Editor Decision Letter

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to the Journal of Consumer Research. Four experts provided clear and consistent perspectives on your manuscript. An Associate Editor integrated the reviewers’ comments, added some additional thoughts and provided a recommendation. I have carefully read your paper as well. This letter provides my decision on your manuscript.

The review team likes your paper and I do too. We find the topic to be provocative, the arguments to be well written, and the demonstration of your effects to be compelling (6 studies, different data collection methodologies, different operationalizations of control and different operationalizations of structured consumption). Several issues remain, though I believe they are doable in a revision. Your revision should emphasize the following issues:

1. First, the relationship between structuredness and boundaries needs to be clarified. As the AE notes, structuredness seems to be the construct, with boundaries being an operationalization. If this is your perspective, make it clear. However, either in your conceptualization or your discussion section, consider Reviewer A’s and B’s comments regarding the relationship between the two. Furthermore, consider using different terms for the types of boundaries (other than implicit and explicit) given the reviews’ comments.

2. Second, added insight into why lack of control induces a desire for structuredness is needed. The reviewers ask, what does structuredness do psychologically for the consumer? Enhance processing ease/fluency? Reduce anxiety? Provide security? Promote a desire for mastery? There are two ways of providing this insight. One would be to add this insight to your Discussion section. However, I agree with the AE that your paper’s contribution would be greatly enhanced by adding another study that addresses one or more of the process mechanisms identified by the reviewers (see Reviewers A, B and C). There may be many explanations, and we don’t expect that you address them all empirically (others could be considered in your discussion section). Still, if you can provide some additional insight into why lack of control induces a search for structuredness, your contribution would be greatly enhanced.

Adding a new study will also help you address the Reviewers’ concerns about whether lack of control induces a desire for structuredness or whether high levels of control induce a desire for freedom (see Reviewers A and C). By including a control group, you could address this issue more directly. The alternative would be to add a control group to studies 1 and/or 2.
The third reason why I recommend a new study is that it would allow you to deal with the manipulation check issues noted by Reviewers C and D. I am slightly less concerned about the manipulation check issue since (a) you do have manipulation checks in some studies (study 1), (b) you have collected pre-test data on control for some of your studies (study 2, study 4b), and (c) you find consistent effects using different operationalizations of personal control. Still, confidence in the results would be enhanced by the inclusion of a manipulation check.

If you find that adding a study makes the current paper too long consider dropping Experiment 1 (as recommended by the AE), study 2 (which tends to be a bit confusing for the reviewers), or study 3 (which to my mind does not really get at the psychological mechanism). Additionally, you can reduce length by omitting the numerous figures. The results are relatively simple; hence figures may not be needed. Alternatively, consider developing a single table consolidates the data reported in your separate figures.

Personally, I don’t find your Figure 1 to be particularly insightful. Moreover, the figure is not tested in its entirety as Reviewer C notes. Hence I would omit that figure. If you want to include a figure, consider developing one that incorporates the aforementioned psychological mechanisms (or others that you identify). If you test this conceptual model and there are multiple mediators, consider using the SEM approach advocated by Reviewer C.

3. Your research is novel and interesting; and it has interesting implications. I agree with Reviewer B and the AE that your discussion section can be buttressed. Use the discussion section to address a broader set of conceptual issues (i.e., see Reviewer C on structure vs. order and conscious vs. non-conscious aspects), research questions (as noted by all of the reviewers) and pragmatic implications (as suggested by Reviewer B).

If you choose to revise the paper for JCR (and I hope you do), my plan is to send it to the same review team. As such, please submit a set of comments to the AE indicating how you have responded to the reviewers’ comments. If you wish, you may also include a set of notes to each of the reviewers. Although there is no limit to the length of these notes, history tells us that 2-3 pages per reviewer is generally sufficient.

I hope these comments are clear. If not, please let me know. Thank you for submitting your work to JCR. I wish you the very best with your revision effort.

