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Beyond Propensity: Thresholds, Costs, and Interventions in Negotiation Avoidance

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Abstract

The benefits of negotiating are well documented. However, anecdotal evidence and market trends suggest that many people choose not to negotiate when given the opportunity. Previous research has identified several contextual factors that influence the decision about whether to initiate negotiation. Across five studies involving 5,881 Americans, we seek to build upon that work by investigating the economic magnitude of negotiation avoidance. We find that 95% of individuals choose not to negotiate up to 51% of the time (Study 1). We introduce the concept of Threshold for Negotiation Initiation (TFNI), which seeks to quantify the point at which individuals believe negotiation becomes worthwhile (Study 2). We find that 49.7% of adults report a Willingness to Pay to Avoid Negotiation (WTP-AN) (Study 3). We demonstrate that both TFNI and WTP-AN are not static sums of money but are irrationally price-contingent. We test two interventions designed to encourage negotiation: comparing the value of negotiating to one's actual hourly wage (Study 4) and manipulating the perceived social norm of negotiating (Study 5). Finally, we outline opportunities for future research to further investigate avoidance behavior and potential interventions to increase negotiation initiation.

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Opportunities to negotiate—social interactions aimed at reaching agreements that improve the parties' status quo—are ubiquitous (Boothby et al., 2023). From purchasing cars and electronics to negotiating job offers or rent, individuals constantly face situations where bargaining can lead to meaningful financial and relational benefits (Bazerman et al., 2000; Babcock & Laschever, 2003). Despite the well-documented benefits of negotiation, many individuals routinely opt out of it. Market trends—such as fixed-price dealerships, no-haggle marketing, and streamlined online purchasing—reflect widespread preferences for avoiding negotiation (Harris & Mowen, 2001; Cox Automotive, 2018). Indeed, up to 85% of buyers prefer fixed-price or online options (Lavietes, 2019).

Personal experience often mirrors this aversion. During a market stroll at a negotiation research event in Tel Aviv, even we—negotiation scholars—chose not to haggle over prices, despite ideal conditions for doing so. That moment sparked a realization: if negotiation experts are inclined to avoid negotiation in everyday settings, how often do laypeople make the same choice—and how much are they willing to give up to do so? Although scholars have long recognized that negotiation can be psychologically uncomfortable (Small et al., 2007; Reif & Brodbeck, 2014), much of the literature has focused on when individuals are likely to initiate negotiation under specific conditions—such as gender dynamics (Babcock et al., 2006; Bowles et al., 2007), power

asymmetries (Magee et al., 2007; Lammers et al., 2008), or message framing (Small et al., 2007)—rather than on how much avoidance occurs or how individuals evaluate the cost of negotiating. Prior research has also identified cognitive and emotional antecedents of avoidance, including anxiety about relational strain (Small et al., 2007; Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011) and sensitivity to social norms (Reif & Brodbeck, 2017; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Despite these insights, the precise economic magnitude of negotiation avoidance remains largely unexplored—specifically, how much individuals are willing to sacrifice, or even pay, to avoid negotiating altogether.

This gap carries important implications. While prior research has highlighted the psychological discomfort that often deters individuals from negotiating (e.g., O'Connor et al., 2010; Small et al., 2007), our understanding remains incomplete without assessing its behavioral and economic consequences. It is one thing to know that people feel anxious about negotiation; it is another to understand what that discomfort costs—in terms of money left on the table or premiums paid to avoid negotiating (Shalvi et al., 2013). This distinction is critical, as quantifying the economic impact of avoidance can reshape how we theorize negotiation behavior and design interventions. If people routinely forgo negotiation opportunities, what guides their decision to engage or not? Is there a financial threshold below which negotiation feels unjustifiable? Do some individuals experience such strong discomfort that they are willing to pay extra to avoid it altogether? These questions remain underexplored, despite their relevance to consumer decision-making, labor markets, and organizational practice. Moreover, many negotiation interventions assume that individuals are willing to negotiate if provided with the right tools or incentives (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). But what if the primary barrier is not ability or opportunity—but the decision to initiate in the first place?

To address these questions, we conducted five preregistered studies examining how frequently people avoid negotiation, how they determine the financial threshold at which negotiation becomes worthwhile, whether they are willing to pay to avoid negotiation, and whether targeted interventions can reduce avoidance. Drawing on insights from behavioral economics (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Thaler, 1980) and psychological models of motivation (e.g., De Dreu, 2004; Griesinger & Livingston, 1973), we conceptualize negotiation avoidance as shaped by cognitive heuristics—particularly percentage-based savings thresholds that may obscure absolute value considerations. While affective barriers such as anxiety and discomfort are commonly cited in the literature as contributing factors to negotiation avoidance (e.g., Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011), our study focuses specifically on the cognitive domain. We introduce and operationalize two novel behavioral constructs: the Threshold for Negotiation Initiation (TFNI), which reflects the minimum perceived savings required to trigger negotiation, and Willingness to Pay to Avoid Negotiation (WTP-AN), capturing the extent to which individuals are willing to incur monetary costs to bypass a negotiation. Additionally, we examine the effectiveness of two cognitive interventions—a "Utility Comparison" nudge and a "Social Norm" manipulation—in reducing avoidance behaviors by encouraging more deliberate and socially contextualized decision-making.

This work contributes to the negotiation literature in three main ways. First, it quantifies the prevalence and behavioral costs of negotiation avoidance, moving beyond prior research that has focused largely on antecedents of initiation propensity (e.g., Bowles et al., 2007; Volkema & Fleck, 2012). Second, it introduces and validates TFNI and WTP-AN as behavioral indicators that reflect the economic impact of negotiation barriers. Third, we assess the impact of interventions targeting salience and norm perceptions—offering practical tools for scholars, educators, and organizations seeking to reduce negotiation avoidance. Together, these contributions expand the conceptual scope of negotiation research—from understanding whether people will negotiate to

examining when they choose not to, how much it costs them, and what interventions might reduce avoidance.

