Study 1 (mechanistic dehumanization: $\alpha = 0.76$; animalistic dehumanization: $\alpha = 0.91$; Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Kteily et al., 2015). As in Study 1, items were presented in two blocks, with items randomized within each block. Block order was counterbalanced. Participants then answered distinctiveness and clarity questions described in Study 1 (clarity results mirror Study 1 and are presented in Online Supplement A).

8.2. Results

A repeated-measures ANOVA of condition (indifference vs. preference) on dehumanization (animalistic vs. mechanistic) revealed a significant interaction, in line with our prediction, $F(1, 398) = 6.98, p = .009, \eta^2_p = 0.01$ (Fig. 2). John was perceived as significantly more mechanistic when described as indifferent ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 2.88, SD = 1.01; M_{\text{Preference}} = 2.53, SD = 1.00$), $t(400) = 3.50, p < .001, d = 0.35$. However, the difference between indifference and preference significantly attenuated for perceptions of animalistic dehumanization ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 2.33, SD = 0.94; M_{\text{Preference}} = 2.17, SD = 0.95$), $t(400) = 1.70, p = .089, d = 0.17$. There was a main effect of dehumanization type, with higher scores for mechanistic dehumanization ($M_{\text{Mechanistic}} = 2.70, SD = 1.02; M_{\text{Animalistic}} = 2.25, SD = 0.98$), $F(1, 398) = 163.60, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.39$.3

We next turned to the distinctiveness measure. As predicted, a person indifferent between massage options was perceived as significantly less distinct compared with a person holding a specific preference ($M_{\text{Preference}} = 4.41, SD = 1.62; M_{\text{Indifference}} = 4.02, SD = 1.60$), $t(400) = 2.42, p = .016, d = 0.24$. In line with our theory, a mediational analysis revealed that distinctiveness perceptions mediated the effect of preference (vs. lack thereof) on mechanistic dehumanization ($B_{\text{Indirect}} = 0.08, SE = 0.04, 95\% CI = [−0.15, −0.01]).

8.3. Discussion

Study 2 extends the findings in Study 1, that those lacking preference are more dehumanized, to an everyday decision context. In line with Study 1, we again found that the effect of indifference (vs. preference) was stronger for mechanistic dehumanization than for animalistic dehumanization. Our theory predicts that lacking preference (Study 1)
and more specifically, lacking subjective preference (Study 2) dehumanizes because it removes one’s humanity, making one akin to a robot. As such, our remaining studies focus exclusively on this mechanistic dimension, and we no longer assess animalistic dehumanization moving forward.¹

Importantly, Study 2 also addresses several limitations posed by Study 1. Firstly, Study 2 documents the effect in a more relatable and realistic choice context (i.e., choice of massage). Secondly, unlike Study 1, in which we compared perceptions of someone who lacks preferences to a control (i.e., unchanged) character, in Study 2 we compared someone who lacks preference to someone with a specific preference.

Study 2 also rules out several alternative explanations for the effect. Firstly, one could argue that a person without a preference may be dehumanized because they are perceived as generally unable to feel pleasure (i.e., “Because he doesn’t have preference, he must not be able to experience enjoyment, and therefore he is a robot.”). However, our theory would predict that people will also dehumanize someone who lacks a preference for feeling too much pleasure and is unable to choose because they like all available options the same. Indeed, we posit that a person without preference is dehumanized due to lack of preference specifically, rather than an inability to feel pleasure from the outcome of the decision. We rule out inability to feel pleasure in Study 2 by leveraging a scenario that explicitly emphasizes the character’s interest in maximizing his enjoyment (i.e., signing up for a massage). However, it is still possible that participants in the indifferent (vs. preference) condition believed that John was unable to experience pleasure. To provide evidence that dehumanization results from a lack of preference, rather than an inability to experience enjoyment, we conducted Supplemental Study 2 with 323 participants (see Online Supplement C for full details). In this study, we described someone as either having a preference among a set of dinner options, having no preference because they disliked all options (i.e., the person experiences conflict). We measured mechanistic dehumanization as in Studies 1–2. Participants perceived an indifferent person as significantly more mechanistic than an individual with a preference, regardless of the underlying reason for the indifference (i.e., whether they were indifferent because they liked or disliked all options). This significant pattern of results suggests that the observed effect is unique to lacking preference, regardless of whether or not the person experiences enjoyment.

Secondly, people who fail to express a preference may actually have one, but choose to withhold it for any number of reasons. Thus, one could argue that participants may assume that the character does indeed have a preference but is failing to express and act on it. However, as the scenario described the inner thoughts of the character and not merely his outward expression of preference or lack thereof, it is unlikely that social or self-presentational concerns drive the observed effect.

Studies 1–2 demonstrate that people mechanistically dehumanize a person who lacks a preference that is otherwise positive (e.g., no preference for a massage). Because holding a preference in this situation could be seen as more positive than not holding a preference, it is unclear whether perceived positivity is driving these results. To address this, Study 3 compared a negative preference (i.e., a least favorite preference) with holding no preference.