AE Report

Comments to the Authors:

This manuscript introduces the construct “structured consumption” and investigates how consumers’ sense of personal control can influence preferences for or less structured consumption choices. The paper was read by 4 very thoughtful reviewers, all of whom feel very positively about the manuscript. They all agree that the work is creative and novel and that the manuscript is well-written and very clear. There is also substantial agreement about what should be done to improve the manuscript. Below I will summarize the main points from the reviewers as well as add a few additional comments of my own.
The biggest area of reviewer concern centers around the meaning of the construct “structured.” Reviewer A notes that you tend to use the terms structured and bounded somewhat interchangeably. I think that you do mean structure as the larger construct, with visual boundedness as one operationalization of structure. However, as reviewer A points out, you could have an unstructured stimulus that was nonetheless bounded. Similarly, Reviewer B asks whether an oddly shaped boundary might inhibit a sense of structure. Meg Campbell and Ronnie Goodstein (“The Moderating Effect of Perceived Risk on Consumers’ Evaluations of Product Incongruity Preference for the Norm.” *Journal of Consumer Research* (2001): 439-449; with Goodstein) have a paper examining preferences for novel package shapes that might be relevant on this topic as well.

Reviewer B continues this line of thought by asking for more clarification about the psychological mechanisms associated with a preference for structure. Does structure reduce cognitive demands (or similarly perhaps increase fluency) or does it offer more personally meaningful outcomes such as safety and security, lowered anxiety, etc. An assessment of the degree to which this is primarily a perceptual phenomenon or something else would make your overall contribution clearer. At the moment, you seem to be suggesting something of both. Reviewer C continues this line of thought asking if the underlying mechanism is a desire for mastery and predictability or a need for safety or to eliminate vulnerability. He/she offers the case of an organized but potentially dis-orienting structure (alphabetical rather than category order in the convenience store) and suggests that this kind of structure might be rejected by those seeking control. While Reviewer B is ambivalent about requesting a new study to assess these process questions, given the range of questions raised about this bigger issue, I think that both greater conceptual clarity and additional empirical work is necessary to really nail your phenomenon. This work should clarify the distinctions between structure and boundaries, whether the structure needs to be a fluent one or can be any kind of structure and the underlying psychological mechanisms that appropriate structure provides to consumers. I would also note Reviewer C’s suggestion that to the extent you think there are multiple mediators/process variables that you might consider investigating them using a Structural Equation Modeling approach rather than a mediation approach.

Nearly all the reviewers note that at present it is difficult to tell whether you have shown that low control people prefer structure or that high control individual prefer freedom (lack of structure). Reviewer B also gets at this when he/she asks of prominent boundaries or excessive neatness might actually prime feelings of restriction. And Reviewer C also asks if sometimes the presence of control might be perceived as undesirable. Reviewer D also notes that sometimes a low level of personal control might be preferred, particularly in the domain of happy surprises. It is somewhat surprising that you find these threats even in the domain of positive events. Some discussion of why you think this might be the case would be useful. Clarification of these topics both conceptually and experimentally would make the implications of your results much clearer. Last on this point, several of the reviewers ask for more affective variables in your testing. These requests go along with a sense that the structure may reduce anxiety, increase comfort, etc. and it would be nice to see evidence of such processes if they exist.
I don’t find the paper to be overly long in its current form and think that you could accommodate another study and still maintain the current studies. However, if the suggested additions make the paper too long, my advice would be to drop Experiment 1.

Reviewers B and C find the implicit/explicit terminology to be confusing. Reviewer C’s point about how the use of white space would be perceived is a very perceptive one. I agree with these issues and would suggest that you consider other terms, perhaps tangible and intangible as suggested by Reviewer C.

Reviewer D asks for manipulation checks throughout your empirical work. In my opinion, his/her point regarding Experiments 4a and 4b is particularly important. Is it the case that individuals with religious beliefs and adequate resources were simply less affected by the manipulations or were they better able to recover from the threat? At present we are unable to tell. In addition, why do you think you don’t observe a main effect for personal control condition as you did in the previous experiments in experiments 4a and 4b?

I agree with Reviewer B that the General Discussion is under-developed. You have the opportunity here to expand the notion of structure conceptually and to consider it at a much deeper level than you are currently. Both the theoretical and practical implications could be much richer. Use this opportunity to lay out interesting questions and to consider the full range of the structured consumption construct.

More minor issues.

1. In Experiment 2, is there a significant difference between the control and the high personal control conditions? From the means I would guess not, but it’s not clear to me if that is consistent with your theory. Relatedly, why pool the neutral and high personal control conditions in your mediation analysis? I understand why you did it, given an apparent lack of difference in the conditions, but theoretically what makes such a pooling of the two conditions appropriate?

2. In Experiment 4a, would all religious individuals exhibit the same pattern? Are there differences in religion (i.e., Christianity vs. Buddhism perhaps)?