Theoretical Background

Understanding Negotiation Avoidance: Concept and Scope

Although negotiation permeates everyday life and offers well-documented benefits, individuals frequently choose not to negotiate even when clear opportunities arise (Cox Automotive, 2018; Lavietes, 2019; Evans & Beltramini, 1987). This behavior—negotiation avoidance—represents more than missed opportunity; it reflects a patterned behavioral tendency that has become the subject of significant scholarly inquiry (Reif & Brodbeck, 2014). However, this work has largely focused on identifying the psychological antecedents of avoidance, while its direct behavioral and economic consequences have received less empirical attention.

Negotiation avoidance refers to the deliberate decision to forgo initiating a negotiation (Bear & Segel-Karpas, 2015; Reif & Brodbeck, 2014). It is conceptually distinct from related constructs such as poor negotiation performance (Thompson, 1990), difficulty in claiming value (Curhan et al., 2006), or lack of opportunity to negotiate (Volkema & Fleck, 2012). Avoidance often stems from anticipatory judgments that negotiation will be effortful, socially inappropriate, or ultimately unproductive (Reif & Brodbeck, 2014; Small et al., 2007). While prior research has examined who is likely to initiate negotiation and under which conditions—focusing on factors such as gender (Babcock et al., 2006; Bowles et al., 2007), power dynamics (Magee et al., 2007), cultural norms (Volkema, 2009, 2012), and message framing (Small et al., 2007)—less is known about how frequently people avoid negotiation or what economic costs such avoidance entails.

Notably, even experienced or highly competent negotiators may choose to avoid initiating negotiations in contexts where the social or emotional stakes feel particularly high (Bear & Segel-Karpas, 2015; Volkema & Fleck, 2012). This highlights that avoidance is not merely a function of skill or experience but is also shaped by perceived relational and psychological costs. Individuals may refrain from negotiating not because they are unable, but because they expect it could damage relationships, violate implicit norms, or lead to discomfort or rejection (Curhan et al., 2008; Gelfand et al., 2006). To better understand these dynamics, it is essential to consider the psychological mechanisms that underlie people's reluctance to negotiate—particularly the cognitive and emotional barriers that may drive such decisions.

Why People Avoid Negotiation: Emotional and Cognitive Barriers

A growing body of research suggests that both emotional responses and cognitive biases significantly influence individuals' decisions to avoid negotiation. Emotionally, negotiation is often perceived as an anxiety-provoking situation, driven by the fear of rejection, potential damage to interpersonal relationships, and concerns about social appropriateness (Curhan et al., 2008; Miles, 2010; Small et al., 2007). This discomfort arises not only from the inherent tension of the bargaining process but also from its potential to threaten personal identity and interpersonal relationships (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Kong et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2025). Beyond these relational concerns, individuals may also fear more tangible consequences—such as the possibility that initiating negotiation could lead to the withdrawal of an offer (Hart et al., 2024). These anxieties can be particularly salient in ambiguous or power-asymmetric settings (Kapoutsis et al.,

2013, 2017) and may disproportionately affect individuals negotiating on their own behalf, especially women (Bowles et al., 2005; Bear, 2011).

Cognitive barriers also play a substantial role in shaping avoidance behavior. A central tenet of behavioral economics and decision literature is that individuals frequently rely on heuristics—mental shortcuts—to navigate uncertainty (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Thaler, 1980). One relevant heuristic in the context of negotiation is percentage-based thinking: the tendency to assess the value of negotiating based on the relative rather than absolute monetary benefit. For instance, individuals may be more willing to negotiate for a $10 discount on a $20 item than for the same $10 on a $1,000 item, because the former represents a larger percentage of the total price—even though the absolute savings are identical (Shalvi et al., 2013; Thaler, 1980). This suggests that effort and outcome evaluations are often anchored to proportionate thresholds, not absolute utility—a key insight for understanding behavioral thresholds in negotiation initiation.

Importantly, these cognitive and emotional barriers may not operate in isolation. Prior research suggests, for example, that emotional arousal—particularly anxiety—can increase an individual's reliance on heuristics, leading to more conservative or risk-averse decision-making (Tiedens & Linton, 2001). Anxious individuals may therefore be more likely to default to heuristics that undervalue potential gains or exaggerate potential losses, thereby reducing the likelihood of initiating a negotiation. In a similar vein, social norms and expectations can contribute to avoidance by framing negotiation as atypical or inappropriate in certain contexts (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Reif & Brodbeck, 2017), further lowering the perceived acceptability of negotiation behavior.

While emotional discomfort, cognitive simplification, and norm sensitivity are well-established in negotiation theory (e.g., Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Reif & Brodbeck, 2017), their behavioral consequences have rarely been captured as direct economic trade-offs. Prior research has often relied on self-report measures of intent or affect rather than on observable costs—such as money willingly sacrificed—or on quantifiable thresholds that guide avoidance decisions (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Bowles et al., 2007; Magee et al., 2007; Small et al., 2007). In contrast, the present work focuses on behavioral expressions of these psychological dynamics, using decisions like whether to negotiate or how much to forgo as indirect indicators of underlying discomfort or heuristics. This approach aligns with behavioral science traditions that infer internal states from choice patterns and revealed preferences (Falk & Heckman, 2009). To advance this perspective, we introduce two constructs—Threshold for Negotiation Initiation (TFNI) and Willingness to Pay to Avoid Negotiation (WTP-AN)—which operationalize avoidance in economic terms and illuminate how it unfolds in practice.