9. Study 3: Lack of preference (vs. “anti-preference”) causes dehumanization

Studies 1–2 established the dehumanizing effect of lacking preference, yet neither study compared lack of preference with holding a negative preference, that is, an “anti-preference” (i.e., option disliked the most). From an impression-management perspective, holding an anti-preference might lead to negative consequences. Indeed, people regard individuals who criticize others as more intelligent, but less likeable (Amabile, 1983). What effect might it have on one’s perceived humanity, however? According to our theory, if dehumanization results from lacking preference more broadly, holding any preference, be that a positive or negative preference, should be perceived as similarly humanizing, as it serves to differentiate the individual from others. However, if dehumanization results from a lack of positive preference specifically, someone who expresses an anti-preference (i.e., option disliked the most), should be dehumanized similarly to someone who lacks a preference. To examine whether lacking preference dehumanizes even when compared with holding an anti-preference, Study 3 compared lacking preference with holding a positive and negative preference. That is, we introduced an “anti-preference,” wherein someone is described as having an option they dislike the most. The inclusion of the anti-preference condition further rules out the possibility that the effect is driven by a lack of fun, or anhedonia, as holding an anti-preference is negative in valence.

Participants read a scenario about two women, who entered a sweepstakes for a free vacation. Half of participants read that one of the women indicated that she didn’t have a preference. The remaining participants instead read that one woman indicated what her most preferred vacation destination was, while the other woman indicated that she didn’t have a preference. The participants then rated both women on the mechanistic dehumanization measures from Studies 1–2 and rated the extent to which they could imagine both women as distinct people. We predicted that lacking a preference would be dehumanizing when compared to holding a preference, or holding an “anti-preference” and that this would be mediated by perceived distinctiveness.

9.1. Method

9.1.1. Participants

A total of 203 US-based Prolific participants (51.50% men; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.36, SD = 12.75$) participated for $0.45$. We aimed for a minimum of 100 participants per cell and used this standard in the remaining studies.

9.1.2. Procedure

This study employed a 2 (valence: positive vs. negative, between-subjects) × 2 (preference: preference vs. indifference, within-subject) mixed model design.

Participants read that a popular hotel chain was offering a
sweepstakes, with the chance to win a free 7-day vacation to one of six possible destinations. Participants in the positive valence condition read that entrants were asked what their most preferred vacation destination was from six options (Hawaii, Mexico, Napa & Sonoma, Costa Rica, Alaska, and Scotland). Participants in the negative valence condition read that entrants were asked what their least preferred vacation destination was from the same six options.

Participants read that two women, Alex and Beth, were entering the sweepstakes. In the positive-valence “preference” condition, one woman was Alex, who indicated that her most preferred destination was Hawaii. In the negative-valence “anti-preference” condition, one woman indicated that her least preferred destination was Napa & Sonoma. In both conditions, the other woman indicated “Don’t have a preference.” Presentation order (preference vs. indifference) was counterbalanced. Participants then rated their impressions of both Alex and Beth on the six-item mechanistic dehumanization scale (α = 0.73), as well as the distinctiveness measure used in Studies 1–2. We also included the clarity measure used in prior studies (see Online Supplement A for results).

### 9.2. Results

A repeated-measures ANOVA of preference (indifference vs. preference) as the within-subject factor and valence (positive vs. negative preference) as the between-subjects factor on dehumanization revealed a significant effect of preference. As predicted, participants perceived the indifferent character as significantly more mechanistic than the character with a preference (M\text{Indifference} = 3.36, SD = 1.12; M\text{Preference} = 2.81, SD = 0.92), F(1, 199) = 32.97, p < .001, n_p^2 = 0.14. There was also a significant interaction between preference and valence, F(1, 199) = 6.81, p = .010, n_p^2 = 0.03, such that the effect of preference on dehumanization was stronger in the positive valence, “preference” scenario (M\text{Preference} = 3.51, SD = 1.16; M\text{Indifference} = 2.71, SD = 0.95), t (102) = 5.27, p < .001, d = 0.52, than in the negative valence, “anti-preference” scenario (M\text{Indifference} = 3.20, SD = 1.05; M\text{Anti-preference} = 2.90, SD = 0.88), t(99) = 2.61, p = .011, d = 0.26, although both effects were significant. There was no main effect of valence condition, F(1, 199) = 0.27, p = .607, n_p^2 < 0.01, nor effects involving counterbalancing, F < 1.56, ps > 0.213.

We next examined distinctiveness. A repeated-measures ANOVA of preference condition (indifference vs. preference) and valence condition (positive vs. negative) on distinctiveness revealed a significant effect of preference condition, such that the person without a preference was perceived as less distinct (M\text{Indifference} = 3.49, SD = 1.54) than the one with a preference (M\text{Preference} = 4.08, SD = 1.53), F(1, 199) = 13.27, p < .001, n_p^2 = 0.06. There was no significant effect of valence, F(1, 199) = 0.37, p = .544, n_p^2 < 0.01, nor valence × preference interaction, F(1, 199) = 0.18, p = .668, n_p^2 < 0.01, indicating that the effect of preference on distinctiveness was significant for the positive-valence scenario, F(1, 199) = 5.58, p = .019, n_p^2 = 0.03, and negative-valence scenario, F(1, 199) = 7.80, p = .006, n_p^2 = 0.04. There was no significant effect or interactions involving order, F < 1.97, ps > 0.325.

Our theory predicts that distinctiveness perceptions should mediate the relationship between preference (or lack thereof), regardless of valence, and dehumanization. In line with our theory, a mediational analysis revealed that distinctiveness perceptions mediated the effect of preference (or lack thereof) on mechanistic dehumanization (B\text{Indirect} = -0.18, SE = 0.07, 95% CI = [-0.33, -0.07]; MEMORE Model 1; Montoya & Hayes, 2017).