3. Reviewer C suggests that it would be nice to see a mediation analysis in study 5 that examines the role of the differential weighting of order/structure. I agree with this suggestion. This is a very nice finding and it would be nice to see you make more of it than you do currently.

4. Each of the reviewers asks for more details about various pieces of the paper. These points should be addressed in a revision.

Overall, congratulations on such a great manuscript. We’re looking forward to seeing the revision.
Reviewer A

Comments to the Authors:

Overall, I like the paper. The author did a great job in designing a series of very clever and creative studies (as well as study titles!) in testing the theory and the results provide consistent support. The question is interesting and the paper is well-written.

I have a few questions/comments below that can hopefully help the author improve the manuscript.

Major points:

1. You seem to use “bounded” and “structured” interchangeably. Also, you stimuli seem to mix these two as well. For examples, some of the images in appendix 2 differ in boundary and some differ in structure. But are these two the same? You could have a bounded situation, but disorganized or not structured. For example, you might have a card with boundary, but the content on the card is very confusing. So need to be careful about which one you’re referring to.

   a. Related to the above point, is it that the bigger construct is “structure”, such that having a boundary is one way to provide structure? Anyway, the relationship between these two constructs needs some clarification.

2. Is it that the low control people need structure, or the high personal control people need freedom? I think your results can be explained in either direction. The only place you could offer some insight to this question is study 3 where you had a control condition. However, in this study, do you have any pre-test on perception of personal control in those 3 conditions? It’s not in the paper. Is there a difference between the high and control condition in terms of personal control perception?

Minor points:

1. In study 1, you mentioned that those in the high control condition never exercised their control to terminate the noise. Is that true? You mean nobody in this condition ever used the remote?

2. Did you ever measure anxiety or arousal-related mood items? I know you have typical mood measures for your manipulations, but what about specific items related to anxiety or arousal? It seems possible that these measures would show higher values in the low vs. high personal control condition, and further contribute to your results.

I very much enjoyed reading your paper!
**Reviewer B**

**Comments to the Authors:**

This paper introduces a new construct in consumer research, “structured consumption,” and posits that it plays a role in helping people deal with lack of control in their lives. The authors argue that under low self-control (relative to neutral or high self-control), consumers will prefer structured consumption as represented by products that contain boundaries vs. no boundaries or environments that are organized vs. unorganized. Results support the central prediction across a variety of manipulations and contexts. Further results show that buffers such as religious beliefs, social support, and financial resources serve to reduce the need for external boundaries under situations of low self-control.

**General Reaction**

This paper was a pleasure to read and to ponder over. The logic and clarity of the writing is outstanding. I found the basic proposition to be novel, stimulating, and important theoretically. The practical implications are far-reaching. Whatever the outcome at JCR, I would like to congratulate the author(s) on the quality of this work.

My critical comments below are intended to encourage the authors to further develop the core concepts in order to maximize the long term contribution of this work. In particular, the concepts of “structured consumption” and “boundaries” are still a bit vague. For scholars to effectively build on this work, it would be helpful to refine these ideas.

**Conceptual issues**

1) “Structured consumption”. The general concept is argued (compellingly) at a somewhat intuitive level. However, it is not very clear exactly what structured consumption does for the consumer at the psychological level. One possibility is that it reduces demands on cognitive functioning by simplifying visual processing (and perhaps other perceptual processing). Alternatively, structured stimuli and environments may be desirable because of implied meaning, such as connotations of safety or security. Without this conceptual development, the final result of seeking and obtaining structured consumption is unknown. Would it lead to increased perceptions of self-control, lower anxiety, positive subjective experience, increased executive functioning, or all of the above?

The question is whether to pawn this off as a direction for future research, or to run a study now to claim this contribution as your own. Either way, it is important to address whether selecting more structured consumption (through boundaries or other means) actually provides a comforting effect to participants.

2) Boundaries as providing structure. The idea that boundaries provide structure is intuitively appealing. Operationalizing the concept with visual borders was quite clever. But conceptually, how are boundaries or lack thereof processed by the consumer? Are boundaries inherently “structured” or do some boundaries inhibit structure (such as an oddly-shaped border)? It might
be helpful to consider some Gestalt-like perceptual principles, assuming that visual perception is the underlying issue. If the preference for boundaries is meaning-based, then one could conceive of situations where boundaries might have the reverse effect. For example, prominent boundaries or excessive neatness may prime feelings of confinement or restriction of freedom.