Behavioral Indicators of Negotiation Avoidance: TFNI and WTP-AN

TFNI, or Threshold for Negotiation Initiation, refers to the minimum expected benefit—typically framed in monetary terms—that an individual requires in order to justify starting a negotiation. It does not reflect the anticipated outcome of the negotiation itself, but rather the entry point at which initiating the process is perceived as worthwhile. This threshold reflects a cognitive judgment in which individuals weigh the perceived benefits of negotiation against its subjective costs, such as time, effort, and potential psychological discomfort (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011). Research suggests that individuals often anchor this threshold to relative (percentage-based) rather than absolute values, consistent with heuristic-driven decision-making patterns observed in

consumer behavior and prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Thaler, 1980). For example, a person may be reluctant to negotiate unless the potential savings exceed 10% of the listed price, even when an identical dollar amount would be available in another context. This reveals a systematic bias in how people evaluate negotiation opportunities, often resulting in economically irrational outcomes.

WTP-AN, or Willingness to Pay to Avoid Negotiation, on the other hand, captures the extent to which individuals are prepared to incur a financial cost in order to forgo the negotiation process altogether. This construct reflects the behavioral expression of affective discomfort—particularly negotiation-related anxiety, social apprehension, and anticipated relational tension (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Shalvi et al., 2013). Rather than assessing emotional states through introspective self-reports, WTP-AN infers their presence through economically consequential choices: the decision to sacrifice material gain for psychological relief. Conceptually, this approach aligns with the logic of revealed preferences in behavioral economics, where individuals' actions under trade-off conditions are used to infer latent utilities and aversions (Falk & Heckman, 2009; Thaler, 1980). In the context of negotiation, a willingness to pay to avoid negotiation suggests that the perceived emotional or social cost of negotiating is substantial—comparable to, or exceeding, objective economic value. WTP-AN thus serves as a proxy for affective aversion, operationalizing avoidance in a way that bridges psychological theory and decision behavior.

Together, TFNI and WTP-AN offer complementary perspectives on how negotiation avoidance is shaped by psychological processes. TFNI captures the cognitive threshold at which negotiation becomes a worthwhile option, while WTP-AN reflects the affective cost individuals associate with engaging in negotiation. This distinction is critical because it reveals that people avoid negotiating for two different reasons: sometimes the potential reward is not perceived to be worth the effort (TFNI), while other times the process itself is sufficiently aversive that they will pay a premium to avoid it (WTP-AN).

Reducing Avoidance: Behavioral Interventions Targeting Cognitive and Normative Barriers

Given that negotiation avoidance is shaped by both cognitive heuristics—such as percentage-based thinking (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979)—and affective discomfort, including anxiety about social judgment or fear of backlash (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Small et al., 2007), insights from behavioral science offer a robust basis for designing interventions to mitigate these barriers (Hertwig & Grüne-Yanoff, 2017; Thaler, 2021). In this research, we adapt and test two such approaches: a Utility Comparison intervention, which increases the salience of opportunity costs by prompting individuals to compare potential savings to their hourly wage, and a Social Norm intervention, which highlights descriptive norms to reframe negotiation as a common and accepted behavior (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Hsee et al., 2003).

The Utility Comparison intervention is designed to address cognitive misperceptions by increasing the perceived value of negotiation. Drawing on cost-benefit framing techniques (Frederick et al., 2009; Hsee et al., 2003), this intervention prompts individuals to compare potential negotiation savings to their hourly wage. The goal is to help people recognize that the return on time invested in negotiation may exceed that of other productive activities. By shifting attention from abstract percentages to concrete labor-value comparisons, the intervention aims to recalibrate TFNI and reduce underestimation of negotiation's economic utility.

The Social Norm intervention is intended to reduce the social and emotional costs of negotiation

avoidance. By informing participants that the majority of peers or individuals in similar contexts do, in fact, engage in negotiation, the intervention works to reframe negotiation as a normative behavior. This aligns with decades of research showing that descriptive norms—information about what others commonly do—can strongly influence decision-making and reduce resistance to socially sensitive actions (Cialdini et al., 1990; Goldstein et al., 2008). For individuals who fear seeming inappropriate or confrontational, learning that negotiation is a common and accepted practice may mitigate relational concerns and lower WTP-AN.

Both interventions thus aim to influence different aspects of avoidance behavior. The Utility Comparison targets cognitive evaluations of cost and benefit, while the Social Norm intervention addresses affective and normative concerns. Together, these approaches offer theoretically grounded and practically scalable strategies for addressing the psychological barriers to negotiation and for promoting engagement by lowering perceived thresholds and emotional costs.

Overview of Studies

To investigate the pervasiveness of negotiation avoidance and assess potential interventions, we conducted five large, preregistered studies, all with participants from the United States. This methodological choice was intentional. Prior research has shown that negotiation initiation is strongly shaped by national culture (Volkema, 2009), with individuals in low-context cultures like the U.S. generally more inclined to negotiate directly than those in high-context cultures (e.g., Japan, China), where social harmony and indirect communication are more valued (Adair et al., 2001; Volkema, 2009). Focusing on the U.S. therefore offers a conservative test of our research questions: finding high levels of negotiation avoidance in a context that encourages direct communication highlights the robustness and generalizability of these barriers. We discuss the importance of extending this work to other cultural settings in the Future Research section.

To guide our investigation, we focused on four central questions: How common is negotiation avoidance? What financial threshold makes negotiation feel worthwhile (TFNI)? Are individuals willing to pay to avoid negotiation (WTP-AN)? And can behavioral interventions reduce avoidance? Study 1 examines the prevalence of negotiation avoidance, documenting both the proportion of individuals who forgo negotiation and how often they do so. Study 2 explores the existence of a Threshold for Negotiation Initiation (TFNI), testing whether percentage-based thinking shapes price-contingent thresholds. Study 3 investigates whether individuals are willing to incur real financial costs to avoid negotiation (WTP-AN), and how this varies by price. Study 4 tests a Utility Comparison intervention, which frames negotiation savings in terms of hourly wage, while Study 5 evaluates a Social Norm intervention that presents negotiation as common and socially acceptable. Together, these studies offer a systematic investigation of negotiation avoidance and potential strategies for mitigating it.

