CARDINAL MANUSCRIPT REVIEW HISTORY
REVIEWS (ROUND 2)

Editor Decision Letter

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to the Journal of Consumer Research. The same review team who read your previous submission read this version as well. I have also carefully read your reviewer responses, your revised manuscript, and the reviewers’ and AE’s assessments carefully in making a decision on the manuscript. This letter provides my decision.

You have done an excellent job of responding to the review team’s comments. So much so, that relatively few issues remain. Because these issues are doable, I am happy to offer a conditional acceptance of your paper. Congratulations! Your paper is very interesting and I believe will make a nice contribution to the field.

The AE does an excellent job articulating the issues that remain. Please follow his/her guidance carefully. I support the ideas of dropping study 7 (see Reviewers A, B and D) and moving study 8 earlier in the paper (see Reviewer A and C). Reviewer D’s comments about the mediation analyses in studies 2 and 4 are valid. Unless you can justify retaining these mediation analyses you might simply drop them.

Your Discussion Section requires several changes. First, address Reviewer B’s comment about making your contribution highly salient in the first paragraph. I am also inclined to keep study 4 (as the AE recommends), but I would like you to address Reviewer D’s point about boundaries vs. structure in the Discussion section. Reviewer C makes several good points about certain conclusions (i.e., conscious recognition of functional benefits motivation to recognize function vs. symbolic benefits of boundaries). Please provide stronger evidence to support these conclusions or tone them down. I think Reviewer C makes a good point about the placement of the manipulation check items. This issue deserves some attention in the Discussion section. Finally, use the discussion section to address Reviewer A’s point 2.

Finally, your paper is well written, but I agree with Reviewer A that it is still too long. Eliminating study 7 will help, but I would like you to look for other ways to tighten the prose. Please also try to reduce redundancy as much as possible. I’m not convinced that the first 4 figures are necessary as long as the cell means are presented in the text. Figure 5 should be retained. One reviewer recommends including information in a footnote. Please note that JCR does not allow footnotes.

I will not ask the reviewers or the AE to review the next version of the paper. They have done an
outstanding job in providing comments and I wish to thank them for their excellent stewardship
of the manuscript. Instead, I will make the final call on your manuscript. As such, Please do
include with your revision a set of notes for me that detail how you have addressed the changes
noted here and in the AE’s report. My position as editor will conclude on June 30th. Although
you are welcome to send in your paper at any time, a different editor will evaluate it if it is
submitted after June 30th.

Thank you for your excellent revision. Your hard work has clearly paid off. I hope to see your
revised paper soon.

AE Report

Comments to the Authors:

This is a revision of a previous manuscript, investigating the impact of perceived personal
control on consumer preferences for boundaries. The paper was read by the same 4 reviewers as
in the first round. Overall, the review team and I are very pleased with your revision. Two
reviewers recommend conditional acceptance and two recommend one more round of revision to
address some unresolved issues. Below, I will briefly summarize the reviewer comments and
concerns and add a few details of my own. The bulk of the remaining concerns revolve around
empirical issues. I will focus there as well, though a few of these issues also implicate more
conceptual concerns.

In particular, the review team generally has concerns regarding Study 7, both in concept and
strength and in its overall contribution to the paper. I agree with the review team that the paper
will likely be stronger without the inclusion of this study, particularly since it is largely
subsumed under Study 8, which is substantially stronger. I would remove Study 7 from the
manuscript.

In addition, I am inclined to agree with Reviewer C’s suggestion that the overall flow of the
paper will be improved by moving what is now Study 8 to place it before the current studies 5
and 6. Studies 5 and 6 more aligned with the symbolic benefits of boundaries (rather than
functional) and I agree that they are better placed at the end. I also agree with this reviewer that it
would be useful to preview the functional vs. symbolic distinction in your theoretical overview,
before you begin discussing any studies, and a brief discussion of the potential relationship
between symbolic and functional benefits would be interesting. Reviewer A makes a nice point
here about the superiority of functional vs. symbolic benefits.