### 9.3. Discussion

Study 3 provides further evidence for the dehumanizing effect of lacking preference. Those with preferences, regardless of whether the preference was positive or negative in valence, were perceived as more distinct, and thus more human, than those who lacked a preference. This finding complements prior research suggesting that negativity can serve to differentiate. For example, people who have a high need for uniqueness are less willing to make positive recommendations about a product (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010) and negative product reviews are more differentiated than positive ones (Amabile, 1983). Beyond documenting further evidence for the theory, Study 3 examined the effect in a different context (travel) and leveraged a different design (within-subject manipulation of preference) than Studies 1–2, which speaks to the robustness of the effect.

Crucially, our theory hinges on the idea that lacking preference dehumanizes because it shows that one’s identity is indistinct or generic. If this logic holds true, it would suggest that having a unique preference should reduce dehumanization by others compared to having a generic preference because the latter provides less distinction from others. For example, a common preference for chocolate ice cream is more generic than a preference for maple bacon ice cream, which is much rarer, and thus the former preference should consequently lead to greater dehumanization. We investigate this possibility in Study 4.

### 10. Study 4: Generic (vs. unique) preference causes dehumanization

Studies 1–3 examined mediation of lacking preference on dehumanization through distinctiveness. To make a stronger causal argument for this process, Study 4 examined moderation by preference distinctiveness. Specifically, we compared holding a unique preference versus no preference and a unique preference versus a generic (commonplace) preference. We predicted that, in line with the theory, people would dehumanize someone with no preference compared to someone with a preference, either generic or unique, but that people are more likely to dehumanize someone with a generic (vs. a unique) preference.

Participants were asked to read a short scenario about a man named Mark who was dining with some friends. Some participants read that Mark had a preference for the chocolate ice cream (generic preference), while others read that he preferred the maple bacon ice cream (unique preference). The remaining participants instead read that Mark did not have a preference and was indifferent among the options. Participants then rated Mark on the mechanistic dehumanization measures from Studies 1–3 and, as a manipulation check, rated the extent to which they viewed him as a distinct person.

### 10.1. Method

#### 10.1.1. Participants

We pre-registered this study (https://aspredicted.org/br3vd.pdf) and recruited a total of 301 undergraduate and graduate students from an online participant pool at a Northeastern university (23.9% men; M\text{Age} = 23.15, SD = 5.36). Students participated either in exchange for the chance to win a $25 Amazon gift card or for course credit (85.4% for lottery).

#### 10.1.2. Procedure

This study employed a 3 (preference: unique preference vs. generic preference vs. indifference) × 2 (between-subjects design. Participants read that a man named Mark was at dinner with some new friends and the diners were placing orders for dessert. Participants in the unique preference condition read that Mark preferred and ordered the maple bacon ice cream from a choice of five options (chocolate, rocky road, cookies & cream, mint chocolate chip, and maple bacon). Participants in the generic preference condition read that Mark instead preferred and...
ordered the chocolate ice cream. Those in the indifferent condition read that Mark did not have a preference and was indifferent among the options, so he chose a flavor randomly and ordered the chocolate ice cream. Thus, in the generic and no preference conditions, we held the outcome constant, but manipulated whether this outcome was driven by no preference or a generic preference.

Participants then rated their impressions of Mark on the six-item mechanistic dehumanization scale ($\alpha = 0.72$). We measured distinctiveness in this study as a manipulation check, given that this study manipulated degree of distinctiveness. Lastly, to assess strength of preference, we asked “to what extent do you think Mark preferred the ice cream flavor he ended up with compared to the other flavors? (1 = didn’t have a preference at all for the specific flavor; 7 = had a strong preference for the specific flavor).

10.2. Results

10.2.1. Preference manipulation check

We first confirmed that participants believed Mark had a stronger preference in the unique preference condition (vs. no preference condition) ($M_{unique\ preference} = 5.33, SD = 1.07$; $M_{difference} = 2.96, SD = 1.61$), $t(298) = 12.48, p < .001, d = 1.76$, and in the generic preference condition (vs. no preference condition) ($M_{generic\ preference} = 5.38, SD = 1.29$; $M_{difference} = 2.96, SD = 1.61$), $t(298) = 12.77, p < .001, d = 1.81$, with no significant difference between the two preference conditions, $t < 1, p > .795$.

10.2.2. Distinctiveness manipulation check

We next confirmed that our manipulation significantly affected distinctiveness. An ANOVA of preference condition (indifference vs. unique preference vs. generic preference) revealed a significant main effect of preference condition, $F(2, 298) = 70.70, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.32$. The character without a preference was perceived as less distinct ($M_{difference} = 2.80, SD = 1.19$) than the one with a unique preference ($M_{unique\ preference} = 4.84, SD = 1.47$), $t(298) = -11.17, p < .001, d = -1.60$. The character with the generic preference was also perceived as less distinct than the character with a unique preference ($M_{Generic\ preference} = 3.18, SD = 1.21$), $t(298) = -9.13, p < .001, d = -1.29$. There was also a significant difference between no preference and generic preference conditions, $t(298) = 2.06, p = .040, d = 0.29$.

10.2.3. Hypothesis testing

An ANOVA with the three preference conditions serving as the between-subjects factor revealed a significant main effect of preference condition, $F(2, 298) = 18.21, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.11$ (Fig. 3). As predicted, participants perceived the indifferent character as significantly more mechanistic than the character with a unique preference ($M_{difference} = 3.57, SD = 0.99$; $M_{unique\ preference} = 2.78, SD = 0.87$), $t(298) = 6.01, p < .001, d = 0.85$, as well as the character with a generic preference ($M_{Generic\ preference} = 3.11, SD = 0.90$), $t(298) = 3.49, p < .001, d = 0.49$. Also in line with our prediction, participants perceived the character with a generic preference as more mechanistic than the character with a unique preference, $t(298) = 2.54, p = .012, d = 0.36$.