Study 1: Negotiation Avoidance is the Norm, Not the Exception

Study 1 explores the frequency and extent of negotiation avoidance among individuals. Specifically, it seeks to document how many individuals choose to forgo negotiation opportunities and how often they make this choice. By providing descriptive evidence of this behavior, the study lays the groundwork for understanding the pervasiveness of negotiation avoidance and its practical implications.

The study procedure, sample size, exclusions, predictions, and data analysis plan were

preregistered on the Open Science Framework[1]. We recruited participants through the Prolific platform, with 2,002 individuals completing the study. After excluding 12 participants who failed the attention check in accordance with the preregistered exclusion criteria, the final sample consisted of 1,990 participants (51.1% female, 65.4% Caucasian), with an average age of 33.7 years (SD = 12.0).

After consenting to the study, participants were asked, "Was there ever a time that you had the opportunity to negotiate but decided not to?" (Yes/No). They were then asked, "What percent of the time do you choose NOT to negotiate when you could?" Participants answered using a slider scale from 0 to 100. If participants answered "yes" to the first question, they were prompted to list the reasons for avoiding negotiation. All participants then completed an attention check and basic demographic questions, including gender, age, race, annual income, and level of education.

Results

The findings revealed that 77.3% of respondents reported having chosen to avoid negotiations at some point, indicating that negotiation avoidance is a widespread phenomenon in the United States. Further, only 4.6% of participants indicated that they never avoid negotiation, suggesting that up to 95.4% of participants sometimes choose not to negotiate. On average, participants indicated that they avoid negotiating in nearly half (48.6%) of the situations where they have the opportunity to do so. When excluding the 4.6% of participants who reported never avoiding negotiation, the average avoidance rate increased to 51.0%.

Although we did not formulate specific predictions regarding gender, it remains a central topic in negotiation research (Mazei et al., 2015; Stuhlmacher & Walters, 1999)—particularly in relation to initiation behaviors (Eriksson & Sandberg, 2012; Reif et al., 2019). Prior work suggests that women may be less likely to initiate negotiations under certain conditions (e.g., Babcock et al., 2006). Accordingly, we report exploratory gender analyses for each study to inform future research. These findings were not hypothesized a priori and should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

In the present study, women (74.7%) were less likely than men (80.1%) to answer "Yes" when asked whether there was ever a time that they had the opportunity to negotiate and decided not to. A chi-square analysis confirmed that this difference was significant ($X2$ [1, N = 1,988] = 8.20, $p = .004$). However, a t-test demonstrated that the percentage of time women (M = 55.22%, SD = 26.37) chose not to negotiate was higher than the percentage of time men (M = 46.60%, SD = 26.29) chose not to negotiate, $t(1894) = -7.13$, $p < .001$. One possible explanation for this apparent contradiction is that while women may avoid negotiation more frequently overall, such instances might stand out more for men because negotiating aligns more strongly with traditional gender norms. As a result, men may be more likely to recall and report moments when they deviated from this norm, even if they occur less often.

Overall, the results of Study 1 provide compelling evidence that negotiation avoidance is prevalent among the general population. Between 77% and 95% of individuals reported avoiding negotiation opportunities, with avoidance occurring in 48% to 51% of cases. These findings reveal that negotiation avoidance is not an exception but a common behavioral trend.

[1] https://osf.io/y7s8k/?view_only=d2190d3ff0e04d388cf8a9c14b581dc7

Study 2: Establishing a Threshold for Negotiation Initiation (TFNI)

Study 2 examines whether individuals have a psychological threshold, referred to as the "Threshold for Negotiation Initiation" (TFNI), at which they perceive negotiation to be financially worthwhile. This study also explores whether this threshold is influenced by the price of the product, highlighting how cognitive biases, such as percentage-based thinking, shape negotiation behavior. To explore this, we examined participants' responses across four price conditions: $20, $200, $2,000, and $20,000. The study's sample, exclusion criteria, materials, predictions, and data analysis plan for this study were preregistered on the Open Science Framework[2]. Based on a small effect size (f = .10) at 80% power for 4 conditions, we recruited 1,200 participants in the United States via the Prolific platform, excluding individuals who participated in Study 1. After applying the preregistered exclusion criteria, four participants who failed the attention check were removed, leaving a final sample size of 1,196 (53.8% female, 67.4% Caucasian), with an average age of 35.2 years (SD = 13.2).

To ensure participants' focus and understanding, they first read an introductory prompt emphasizing the importance of careful reading and thoughtful responses. The prompt stated: "On the next page, you will be asked one question about NEGOTIATING. Specifically, we will ask when you would be willing to INITIATE or START a negotiation. Please read the question carefully. In order to give you adequate time, you will not be able to advance to the next screen for 20 seconds." (capitalization/bolding in the original).

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of four price conditions: $20, $200, $2,000 and $20,000. They were asked to imagine purchasing an electronic device at the assigned price point. Our choice of electronics was intentional, based on the need for a product category that is (a) gender-neutral and (b) plausibly spans a wide price range—from low-cost items like headphones or USB drives ($20) to high-end technology such as smart home systems or professional drones ($20,000). Since electronics are not typically negotiated for in retail settings in the U.S., we deliberately left the study scenario open-ended. This ambiguity allowed participants to imagine a variety of plausible purchase contexts, including second-hand online markets, where bargaining for electronics is both common and socially normative.

Participants were then prompted to adjust a slider scale to indicate the minimum savings they would require to initiate negotiation (i.e., "If I knew I could save $_____ by negotiating for this electronic device, I would initiate a negotiation."). The scale ranged from 0 to the full price of the item, and participants were required to spend at least 20 seconds on the page to ensure thoughtful responses. Demographic information was collected afterward.