Reviewer D continues to struggle with the relationship between organization and boundaries in
study 4. I am inclined to keep this study in the paper, though I agree that a priori organization
and boundaries are not necessarily the same thing. I agree with the reviewer’s perspective that
both boundaries and order seem to reflect two different instantiations of structure or control. But
I might have preferences for organization that are based on very different processes than my
preferences for boundaries (for example, Andrea Morales’s work on the signal that an organized
store sends regarding a store’s effort, which would not be related to a preference for control,
necessarily). This particular operationalization is sufficiently different from the rest of the paper and sufficiently implicates a potentially different mechanism that this deserves some discussion.

I also agree with Reviewer D that the mediation analyses in studies 2 and 4 don’t seem to offer much illumination into the overall process you’re describing. I understand you added those in response to the previous round, but they don’t seem to offer much. In contrast, the mediation analysis in study 8 does seem valuable. Reviewer C, however, asks for more details regarding this analysis.

Last, several of the reviewers raise issues with the order in which you measured certain variables. Reviewer A is concerned that you might have primed religion for those with strong beliefs by measuring it first in Studies 5 and 6. Reviewer C is concerned regarding the manipulation checks in studies 5-8. Like Reviewer C, I think this merits discussion.

Overall, this is a very nice paper and your revision has been quite successful!

Reviewer A

Comments to the Authors:

I continue to like this paper. I think the author had done a solid job revising the paper, addressed all my major concerns from the last round. However, the new studies and some of the study procedures raise additional concerns in me:

1. In study 4, why for the store evaluation measure, there isn’t an interaction of feeling of control by store design. Wouldn’t you expect that those in the low control, bounded design condition like the store more than other conditions?

2. In study 5, you measure religious belief strength before people made choices. So this might have primed high religious people their strong belief, and that’s why they relied on such belief later and didn’t show preference to bounded objects. What if you measured such belief in a separate context or at the end of the study? Do you expect the same results? In other words, is turning to God a necessarily superior strategy to maintain order than choosing bounded objects for religious people?
   • The same problem pertains to study 6.

3. Study 7—very interesting. However it makes me wonder if prefer in the low control condition prefer structure/boundary, the low control people seeing bounded painting should like the painting more than when seeing unbounded version. If so, shouldn’t they spend more time looking at the painting? Did you measure liking of painting?

4. Study 8—what’s the correlation between attention overload measure and the overall anxiety measure? My sense is that these two concepts are highly related, and it might be that attention overload will lead to higher anxiety and thus greater preference for bounded product?
Minor points:

1. Please add page number
2. Study 1 pretest description was confusing. Exactly what was the comparison? The two original postcards? It seems like you added the black border to one card, correct? Or is the comparison between the bounded vs. nonbounded version for each card? Confusing.
3. The paper as it is seems too long, and I suggest the author shortens the paper. Some of the descriptions can be cut. So some suggestions: Do you have reading time measure in study 8, if so, study 7 seems repetitive. In addition, study 7 isn’t persuasive in terms of suggesting functional benefits of structure. Also study 5 and study 6 can be shortened.

Reviewer B

Comments to the Authors:

The revision has clarified most of the conceptual issues. In particular, I now understand why you argue that the effect is due to those who feel low control (rather than high control). Also, the change in terminology from explicit/implicit to tangible/intangible improved the communication of this dichotomy. I appreciate the additional methodological details, and the additional points raised in the future directions section.

Studies 7 & 8 were added in part to address my concern about the psychological process underlying the effects demonstrated in the paper. I’m not convinced that Study 7 does this. The conceptual argument for this study is based on attentional overload, but the DV used was looking time. To test attentional overload, the usual approach would be to take a measure of attentional capacity immediately post-exposure. I’m uncomfortable using looking time as a measure of attentional overload. I agree that shorter looking time indicates less attention, but I don’t see how it provides insight for the reason behind this effect. It could be perceptual, cognitive (overload), or motivational. My suggestion is to either (a) provide support for the use of looking time as a measure of attentional overload or (b) drop the study.