3) Implicit vs. explicit boundaries: The classification of boundaries into two types is a big step in the right direction. However, I do not understand why this particular distinction was chosen. Perhaps the point was to distinguish semantic from perceptual issues? It would be helpful to develop and explain the classifications of types of boundaries so that it ties in to known psychological processes.

Further, the terminology used (implicit vs. explicit) is confusing.

   a. Explicit boundaries are defined as visual, but could they not also be tactile?

   b. Furthermore, if visual borders are non-consciously associated with semantic concepts and feelings, can’t they also be construed as implicit?

   c. The use of the term “implicit” may be problematic for you because it has a certain amount of research baggage (such as the expectation that the author has the burden of proof to claim that something is truly “implicit.”)

   d. The term implicit, as used in this paper, is not necessarily “virtual”. For instance, a virtual border as represented by an organized room, may be very visually distinct. A river separating the border between two states may also be explicit in that sense.

4) General discussion: This section needs to be expanded upon significantly. This section seems to be the least developed but the most fruitful in terms of encouraging future research in the topic area and making the reader more aware of the novelty and contribution of the research. This is a good place to return to the conceptual issues discussed above and to lay out more specific avenues for future research based on these concepts. Given the original motivation provided for this article (homeland security) and related concepts (financial insecurity, etc.), the practical implications could be enormous.

Methods

Please report how you controlled for order and positioning of the alternatives for the selection tasks (postcards, logos, products).

Relatively minor Issues

1) In Experiment 3, no explanation is offered for the prediction that the effect is driven by low personal control rather than high personal control (page 14.)

2) At first read, the wording used to explain the self-control manipulation in Experiment 2 was confusing. For readers who are less familiar with the 10 vs 3 manipulation, the prediction
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seems counterintuitive. It would help to offer the reader additional background.

3) The data collection reported on page 17 was not well integrated into the section on Experiment 3. Perhaps it would help to label it as an auxiliary study and to provide an introduction that motivates it. (I agree with you that it is interesting and useful—it’s just how it fits in to your narrative at this point that I am questioning).

Reviewer C

Comments to the Authors:

The paper investigates a very interesting idea, namely that consumers respond to the lack of personal control by seeking structure in their consumption patterns, through physical boundaries. The relationship between personal control and boundaries is a surprising one, and the author makes a reasonably strong case for why the two should be connected. The paper delivers new insights into two under-researched topics in consumer behavior: how consumers react when their personal control is threatened, and the role of environment- and object-related boundaries in consumption. I particularly liked the holistic approach to the consumer taken in this paper: one’s need for structure, religiosity, and personal resources (including financial, social, and environmental) are all examined in the context of one’s responses to an actual or potential loss of control. The research findings combined paint an unusually rich understanding of consumers not just as consumption agents, but as human beings.

This is a well-written paper that rests on a set of relatively diverse evidence. Several types of personal control manipulations are included (explicit presence/absence of personal control in Experiment 1, easy/difficult recall of personal control instances in Experiment 2, recall of various types of instances of high/low personal control in Experiments 3-5). The six experiments are carefully crafted and supplemented by insightful pre-tests where necessary. The experiments involve, among others, respondents drawn from a marketing research company’s database, and actual choices made in a simulated convenience store setting, which together help increase the generalizability and validity of the results.

The paper also includes a few methodological and conceptual shortcomings, which I will briefly discuss below, in the order of importance.

Conceptual issues

1. The paper suggests that consumers respond to a lack of personal control by seeking structure and order in consumption. Though this is clearly a valid argument, I believe that structure may not represent the most fundamental value sought out by consumers under such circumstances. They will try to compensate for the lack of control in one domain by attempting to control another domain, and may ultimately look for certainty, predictability, and easy mastery. These constructs are positively influenced by, but distinct from the more concrete values of structure and order. To illustrate this, consider the case of a convenience store in which the items are neatly arranged and organized by category, as one would typically expect from such a store. Now contrast this to a convenience store in which the
same items are just as neatly arranged, but are organized in alphabetical order (by brand name) instead. Both stores can be argued to possess a high degree of order and structure, yet the former entails a more familiar and intuitive structure and will most certainly be easier to navigate. A lack of control will likely cause consumers to favor the former over the latter store, which points towards a desire for values deeper than just structure for structure’s sake. It would be helpful for the paper to discuss and verify whether structure and order represent a proxy or an end-value in the context of the present research.