10.3. Discussion

Study 4 provided further evidence for the proposed process—that lacking preference leads to dehumanization, at least in part, because it causes a person to be perceived as less distinct. Indeed, even someone with a generic preference was dehumanized compared with someone holding a unique preference, precisely because their commonplace preference failed to sufficiently differentiate them from others to the same degree. We also report a replication of this study using vanilla instead of chocolate ice-cream in Online Supplement D (Supplemental Study 3).

Having replicated the basic effect of lack of subjective preference on mechanistic dehumanization and provided evidence for the proposed mechanism in four separate studies, our remaining studies examine downstream consequences that follow from expressing a lack of preference. Given that information about subjective preferences is commonly communicated by applicants during the interview process and even conveyed by businesses via their online employee profiles, we examine whether lacking preference impairs a person’s reputation and the work they produce as it relates to having a more human mind. Specifically, the next study tested whether people judge service providers and their work more negatively if service providers fail to express preference (or not), and examine the conditions under which this effect is likely to be stronger.

11. Study 5: Moderation by need for a human mind

So far, we have documented that lack of preference causes dehumanization. Study 5 was designed to provide additional evidence of the process and to demonstrate a downstream consequence of this effect for evaluation of a person’s reputation. We predicted that people would expect a service provider lacking a preference (vs. holding a preference) to have lower performance potential. We expected this effect to be stronger in situations in which consumers desire a creative skillset (i.e., a more human mind capable of experiencing emotion) than a technical skillset (i.e., a more robotic mind).

We asked participants to consider hiring an interior designer to renovate their bedroom. We manipulated whether participants were looking to hire an interior designer with a creative skillset or a technical skillset. We reasoned that for an interior designer to personalize a room, they need traits that are at odds with mechanistic dehumanization (i.e., creativity, empathy), whereas technical skills can be found in both humans and mechanistically dehumanized entities. This is in line with prior research which demonstrated that businesspeople are perceived as rational and self-controlled, but lacking emotion and warmth and are hence associated with robots (Loughnan & Haslam, 2007).

We further manipulated whether the interior designer was described as indifferent or having preferences and measured participants’ satisfaction with the designer. We predicted an interaction between task requirement (creative vs. technical skills) and preferences (present vs. absent), such that participants would be less satisfied with an indifferent designer (vs. one with preferences) when the interior design project required more creativity. However, we expected this effect of preference on satisfaction to weaken for a project requiring more technical skills. We further tested whether this interaction effect is mediated by mechanistic dehumanization, such that lacking (vs. holding) a preference reduces satisfaction with a worker via mechanistic dehumanization when creativity is required, which would attenuate when technical skills are required (i.e., moderated mediation).
11.1. Method

11.1.1. Participants

We pre-registered this study (https://aspredicted.org/8rh78.pdf) and recruited 401 US-based Prolific participants (51.4% men; M_{age} = 33.31, SD = 12.48) for $0.45.

11.1.2. Procedure

This study employed a 2 (interior designer preference: indifference vs. preference) × 2 (task requirements: creative vs. technical) between-subjects design.

Participants considered redesigning a bedroom and viewed a picture of the room they wanted to hire an interior designer to help them renovate. They learned that they had provided an interior design firm with a general idea of what they were looking for, and an interior designer would be chosen for them.

In the creative condition, participants learned “You are looking for someone high on creative skills (can create a personalized and comfortable atmosphere). This person would be highly imaginative with fun facts about Mark’s favorite food and music, as well as several pieces of work-related information (e.g., education and industry experience). All information was identical across conditions, with the exception of answers to the “fun fact” questions about favorite food and music. Those in the preference condition read: “New York style pizza with basil and hot oil,” and “Classic rock and hip-hop,” respectively. Those in the indifferent condition instead saw the following response to both prompts: “Don’t have a preference.”

Participants then viewed a profile of an interior designer named Mark. The profile included two “fun facts” about Mark’s favorite food and music, as well as several pieces of work-related information (e.g., education and industry experience). All information was identical across conditions, with the exception of answers to the “fun fact” questions about favorite food and music. Those in the preference condition read: “New York style pizza with basil and hot oil,” and “Classic rock and hip-hop,” respectively. Those in the indifferent condition instead saw the following response to both prompts: “Don’t have a preference.”

Participants answered two comprehension check questions and then indicated their satisfaction with the interior designer by answering “How pleased are you with the service representative that was chosen for your project?” (1 = not at all pleased; 7 = very pleased). We then measured our proposed mediator, mechanistic dehumanization, using the six-item scale from Studies 1–4 (α = 0.80).

11.2. Results

11.2.1. Mechanistic dehumanization

An ANOVA of preference condition (indifference vs. preference) and task requirement (creative vs. technical skills) on mechanistic dehumanization revealed a main effect of preference; mechanistic dehumanization was greater in the indifference (vs. preference) condition (M_{Indifference} = 3.82, SD = 1.05; M_{Preference} = 2.81, SD = 0.95), F(1, 397) = 101.05, p < .001, η^2_p = 0.20, consistent with our main hypothesis. There was no significant effect of task requirement, F(1, 397) = 0.03, p = .868, η^2_p < 0.01, and no significant interaction between preference condition and task requirement, F(1, 397) = 0.14, p = .706, η^2_p < 0.01.