Study 8 is more thought provoking to me. It doesn’t nail the process explanation, but it provides a good first step at documenting perceived attentional overload as a mediator. These results make a good contribution to the paper.

I continue to think that the General Discussion is weak. When I’m reading an article in a top journal, I usually start with the General Discussion. I want to know what the contribution is before I decide to invest time in reading the whole thing. If I were to read this GD that way, I would miss the really cool contribution of this paper.

Reviewer C

Comments to the Authors:

First I would like to start by commending the author on doing a wonderful job revising the paper and addressing my concerns as well as those raised by the other reviewers and AE. The new
version is significantly improved over the original, particularly by providing rich insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect of personal control on people’s preferences for boundaries in consumption.

Below I will list a few issues that I find slightly problematic in the revised paper version. I would like to emphasize, however, that I believe these limitations can most likely be addressed by acknowledging them in the paper rather than collecting a new round of data.

**Concluding that functional benefits are consciously recognized.** The general discussion addresses the very interesting issue as to whether the observed effect happens at a conscious or unconscious level. The results section of Study 8 suggests that individuals consciously recognize the functional benefits of choosing boundaries. However, the findings reported in this study (i.e., an interaction between control and painting choice on a between-subjects measure of attentional overload) do not directly support such conclusion. Just because an interaction pattern could be found on the attentional overload measure (as opposed to other measures in that study) does not necessarily mean that consumers are aware of the effect of bounded stimuli choice on attentional focus. Nevertheless, since the study includes a repeated (i.e., pre- and post-choice) measure of attentional overload – which represents a within-subjects variable – this measure can be used for shedding light on the consciousness issue. If the interaction effect found post-choice holds even when pre-choice attentional overload is controlled for, one can more readily conclude that individuals are likely aware of a decrease in their attentional overload through the choice of bounded products.

**Concluding that individuals are able (or motivated) to recognize only the functional, but not the symbolic benefits of boundaries.** Study 8 and the general discussion indicate that individuals’ self-reports acknowledge the functional benefits of boundaries, but fail to do so for symbolic benefits. This result, while entirely plausible, may be due to the design of Study 8, which makes functional – but not symbolic – benefits salient to participants. More specifically, as noted in my point above, Study 8 collects measures for attentional overload in the beginning (pre-choice) and again at the end (post-choice). It is entirely possible that drawing participants’ attention to this measure initially may have made the functional benefits of boundaries salient to them. In contrast, the PANAS measure (which is used as an indicator of symbolic benefits) is collected only in the post-choice condition. Because functional and symbolic benefits thus differ in the degree to which they may have been made salient to participants, this prevents one from drawing meaningful conclusions as to which type of benefit operates at a conscious (or is at least more accessible) level.

While I’m concerned about the empirical validity of this conclusion, I do agree with the author that consumers (and potentially also consumer behavior researchers) are more likely to have an intuition about the functional benefits of boundaries than about the symbolic ones. For the sake of making the paper more interesting to readers, I would suggest discussing the functional benefits prior to the symbolic ones and reversing the order of studies 5-6 and 7-8.

**Manipulation checks.** While I greatly appreciate the author’s effort to re-collect data for studies 5 and 6 in order to include manipulation checks, I could not help but notice that the manipulation check questions were shown to participants at the beginning (rather than the end) of studies 5-8.
Was there a particular reason for this placement? While such initial placement may be worrisome in terms of demand artifacts (since, as indicated in my point above, measures collected pre-choice may have appeared particularly salient to respondents), I am aware that the initial paper version did not include manipulation checks for studies 5 and 6, and yet the results still held, thus ruling out demand artifacts. I hence do not consider the manipulation check limitation critical to the viability of the studies, but I do suggest briefly addressing it in the discussion portion of the studies or in a footnote.

**Mediation analyses.** Studies 2 and 8 report mediation analyses, but while indicating that mediation exists in both cases, no information is provided as to whether the mediation is indirect-only (i.e., full) or not. Particularly in Study 8, finding evidence of a direct effect of personal control on preferences (i.e., only partial mediation through attentional overload) would in fact be consistent with the papers’ theoretical framework, which suggests the presence of not just one, but two mediators: focusing ability and psychological comfort.