Table 1 Negotiation Thresholds by Condition

Condition	*N*	Threshold in $		Threshold as a % of Price
		M	*SD*	*M*
$20	300	$7.24	3.89	36.20%
$200	299	$52.58	39.80	26.29%
$2,000	301	$437.96	431.14	21.90%
$20,000	296	$5,336.18	5,508.49	26.68%

[2] https://osf.io/xb4m7/?view_only=25b1e7ee71a2456db560938866163df9

Results

The mean thresholds for each price condition are displayed in **Table 1**, both as dollar amounts and as percentages of the product's price. A significant difference in mean dollar thresholds was found across conditions ($F[3, 1{,}192]) = 264.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta p2 = .40$). As expected, participants' negotiation thresholds aligned more closely with a percentage of the product price rather than a fixed dollar amount. An exploratory moderation analysis revealed that the interaction term of price and gender did not significantly impact TFNI ($p = .633$), indicating that gender did not moderate the effect of price on TFNI.

Although classical economic theory suggests that individuals should be equally motivated to negotiate for a fixed amount of savings—regardless of the item's price (e.g., saving $20 on a $50 item should be as valuable as saving $20 on a $500 item; see Kahneman & Tversky, 1979)—our findings suggest otherwise. Participants appeared to rely on a percentage-based heuristic when evaluating whether negotiation was worthwhile. Specifically, the required savings thresholds were 26.7%, 21.9%, 26.3%, and 36.2% for items priced at $20,000, $2,000, $200, and $20, respectively. These results indicate that negotiation initiation decisions are not driven by absolute dollar amounts but rather by perceived proportional value. On average, participants required anticipated savings of 21% to 36% of the item's price before considering negotiation justified.

Study 3: Willingness to Pay to Avoid Negotiations (WTP-AN)

Building on evidence of a price-contingent threshold (TFNI) that influences when negotiation feels worthwhile, Study 3 examines the financial cost of negotiation aversion by assessing the extent to which individuals are willing to pay a premium to avoid the discomfort of negotiating—a construct we refer to as Willingness to Pay to Avoid Negotiation (WTP-AN). Specifically, we tested whether individuals would pay more than the average market price of an item simply to bypass a negotiation. This question is particularly relevant for businesses targeting negotiation-averse consumers with offers like "no haggling" or fixed pricing. We sought to answer the following: Are some individuals willing to pay a premium to avoid negotiating? How common is this preference, and how much more are these individuals willing to pay? Finally, is this avoidance premium also sensitive to the price of the item, as observed with TFNI?

The study's sample, exclusions, materials, predictions, and data analysis plan were preregistered on the Open Science Framework[3]. We recruited U.S.-based participants through Prolific, excluding those who had participated in previous studies. A total of 1,102 participants completed the questionnaire, with three excluded for failing the attention check per preregistered criteria. This left a final sample size of 1,099 participants (50.6% female, 71.0% Caucasian), with an average age of 34.8 years ($SD = 11.5$).

After consenting to the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of two price-based conditions: $2,000 or $20,000. They were asked to imagine purchasing a car and were presented with two side-by-side advertisements featuring identical cars. The left advertisement, labeled "Shop A," included the phrase "WE NEGOTIATE," while the right advertisement, labeled "Shop B," featured the phrase "WE DON'T NEGOTIATE."

[3] https://osf.io/kxym3/?view_only=ab79aa7dc22a4cdba57e57b2a6138267

Participants were first asked to indicate which shop they would likely choose, followed by an open-ended question to assess how much more they would be willing to pay to avoid negotiating. Specifically, participants were presented with the following prompt: "The average price of the car is $2,000 ($20,000). Fill in the blank with the number that makes this statement TRUE FOR YOU: 'I would be willing to pay $_____ MORE than the price of the car in order to avoid negotiating.'" After completing this task, participants provided demographic information.

Results - Main Effects

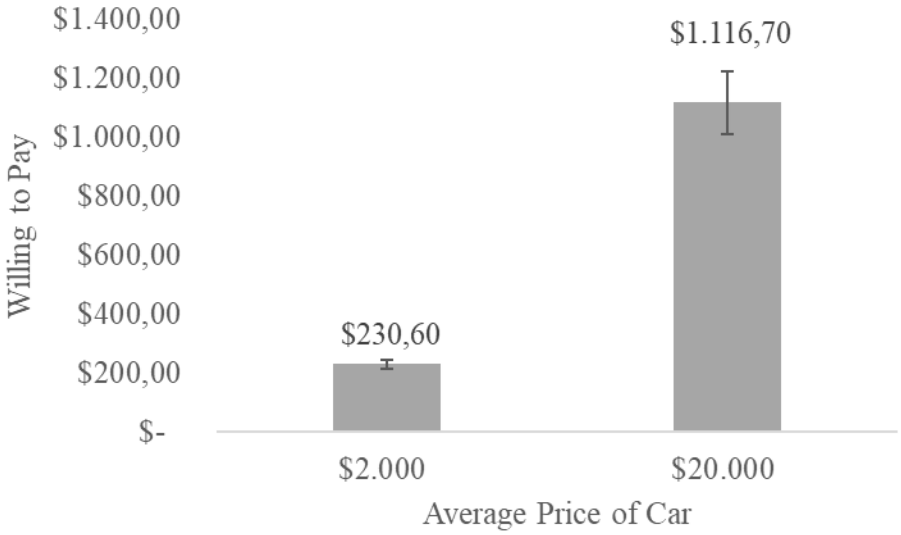
The primary goal of this study was to examine participants' responses to an open-ended question asking how much they would be willing to pay to avoid negotiating. The open-response format was intentionally used to give participants flexibility and to avoid anchoring their responses with preset ranges. After data collection, responses were cleaned and standardized. Non-numeric answers—such as "No" or "I want to negotiate"—as well as a single negative value indicating unwillingness to pay, were recoded as zero. Numeric entries were standardized by removing formatting elements such as dollar signs and commas. Of the 1,099 participants, 546 (49.68%) reported a willingness to pay more than $0 to avoid negotiation.