11.2.2. Satisfaction with chosen service representative

We next examined satisfaction with the interior designer. In line with or theorizing, an ANOVA of preference condition and task requirement on satisfaction resulted in a significant interaction, F(1, 397) = 3.98, p = .047, η^2_p = 0.01 (Fig. 4). Participants seeking a creative person to help them personalize their room were less satisfied when Mark lacked (vs. had) preferences (M_{Indifference} = 4.28, SD = 1.61; M_{Preference} = 5.03, SD = 1.16), F(1, 397) = 17.87, p < .001, η^2_p = 0.04. However, this effect of preference significantly attenuated when participants were looking for a person with a technical skillset (M_{Indifference} = 4.89, SD = 1.14; M_{Preference} = 5.14, SD = 1.07), F(1, 397) = 2.00, p = .158, η^2_p < 0.01.

There was a main effect of required skill-set (M_{Technical} = 5.02, SD = 1.11; M_{Creative} = 4.66, SD = 1.45), F(1, 397) = 8.16, p = .005, η^2_p = 0.02, and preference condition (M_{Indifference} = 4.58, SD = 1.43; M_{Preference} = 5.09, SD = 1.11), 15.93, p < .001, η^2_p = 0.04.

According to our theory, the effect of preference via dehumanization on how pleased people are with the service representative should depend on the type of task the representative is engaging in. More specifically, our model predicts an interaction between preference (present vs. absent) and job skills required (technical vs. creative) on satisfaction, and between dehumanization and job skills required. Specifically, people will be less pleased with a service representative they are hiring for a job requiring creative (vs. technical) skills who expresses no preference (vs. a preference) because the relationship between dehumanization and task satisfaction is stronger for creative (vs. technical) tasks. We test our hypothesis that dehumanization mediates the preference × task type interaction on satisfaction with work output, using a moderated mediation analysis (Hayes, 2015, Model 15, see Fig. 5). The moderated mediation for the indirect effect was significant (β_{Indirect} = 0.45, SE = 0.12, 95% CI = [0.21, 0.68]), revealing that the indirect effect of preference on satisfaction via dehumanization was significantly stronger for a creative task, B = 0.80, SE = 0.11, 95% CI = [0.60, 1.02], than for a technical task, B = 0.35, SE = 0.10, 95% CI = [0.16, 0.58]. In conclusion, the results of Study 5 support the idea that lacking a preference decreases satisfaction with a creative task by increasing dehumanization, but that this pathway is reduced for a technical task.

11.3. Discussion

Study 5 revealed that people were less satisfied with hiring an interior designer who expressed no preference (vs. held a preference) when they needed help with a task requiring creativity. While lacking preference also reduced satisfaction for an indifferent person (vs. one with a preference) for a more technical job, a task that can be performed by humans and robots alike, it did not hamper perceptions to the same degree. In addition, we note that this is the first study to provide a main effect of required skill-set (M_{Technical} = 5.02, SD = 1.11; M_{Creative} = 4.66, SD = 1.45), F(1, 397) = 8.16, p = .005, η^2_p = 0.02, and preference condition (M_{Indifference} = 4.58, SD = 1.43; M_{Preference} = 5.09, SD = 1.11), 15.93, p < .001, η^2_p = 0.04.

Decomposing this interaction another way, whereas people were similarly satisfied with a person who had a preference regardless of task requirement, F (1, 397) = 0.37, p = .542, η^2_p < 0.01, they were significantly less satisfied with an indifferent person when seeking creative (vs. technical) skills, F(1, 397) = 11.73, p < .001, η^2_p = 0.03.

Fig. 4. Study 5: Degree of satisfaction with the service representative was moderated by the nature of the task. (*** p < .001).
12. Study 6: Lack of subjective preference harms work a person produces

Study 6 examined how dehumanizing a person who lacks preference affects evaluations of the creative output of a person’s work, holding actual work output constant. Using a similar interior design paradigm as Study 5, participants learned that the interior designer would help them with both the design and technical execution of the renovation and viewed before and after pictures of the room. Participants then rated how creative, generic, and tailored to their vision the room appeared. We predicted that people would mechanistically dehumanize a person who lacks (vs. has) a preference and, as a result, negatively evaluate his work on “human” dimensions of genericity and responsiveness (tailored to one’s vision), as well as creativity. We expected this to occur even when holding the person’s objective work output – the room design – constant across conditions.

12.1. Method

12.1.1. Participants

A total of 209 US-based MTurk workers (60.77% men; $M_{age}$ = 35.61, $SD = 12.18$) participated for $0.40.

12.1.2. Procedure

This study employed a 2 cell (interior designer preference: indifference vs. preference) between-subjects design. Participants considered redesigning their bedroom and viewed pictures of the room. They learned they wanted to hire an interior designer to help redecorate and refurbish it. They were additionally told that they had provided an interior design firm with a general idea of what they were looking for, and an interior designer named Mark would help with both the design choices and technical details in execution. Importantly, the interior design firm they chose provided them with one interior designer, whose profile they then viewed. We manipulated preference condition using answers to the “fun fact” questions about the applicant’s favorite food and music, as in Study 5.

Participants answered two comprehension check questions to assess their understanding of the scenario. All participants read that, in conversing with the designer, they decided on a modern look with a neutral color palette, but had given the designer creative freedom. Participants then saw before and after pictures of the room, which were identical in both conditions (Fig. 6).

Participants rated the interior designer on the mechanistic dehumanization items ($\alpha = 0.82$) and evaluated the room on the following dimensions, which we averaged together ($\alpha = 0.74$): 1. creativity of design ($1 = \text{not at all creative}; 7 = \text{very creative}$), 2. how tailored it was to the vision the designer was given ($1 = \text{not at all tailored}; 7 = \text{perfectly tailored}$), and 3. how generic the design looked ($1 = \text{not at all generic}; 7 = \text{very generic}$; reverse-coded). Participants then chose whether they would hire the same interior designer again to design other rooms in their house (yes / no).