**Theory section development.** I found the discussion of the functional and symbolic benefits provided by boundaries very illuminating, with studies 7 and 8 providing a nice addition to the paper. That said, I would suggest discussing these benefits earlier in the paper, more specifically in the theory section. The theory section addresses the difference between tangible and intangible boundaries, but leaves out any discussion about the mechanisms underlying the effects investigated in the paper – arguably a more important topic than the boundary typology. Additionally, since the paper implies the presence of two different benefits mediating the investigated effect, but does not explicitly discuss or investigate the relationship between these mediators (e.g., do they operate simultaneously, under what circumstances is one type of benefit more important than the other, etc.), I suggest briefly addressing that relationship in the Future Research section.

**Structure of the empirical section.** For the sake of tightening up the empirical part and providing more structure to the paper, it may be helpful to combine studies 5 and 6 (which deal with the symbolic benefits of boundaries) into one set of studies, and then do the same for studies 7 and 8 (which deal with the functional benefits of boundaries).

Again, I would like to congratulate the author on a very interesting and insightful paper. I look forward to following the future development of this paper.

**Reviewer D**

**Comments to the Authors:**

I think the author tells a more convincing story about “structured consumption” after providing more study details, deleting the weaker study and adding new data. I like most of the changes and I think the paper would be in a good shape to publish if the author could further sharpen the theory and reorganize the studies.

Theory
The author argued that an organized state = a bounded state, but I see “need for boundary” and “need for organization” as two different constructs. Boundary indicates a border or limit (or a sense of containment or confinement). Hence, it facilitates attention focusing which, in turn, would help people regain a sense of control by enabling them to process information more efficiently (as suggested by studies 7 and 8). Organization, on the other hand, is more about grouping and arranging things into a coherent form or a desired pattern. It could also help people regain a sense of control, but by suggesting the absence of randomness (e.g. study 4). Therefore, when people suffer from low sense of control, they may prefer bounded and organized products for very different reasons.

I think the paper would be stronger if the author could only focus on “bounded consumption”, by revising the theory development section and deleting study 4 (the only study about “organized consumption”). Alternatively, the author could take a broader approach by discussing “boundary” and “order” as two different instantiations of “structure” and demonstrate their respective underlying mechanisms. In doing so, the paper should no longer be titled as “the beauty of boundaries”.

Studies

- Study 3 seems more like two pilot studies than a main study because it does not involve the manipulation of control. It only demonstrates a basic relationship between individuals’ need for structure and their preference of boundaries. I would suggest moving it to the first place instead of keeping it as a weak study 3.
- In study 4, the author argues that “an organized state” = “a bounded state”, which, to me, is a bit of a stretch. I would recommend the author to either delete it or to discuss “organization” as a different dimension of “structure”.
- Compared to study 8, study 7 seems to be a weak study because it mere demonstrates a relationship between feeling of control and processing time. How about shortening study 7 as a pretest to study 8?

Other Comments

- Mediation analyses are usually designed to reveal the underlying process, but too many mediators may confuse the readers. I think the mediator in study 8 makes more intuitive sense, whereas I’m not sure what to get from the study 2 and study 4 mediation analyses (e.g. study 2 mediator can be viewed just as a DV). I think the author could either explain the relationship between the different mediators presented in the paper or only report the one(s) that is (are) crucial to your conceptualization.
- In studies 7 & 8 the author reported a difference in anxiety ratings as a result of manipulating control. I was wondering if such a difference was captured by any of the PANAS scale items (e.g. distressed, upset, jittery, nervous or alert) in earlier studies (e.g. study 2 and 4). The author’s argument (regarding the emotional consequent of low control) would be more convincing if consistent findings were documented across studies.
- It is not very clear to me that in all product categories the left option is more “bounded” than the right one (see APPENDIX 3). If the descriptions beneath the pictures were not included for participants, what were the actual product descriptions?