Several responses contained substantial outliers—for example, one participant indicated a willingness to pay $170,000 to avoid negotiating for a $20,000 car. These extreme values, while not clearly erroneous, were classified as "influential outliers" due to their potential to distort central tendency estimates (Aguinis et al., 2013). To address this, and in line with best-practice recommendations for transparency and robustness (Aguinis et al., 2013), we conducted parallel analyses using both the full dataset and a trimmed dataset excluding these outliers. The substantive conclusions were consistent across both approaches.

Results Excluding Outliers. We first used the common interquartile range (IQR) method for identifying outliers. We calculated IQR for each condition, multiplied it by 1.5, and used this to establish cutoffs by adding to the third quartile and subtracting from the first quartile. Specifically, in the $2,000 condition, outliers were defined as values below -$650.00 or above $1,350.00, resulting in the exclusion of 61 outliers. Similarly, in the $20,000 condition, outliers were defined as values below -$6,281.25 or above $11,768.75, leading to the exclusion of 51 outliers. After applying these criteria, 434 participants who indicated a willingness to pay to avoid negotiation were included in the final analysis.

Analysis of the cleaned dataset using a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference between conditions in the amounts participants were willing to pay to avoid negotiation ($F[1, 432] = 79.18$, $p < .000$, $\eta p2 = .15$). Participants buying a $20,000 car were willing to pay an average of $1,116.70 (5.58% of the price) to avoid negotiating, which was significantly higher than the $230.60 (11.53% of the price) reported by participants buying a $2,000 car (see **Figure 1**). These findings demonstrate that the premium individuals are willing to pay to avoid negotiation is contingent on price.

Figure 1. Amount Participants are Willing to Pay Above the Vehicle's Average Price to Avoid Negotiating



Results Including Outliers. An ANOVA including all outliers revealed a similar pattern of results. Participants in the $20,000 condition (M = $2,702.35, SD = $11,006.50) were willing to pay significantly more to avoid negotiating than those in the $2,000 condition (M = $390.25, SD = $1,487.63), $F(1, 1097) = 23.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta p2 = .02$.

Results - Exploratory Findings

Although we did not make any a priori predictions regarding the first question in the study ("Which shop would you choose?"), we considered it valuable to explore. This question sought to examine whether individuals would express a preference for a shop that negotiates while later revealing a willingness to pay to avoid negotiation—potentially reflecting a sense of obligation to negotiate despite underlying reluctance. The descriptive results revealed a notable inconsistency. While 72.90% of respondents indicated they would choose Shop A (the shop that negotiates), yet 49.68% of these same respondents later reported being willing to pay extra to avoid negotiation. This exploratory finding raises questions about whether individuals feel socially or personally obligated to negotiate despite a reluctance to do so, or if the phrasing of the question (e.g., highlighting perceptions of flexibility) influenced the appeal of Shop A, even for those who did not intend to negotiate. Future research should explore these possibilities to better understand the cognitive and contextual factors underlying these choices.

In addition, we observed an unexpected finding regarding participants' willingness to pay to avoid negotiation across price conditions. Analyses revealed that only 46.18% of participants in the $20,000 condition were willing to pay to avoid negotiation, compared to 53.19% in the $2,000 condition. A chi-square analysis confirmed a significant difference between these two conditions ($X2$ [1, N = 1,099] = 5.39, $p = .02$). This unexpected result suggests that the willingness to pay to avoid negotiation may vary depending on price, although this finding was not hypothesized and should be interpreted with caution. Future research is needed to explore how price influences individuals' willingness to pay to avoid negotiation and to clarify the underlying factors driving

this behavior. An exploratory moderation analysis revealed that the interaction term of price and gender did not significantly impact WTP-AN ($p = .239$), indicating that gender did not moderate this effect.

Study 4: Utility Comparison Intervention

Study 4 examined whether targeted interventions could encourage individuals to initiate negotiations and avoid leaving money on the table. Specifically, the Utility Comparison intervention, was designed to make the value of negotiation salient by prompting individuals to compare their potential savings from negotiating to their hourly wage. We hypothesized that this comparison would increase participants' likelihood of initiating a negotiation.

The study's sample, predictions, materials, exclusions, and data analysis plan were preregistered on the Open Science Framework[4]. Based on a G*Power analysis with a small effect size at 80% power with two conditions, we recruited U.S.-based participants via Prolific. Individuals who had participated in previous studies were excluded. The final sample consisted of 800 respondents, of whom 54.1% were female and 72.5% identified Caucasian, with a mean age of 34.9 years (SD = 12.3).

After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to either the control condition or the intervention condition. In the intervention condition, participants were prompted to enter their current hourly wage in U.S. dollars. Following data collection, we manually removed dollar signs and commas from their responses to create a numeric variable; any non-numeric entries (e.g., "I am a student", "Retired") were coded as $0, and one incomprehensible response was excluded from analyses. Participants in the control condition were not asked about their hourly wage and proceeded directly to the study scenario.

All participants read a scenario describing the purchase of a car priced at $16,999. Participants were informed that while the car was technically affordable, that this price exceeded their desired spending limit. They were also told that the average buyer can save $2,000 by negotiating for four hours, which equates a rate of $500 per hour. This information was highlighted in bright red to draw attention and was displayed for at least 10 seconds to ensure comprehension. Participants then answered the primary dependent measure: "How likely are you to actually start a negotiation with the car dealer?" (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely, bold-faced font in original). The study concluded with participants providing basic demographic information.

Results

Hourly wages reported ranged from $0.00 to $105.00, with a mean of $22.90 per hour—significantly lower than the $500 per hour savings highlighted in the scenario. To test our prediction that prompting participants to consider their hourly wage would increase their likelihood of initiating a negotiation, we conducted a one-way ANOVA. The analysis revealed no significant difference between conditions ($M_{control} = 5.6$, $M_{wage} = 5.4$, $p = .113$).