12.2. Results

12.2.1. Mechanistic dehumanization

In line with Study 5, participants perceived the designer without preference as significantly more mechanistic than the one with preference ($M_{indifference} = 3.56, SD = 1.17$; $M_{preference} = 2.88, SD = 1.19$), $t(207) = 4.20, p < .001, d = 0.58$.

12.2.2. Evaluation of work output

Next, we examined evaluation of the room as a function of preference condition. A room designed by an interior designer lacking preference (vs. having preference) was evaluated less positively overall ($M_{indifference} = 4.12, SD = 1.20$; $M_{preference} = 4.69, SD = 1.18$), $t(207) = -3.45, p < .001, d = -0.48$. That is, the room was perceived as less creative, less tailored, and more generic when it was the output of a service provider lacking (vs. holding) a preference. This was true despite participants viewing identical pictures of the room across conditions. These results suggest that the dehumanization effect extends beyond a person’s reputation and can harm perceptions of the work they produce as it relates to having a human mind, in line with our theorizing. Indeed, a mediational analysis of preference condition on room evaluations through mechanistic dehumanization yielded a significant indirect effect ($B_{indirect} = 0.41, SE = 0.11, 95\% CI = [0.20, 0.64]$), suggesting that lack of preference harmed evaluations of the designer’s work by increasing mechanistic dehumanization.

12.2.3. Rehiring decision

To examine how preference (vs. lack thereof) affects rehiring decisions, we conducted a chi-square analysis of choice on preference condition. As predicted, significantly fewer people wanted to rehire an indifferent interior designer (58%) than one with preferences (82%), $\chi^2(1, N = 209) = 14.46, p < .001, \phi = 0.26$, despite the fact that we held actual work output constant across conditions. The effect of preference on rehiring decision was also mediated by mechanistic dehumanization ($B_{indirect} = -0.54, SE = 0.18, 95\% CI = [-0.95, -0.25]$).

12.3. Discussion

Study 6 extended our findings to evaluations of a person’s professional work: a person lacking preference was perceived as producing lower quality work, which was driven by perceptions of mechanistic dehumanization. That is, holding the work output constant (i.e., room design), a room designed by a person lacking preference was perceived as less creative, more generic, and less tailored than the same room designed by a person described as having preferences. This further
affected rehiring decisions; participants were likely to rehire an interior designer who did not have preferences than one who did.

We note that while the results of this study support our theory that the dehumanized essence of the designer transferred into the work he produced, the effect could also be driven by mere association, which has been acknowledged in attitude research (Dimofte & Yalch, 2011; Walther, 2002). More specifically, perceptions of the room might have been weakened not by a transfer of essence, but rather by sharing a negative association with the dehumanized person. With the data we collected, we cannot completely rule out this possibility.

Although Study 6 provides strong evidence in favor of our theory, two limitations are evident. Firstly, the order of the variables in the study may have contributed to the effect. More specifically, the dehumanization items, which served as the mediator in aggregate, were presented before the main dependent variables, room evaluation and rehiring decision. As we did not counterbalance measurement order, we cannot rule out the possibility that the dehumanization items affected responses to the subsequent measures.

To address this possibility, we conducted Supplemental Study 4 with 190 participants (see Online Supplement E for full details), which leveraged a nearly identical scenario to that used in Study 6, without measuring mechanistic dehumanization. Excluding the dehumanization measures, we replicated the previous effects. A room designed by an interior designer lacking (vs. having) a preference was evaluated less positively ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 3.75, SD = 1.21; M_{\text{Preference}} = 4.17, SD = 1.05$), $t(188) = -2.57, p = .011, d = -0.37$, and fewer people wanted to rehire this indifferent interior designer (45% vs. 60%), $\chi^2(1, N = 190) = 4.16, p = .041, \phi = 0.15$.

Secondly, though we aimed to provide a realistic manipulation of preference often used by companies and employees, describing preferences as “fun facts,” this method may have rendered the indifferent person boring given they are missing a concrete answer for a question labeled as “fun.” To rule out this alternative explanation, we conducted Supplemental Study 5 with 62 participants (see Online Supplement E for full details). In this study, participants read about a coworker named John who was being promoted and was tasked with choosing the wall color and desk placement for his new office. John was described as having clear preferences (i.e., for blue walls and his desk placed beneath a window) or as not having preferences for either decision. The benefit of this manipulation of preference, compared with the “fun fact” manipulation from Studies 5–6, is that these preferences, while still subjective, are not construed as “fun” and are quite personal in nature (i.e., John’s choices have minimal impact on others). Participants then rated John on the six-item mechanistic dehumanization scale used in Studies 1–6. In support of our hypothesis, there was a significant effect of preference: John was perceived as more mechanistic when he did not have preferences for his new office wall color and layout than when he did ($M_{\text{Indifference}} = 3.79, SD = 1.06; M_{\text{Preference}} = 3.24, SD = 1.07$), $t(60) = 2.03, p = .047, d = 0.52$. This supplemental study provides additional evidence that the results of Studies 5–6 are not driven by inferences that the person omitting a preference is not fun and therefore less human, but rather that the key to the effect is lacking preference specifically.