Consistent with previous research (Babcock et al., 2006), exploratory analyses revealed a significant main effect of gender on the likelihood of initiating negotiation, such that men ($M = 5.8$, $SD = 1.5$) were more likely than women ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.7$) to report being likely to initiate

[4] https://osf.io/wyms3/?view_only=e02d7f31fab54cd394a85d231bce9efe

a negotiation, $F(1, 798) = 16.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta p2 = .02$, although the effect size is quite small.

The nonsignificant main effect in this study suggests that simply asking participants to report their hourly wage was not a strong enough intervention to emphasize the utility of initiating a negotiation. It is notable that participants did not exhibit a significant increase in their inclination to negotiate, even when confronted with such a stark contrast—$500 per hour for negotiating versus an average hourly wage of $22.90.

The manipulation we used in Study 4 may seem weak or insufficient to the reader, and one may think that results may have been different with the use of a stronger stimulus. However, in the process of doing this research, we ran several pilot studies using multiple different ways to help participants consider the financial value of their time spent negotiating. For example, one "heavier" manipulation we tried was specifically asking participants to report how much money they would have to save per hour during the negotiation to make negotiating worthwhile. None of these manipulations were successful at making participants more likely to initiate negotiation, leading us to conclude that making economic benefits more salient is not sufficient to overcome the psychological and emotional barriers that drive negotiation avoidance. Indeed, we agree with previous scholars that the decision to negotiate is likely influenced by factors beyond purely instrumental considerations (e.g., Reif & Brodbeck, 2014).

Study 5: Social Norm Intervention

Study 5 investigated whether highlighting social norms could increase the likelihood of initiating a negotiation. Specifically, we examined whether manipulating perceived norms would function as an effective intervention to encourage negotiation initiation. This approach reflects the notion that anxiety related to the perceived appropriateness or social norms of negotiation can deter individuals from engaging in it. This study's sample size, materials, predictions, exclusion criteria, and data analysis plan were preregistered on the Open Science Framework[5]. As with Study 4, our sample size was determined using a G*Power analysis with a small effect size, 80% power, and two conditions.

A total of 801 U.S.-based participants were recruited through Prolific, excluding those who had participated in previous studies. Five participants were excluded for failing a simple attention check, per preregistered criteria, resulting in a final sample size of 796 participants. Of these, 49.5% were female, 76.5% were Caucasian, and the mean age was 38.3 years ($SD = 14.0$).

After providing informed consent, participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario describing the purchase of a couch on Craigslist, accompanied by a picture and an asking price. They were then randomly assigned to either a control condition or a social norm condition. In the latter, participants were told that 80% of Americans negotiate when purchasing items on Craigslist. Although simple, this one-sentence manipulation acts as a stylized proxy for how individuals infer norms in real-world settings. We believed that this manipulation would be effective in influencing participant behavior in the same way that individuals would be influenced by any social norm information, whether it came from an internet source, something they heard from a friend, or something they have ascertained through personal experience.

Subsequently, all participants rated how likely they would be to initiate a negotiation on a scale from 1 ("I will DEFINITELY NOT initiate a negotiation") to 7 ("I will DEFINITELY initiate a negotiation"). Points 2 through 6 were intentionally left unlabeled to avoid encouraging satisficing

[5] https://osf.io/yvfs6/?view_only=c7852e3c5df546cbae8880407da6f286

or default "neutral" responses, a common concern in survey research when midpoint anchors are explicitly labeled (Krosnick, 1991; Spector, 1992). This design was intended to prompt more thoughtful, continuous evaluations of participants' behavioral intentions. The study concluded with demographic questions.

Results

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test whether participants in the social norm condition would be more likely to initiate a negotiation than those in the control condition. The analysis revealed a significant difference between conditions ($F[1, 794] = 34.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta p2 = .04$), with participants in the social norm condition ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.8$) being more likely to initiate a negotiation than those in the control condition ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.9$).

An exploratory moderation analysis revealed that the interaction term of condition and gender did not significantly impact likelihood of initiating negotiation ($p = .282$), indicating that gender did not moderate this effect. However, consistent with the exploratory findings in Study 3, there was a main effect of gender on likelihood of initiating a negotiation, such that men ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.8$) were more likely than women ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.9$) to initiate a negotiation, $F(1, 794) = 13.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta p2 = .02$, although the effect size is again quite small.

The significant main effect results demonstrate that highlighting negotiation as a common and socially accepted behavior effectively encourages individuals to engage in it, supporting the potential of norm-based interventions to address negotiation avoidance. While these findings align with classic research on social norms (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990), this study extends that body of work by applying it to the domain of negotiation, which is uniquely characterized by cognitive and emotional barriers, such as anxiety and perceived relational risks. Unlike prior studies on norm-based interventions in more straightforward behavioral domains—such as environmental conservation (Goldstein et al., 2008) or voting behavior (Gerber & Rogers, 2009)—this study demonstrates that emphasizing descriptive norms can reduce avoidance in a complex, high-stakes interpersonal context like negotiation (Zhang et al., 2021).

Discussion

The present research offers a systematic investigation into negotiation avoidance—how often individuals forgo negotiation opportunities, under what conditions, and at what cost—even in a context such as the United States, where direct communication and self-advocacy are culturally normative. Across five preregistered studies, we find that negotiation avoidance is widespread and economically consequential. More than 95% of participants report avoiding negotiation in at least some situations, and people opt out of negotiation opportunities up to 51% of the time. These findings challenge the assumption that individuals are naturally inclined to negotiate when potential benefits are on the table.