13. General discussion

Across six main studies and five supplemental studies, we found that people make inferences about others who lack preference, leading to mechanistic dehumanization, with consequences for people’s professional reputation and the work they produce. First, we demonstrated that a cognitive impairment causing a person to no longer have preferences leads the person to be more dehumanized because they are seen as less distinct, compared with a cognitive impairment that causes no changes in preference (Study 1). We further found that this effect extends to an ordinary choice context, choosing a massage, and occurred even when the preference, or lack of preference, was described as a personal belief, thereby ruling out alternative accounts tied self-presentation (Study 2). Studies 1–2 assessed both mechanistic and animalistic dehumanization, and demonstrated a stronger effect of lack of preference on mechanistic dehumanization, suggesting that lacking preference dehumanizes because one is seen as more robotic (i.e., cold and mechanical).

The effect of lacking a preference on mechanistic dehumanization held when controlling for valence signaled by holding a preference (i.e., having a “favorite” or “least favorite” option) – lacking preference dehumanized compared with holding a preferred option or least preferred option (Study 3). Providing further evidence for the proposed process, lacking preference leads to mechanistic dehumanization because it makes people seem less distinct (Studies 1–4). Indeed, people dehumanize those with generic preference more so than those with unique preference (Study 4).

Importantly, lacking preference has implications for evaluations of workers and their work. Lacking preference led to mechanistic dehumanization, which decreased satisfaction with a service provider, especially for tasks requiring human mindfulness (i.e., personalization

Fig. 6. Study 6: All participants regardless of condition saw the same before pictures (white room) and after pictures (grey room) of the bedroom they were told they were renovating.
and creativity) than tasks requiring a more technical skillset (Study 5). This degraded evaluation resulting from mechanistic dehumanization extended to the evaluation of the work itself (Study 6 and Supplemental Study 4). These effects are robust, occurring across a variety of domains and contexts, with diverse manipulations and dependent measures. They also hold when using participants from different online pools (i.e., MTurk, Prolific) and a student sample.

13.1. Theoretical implications

Broadly, this research offers several theoretical implications for research on impression formation and management. Abundant literature has documented that people strive to differentiate themselves from others to internally maintain a distinct sense of self (Brewer, 1991; Breakwell, 1986; Vignoles, Chryssochoo, & Breakwell, 2000). The current research suggests that such differentiation is also important to advertise externally. Indifference for a particular choice may not seem material to our perception of our own humanity, likely because we are acutely aware of our unique pattern of preferences across domains. However, others lack such detailed information about us and judge us more harshly in its absence, exhibiting a form of actor-observer asymmetry (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Thus, peoples’ motivation for differentiation is apt: failing to sufficiently distinguish ourselves by highlighting a preference leads others to see us as less human.

We also connect to other areas of research that examine perceptions of those who pass on the opportunity to state a preference (i.e., delegation or abdication). For example, recent research finds that people at times prefer to delegate their choices to others, allowing others to decide for them instead of making the decision themselves (Steffel & Williams, 2017; Steffel, Williams, & Perrmann-Graham, 2016). Doing so has been found to benefit decision makers by diffusing responsibility for a bad outcome. However, one possibility is that delegating a decision to another person could lead the decision maker to come off as more robotic than if they had just stated their preference, despite any other benefits that abdicating confers (Kardas, Shaw, & Caruso, 2018).

This work also adds to research on dehumanization and related literatures on infrahumanization and objectification. While existing work has identified animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization as separate constructs, the current research meaningfully extends existing literature by providing evidence for an antecedent to mechanistic dehumanization specifically: lack of subjective preferences. Furthermore, by documentating the effect in commonplace contexts, our work contributes to the growing body of literature investigating precursors of dehumanization in interpersonal and intergroup settings (Haslam & Bain, 2007; Leyens et al., 2003). For example, with regard to mechanistic dehumanization, prior research demonstrated that people perceive the Chinese as lacking emotions, like happiness and love (Bain, Park, Kwok, & Haslam, 2009), and that focusing people on women’s appearance leads to objectification (Loughnan et al., 2010). We show that an individual who simply fails to possess a preference is perceived by others as more robotic and colder compared to someone who has a preference, even for something as inconsequential as a variant on massage techniques or choice of ice cream for dessert.

13.2. Practical implications

These findings offer managerial implications for workers and organizations. Given the humanizing effect of preferences, job applicants could consider including hobbies and other types of preferences on their resumes to be seen as more human in the eyes of hiring committees. They can further tailor this information depending on the hiring context (i.e., if the context is technical, providing preferences may be less useful).

Similarly, organizations can emphasize employees’ preferences to potential clients by publishing “fun facts” about their employees on their websites. This is especially relevant in contexts in which a single person, such as a CEO, acts as the spokesperson for a brand and whose preferences (or lack thereof) are broadcast to the public either through interviews, public appearances, or via a company website. In these cases, a perception of a lack of subjective preferences could potentially harm their reputation, as well as that of their work and the brand they represent. Well-known brand representatives, especially those who are already perceived as machine-like, could potentially benefit from playing up their unique preferences to appear more human to their stakeholders. This likely matters most for industries where having a human mind, and specifically, emotional intelligence, is perceived as important to success, such as advertising or interior design firms, where customers pay a premium for creativity and personalization.

Companies might also want to emphasize their preferences at the organizational level in their corporate messaging to come across as more human. For example, instead of saying “we use local produce” in advertising campaigns, a restaurant could reframe the message as “we use (and love) local produce.” This strategy might be especially useful for companies seeking to improve goodwill after corporate crises. Previous work has shown that corporate apologies are more effective when made by companies perceived as more human, such as those imbued with the ability to feel via the presence of a CEO, who is seen as the human embodiment of the organization (Tang & Gray, 2018). Thus, emphasizing the preferences of employees as well as of the organization as a whole might help customers humanize, and more quickly forgive, the company for wrongdoing.