Our findings make three key theoretical contributions. First, we quantify negotiation avoidance in economic terms by introducing the behavioral constructs of Threshold for Negotiation Initiation (TFNI) and Willingness to Pay to Avoid Negotiation (WTP-AN). TFNI reflects the minimum monetary gain individuals require to consider negotiation worthwhile. Importantly, this threshold is price-contingent, revealing that people apply percentage-based heuristics even when the absolute value of savings is identical. This suggests that many individuals rely on flawed or inconsistent logic when evaluating whether negotiation is worth the effort. Similarly, WTP-AN

captures the extent to which individuals are willing to incur financial costs to avoid the psychological discomfort of negotiating—such as anxiety, confrontation, or social awkwardness (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; O'Connor et al., 2010). Like TFNI, WTP-AN also varies with price, reinforcing the idea that individuals do not apply stable value assessments across decision contexts.

Second, this work bridges psychological theory and behavioral economics by demonstrating how internal states—like discomfort or effort aversion—manifest in financially meaningful decisions. Rather than relying on self-report measures of anxiety or social inhibition, our studies examine observable behavioral signs of avoidance. This allows us to capture avoidance as it plays out in practice, offering a new methodological approach for understanding negotiation avoidance.

Third, we tested two interventions aimed at increasing the likelihood of negotiation initiation. The first intervention—prompting individuals to compare potential negotiation savings to their hourly wage—did not significantly increase their willingness to negotiate, even when the financial contrast was substantial. In contrast, the second intervention, which emphasized the descriptive social norm that negotiation is common and socially acceptable, effectively increased participants' willingness to initiate negotiation. Taken together, these findings highlight the difficulty of altering negotiation-avoidance behavior, while also pointing to promising avenues for intervention. Notably, the relative success of the social norm intervention and the ineffectiveness of the wage comparison suggest that subjective psychological factors may outweigh purely economic considerations. In other words, reducing psychological barriers may be more effective than simply emphasizing the financial benefits of negotiation.

Together, these findings underscore the importance of treating negotiation avoidance as a behavioral phenomenon with both cognitive and affective roots. Rather than assuming that individuals will naturally seize negotiation opportunities when provided with tools or incentives, it is essential to recognize that many people actively avoid negotiating—even at measurable economic cost. By conceptualizing and capturing these avoidance tendencies behaviorally, our research provides a foundation for designing more targeted interventions to encourage negotiation engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

While the present studies offer important insights, several limitations warrant consideration. First, our samples were drawn exclusively from the United States. This focus allowed us to examine negotiation avoidance in a low-context, individualist culture that ostensibly supports self-advocacy. However, cross-cultural studies are needed to determine whether these patterns hold in societies with different norms around confrontation, hierarchy, and relationship maintenance (Shan et al., 2019). Future research should compare TFNI and WTP-AN across cultures to assess the generalizability of these constructs.

Second, all studies were conducted online. This approach allowed for a broad and diverse sample rather than restricting the research to specific firms, industries, or geographic regions. Nevertheless, online participants may experience different motivations, distractions, and psychological influences compared to those in other settings. Future research should therefore consider using field samples to confirm or refine these findings.

Relatedly, the present studies measured only intent to initiate negotiation rather than actual initiation behavior. We regard this as a conservative measurement of avoidance behavior, as many individuals who express an intent to negotiate may ultimately fail to act on it. Further studies should aim to verify our results by examining actual negotiation initiation decisions, providing a

more comprehensive understanding of avoidance behavior. Additionally, it is important to recognize that many negotiations occur outside of workplace settings. Future investigations should thus include non-traditional contexts, such as everyday interactions and transactions among friends, family members, and acquaintances.

Fourth, although the theoretical foundation of this paper draws on both cognitive and affective explanations of negotiation avoidance, our studies do not directly measure these underlying psychological mechanisms. Instead, we use TFNI and WTP-AN as behavioral proxies—economic decisions that reflect inferred psychological states. While this approach aligns with methods in behavioral science that rely on revealed preferences (e.g., Kahneman et al., 1990), it limits causal inference about the mechanisms at play. Future studies should complement this approach by incorporating validated, multi-item scales to directly assess constructs such as perceived effort, anxiety, or social norm sensitivity. Doing so would allow for formal tests of mediation and help clarify the distinct cognitive and affective pathways that underlie negotiation avoidance.

Finally, we acknowledge that many of our outcome variables were assessed using single-item measures. While multi-item scales are often preferred for capturing latent psychological constructs, our measures were designed to directly elicit concrete economic decisions (e.g., the minimum dollar savings required to negotiate, or the dollar amount one would pay to avoid negotiation). In such cases, a single response can offer a clear and unambiguous behavioral readout. This approach is consistent with standard practices in behavioral economics and experimental vignette research, where specific judgments or trade-offs are commonly measured using single, face-valid items (e.g., Kahneman et al., 1990; Matthews et al., 2022). Nonetheless, future work could benefit from triangulating these measures with multi-item or behavioral indicators to further validate their robustness.

In addition to addressing these limitations, there are numerous avenues for future research on negotiation avoidance. Studies might examine additional interventions that individuals, organizations, government bodies, and societies can use to encourage negotiation initiation; diving deeply into how price differences affect the desire to avoid negotiation; and studying how negotiation avoidance varies across industries and product categories. Finally, a large-scale, open-ended study on the reasons individuals choose to avoid negotiating would help illuminate current gaps in understanding and serve as a valuable blueprint for future research in the field.

Conclusion

Negotiation avoidance is a widespread and costly phenomenon, reflected in individuals' behavioral tendencies to delay or forgo negotiation even when benefits are apparent. Our findings show that people often require substantial perceived savings to justify initiating a negotiation and that many are willing to pay to avoid negotiating altogether. These tendencies are not random—they appear to reflect psychologically meaningful thresholds and trade-offs. By capturing these dynamics through the constructs of TFNI and WTP-AN, and by testing interventions to reduce avoidance, this research opens new avenues for understanding and addressing negotiation reluctance. Recognizing and mitigating the barriers that discourage negotiation can empower individuals and organizations to realize more value, equity, and agency in their interactions.

Author Note

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