This work also has implications for a range of interpersonal interactions. Oftentimes, people simply do not have a preference as they truly do not care about the ultimate outcome. Other times, they may be afraid that their unpopular preference will not be well-received by others. Our research suggests that, in these situations, failing to state a preference could make people appear less human. This is of consequence, as even relatively mild forms of dehumanization can leave individuals feeling degraded, invalidated, demoralized, guilty, and ashamed (Hinton, 2004; Sue et al., 2007) and can even lead to states of cognitive impairment characterized by reduced clarity of thought, emotional numbing, and cognitive inflexibility (Bastian & Haslam, 2011; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003). To avoid such outcomes, individuals should consider stating a preference when faced with a subjective choice among alternatives in the presence of others. Even stating an anti-preference, that is, highlighting which option one dislikes the most, could prevent dehumanization (as we observe in Study 3). Stating an anti-preference may be especially useful when one is nervous about revealing a potentially unpopular preference.

In demonstrating how a lack of preferences leads to mechanistic dehumanization, our research also has implications for the opposite pathway: how to humanize truly non-human entities, such as robots or companies. Possibly, assigning a preference to a non-human agent will serve to humanize it. To test this idea, we conducted a study (see Supplemental Study 6 in Online Supplement G for full details) asking 206 MTurk workers to read that the Amazon Echo and its voice-controlled personal assistant service Alexa, either had a favorite song (“My favorite song is ‘Here Comes the Sun’ by The Beatles”) or did not (“I don’t have a favorite song. I’m better with factual questions”). Participants rated Alexa on a five-item anthropomorphism scale (Waytz et al., 2010; α = 0.95): the extent to which Alexa appeared to (1) have a mind of its own, (2) have intentions, (3) have free will, (4) have consciousness, and (5) experienced emotions (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). Alexa was perceived as more human when described as having a preference (M = 3.50, SD = 1.69) than not (M = 3.00, SD = 1.77), t(204) = 2.06, p = 0.041, d = 0.29, an effect with important, practical implications. A plethora of research has demonstrated both the positive and negative effects that brand anthropomorphism has on consumer attitudes towards product performance in terms of trust, liking, and persuasiveness (e.g., Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011; Gray & Wegner, 2012). The current work suggests that a simple way to anthropomorphize non-human entities, such as smart devices, is to program them to have
preferences, like a favorite song or book.

13.3. Future directions

The current research takes an initial step at broadening our understanding of how preferences relate to identity and, at the same time, opens up additional questions for future research. For example, if preferences are causally-central to identity, necessary for perceived continuity of identity (Chen, Urminsky, & Bartels, 2016), lacking preference may disrupt perceptions of one’s own identity. Indeed, a lack of preference might erode personal identity by weakening the links among the other features of identity that are connected with preferences, such as memories. This would have consequences for intra- and interpersonal perception. For example, people may assume that a person without preferences does not have sufficient memory of lived experiences to have formed a preference in the first place. Or, at the very least, it might imply that the person does not have enough mental capacity to personally reflect upon their experiences.

Future research should also explore situations in which a person without a preference might actually be preferred. Study 5 demonstrated that the type of task in which someone is engaged in moderates perceptions of the indifferent person, such that others are less pleased with someone who is indifferent for more mindful tasks compared with more technical ones. Given that an indifferent person is attributed less mind, another potentially interesting context to explore is the purchase of embarrassing items. For instance, people might prefer to have a store clerk that is indifferent when buying a guilty pleasure, as the clerk is perceived as less human and thus less capable of judgment. Or they may prefer their doctor not to have preferences for more (vs. less) intimate procedures (Schroeder, Fishbach, Schein, & Gray, 2017).

As this work develops, attention should be paid to antecedents and boundary conditions for the dehumanization effect. The results presented in this research apply to contexts governed by a specific set of assumptions, which we believe are quite common in everyday life. As discussed in the introduction, we operationalized lack of preference over a focal choice set of sufficient size and with enough variability in the options so that someone with preferences could indeed distinguish among them. We operated under the assumption that lack of preference over unfamiliar, very small choice sets, and/or those for which the options were extremely similar would not lead to the same degree of mechanistic dehumanization. Similarly, emphasizing strong subjective preferences in another domain when expressing indifference for a decision that, to the observer, clearly has an objectively correct answer might erode perceptions of the indifferent person, such that others are less pleased with someone who is indifferent for more mindful tasks compared with more technical ones. Given that an indifferent person is attributed less mind, another potentially interesting context to explore is the purchase of embarrassing items. For instance, people might prefer to have a store clerk that is indifferent when buying a guilty pleasure, as the clerk is perceived as less human and thus less capable of judgment. Or they may prefer their doctor not to have preferences for more (vs. less) intimate procedures (Schroeder, Fishbach, Schein, & Gray, 2017).

Overall, we find that lacking preference increases dehumanization due to lack of distinctiveness, with important consequences for impression management. Thus, the next time you’re at a hiring dinner with some potential new colleagues, rather than go with the flow and let others decide what to order, advertising a clear preference, albeit coupled with a recognition of others’ likes as well, can signal your humanness to a greater extent than saying “anything is fine with me.”

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jessica M. Lopez: Project administration, Investigation, Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing - original draft. Kaitlin Woolley: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing - review & editing. Ann L. McGill: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing - review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgbeh.2021.01.002.

References