Additionally, the relationship between personal control and preferences for boundaries may also be explained by a construct other than structure/order. Lack of control may elicit perceptions of vulnerability, thus prompting consumer to seek safety. In this context, physical boundaries can be interpreted as providing protection from the environment and inducing feelings of security. Particularly the two buffer variables indentified in the paper – high religiosity and personal resource availability – appear to more specifically address the need for safety than simply a need for structure/order. Including a perceived safety measure in Experiment 3 could help elucidate whether a desire for structure or one for safety (or both of them combined) better explains the relationship between personal control and boundaries.

2. The difference between explicit and implicit boundaries is not clearly specified, since it rests on the problematic dichotomy of “visible” versus “invisible”. According to this dichotomy, would white space represent an implicit or an explicit boundary? A highly organized environment is suggested to have strong implicit boundaries. Yet such an environment may also contain areas of white space that are employed as design elements and can be clearly perceived as visual borders. Such an environment would thus fall into the explicit boundary category. Experiment 5 does not indicate how the issue of white space is handled. Replacing the labels of “explicit” and “implicit” with “physical/tangible” and “intangible” could help eliminate any overlap between the two types of boundaries.

3. The paper investigates the effects of incidental personal control. Would the effects also hold when perceived personal control represents a chronic variable (i.e., when individuals differ in learned helplessness/self-efficacy in a particular domain)?

4. The paper implies that the lack of control represents an aversive psychological state. However, there might also be instances where the presence of control may be perceived as undesirable, for example when control is accompanied by a very large responsibility. In such cases, will the pattern of results be similar to the one observed under conditions of low personal control?

5. Future research could investigate the nonconscious aspect of the effect addressed in this paper. It would also be interesting to explore whether the choice of a physically bounded item does in fact enhance perceptions of control in low-control situations.

Methodological issues

1. The paper implies that the relationship between lack of personal control and consumers’ preferences for explicit and boundaries is mediated by two distinct constructs that operate
sequentially: consumers’ enhanced desire for structured consumption and their enhanced willingness to interpret design elements as cues for structure and order. However, Figure 1 does not include both of these constructs, and the paper does not directly verify the entire causal model. The complete model could be best tested using a Structural Equation Modeling approach.

2. Experiment 5 suggests that the effect of personal control on consumers’ responses to the organized vs. disorganized store is explained by a differential weighting of order/structure in the high vs. low control condition. However, a mediation test is not conducted to explicitly verify this explanation.

3. Only experiment 4B explicitly tested whether affect was a confounding variable. It would have been helpful to include a measure of affect in the other experiments, too.

4. Experiments 3 and 4A do not report a manipulation check. Even if the experiments employ manipulations that have been successfully used before, a manipulation check is still needed.

5. Experiment 3 aims, among others, to verify whether low personal control increases one’s desire for boundaries as opposed to high personal control dampening it. While the results section compares the low control condition to the baseline condition, the high control condition is not explicitly contrasted against the baseline (though the lack of a main effect in the former case is implied). The discussion section for Experiment 3 needs to address whether the all the hypotheses pertaining to this experiment have been supported.

6. Experiment 4A does not indicate where the participants were recruited from.

**Reviewer D**

**Comments to the Authors:**

This paper examined an interesting phenomenon. It has important marketing implications and contributes to the literature that consumers seek to re-establish a threatened self-concept via product consumption. But at the current stage the paper is not ready for publication. The studies have their respective drawbacks; some important study details were missing, and there seems to be some internal contradictions. Following are some detailed comments:

1. Experiment 1: I’d like to see more details about the choice stimuli, the pretest and the study procedure. It seems that the manipulation of experiment 1 not only affected feelings of control, but also many other constructs (power, self-determination, mood, arousal, self-esteem… as indicated by participants’ worse performance in the math test). Without sufficient details and a clean manipulation check, experiment 1 does not seem to be a strong first study to report.

2. The manipulation of experiment 2 was a little tricky. First, it did not really manipulate personal control, but confidence with one’s personal control. Second, it’s strange not to observe any main effect of high- vs. low-control writings in the pretest. If there was only a
fluency main effect, why not simply include two conditions (write 3 or 10 instances of having control)? Also, data reporting was not very clear. On average how many bounded logos were chosen in each condition? In addition, how did you choose and pre-test the logos? What was the cover story to the choice task?

3. I like the manipulation of experiment 3, but again manipulation check was needed to show that the writing task only affected feelings of control without affecting other constructs. The three “motivation for control” questions seem a little strange and bold, and could potentially have demand effect (on choice). Hence, I’m not sure how much the mediation analysis added to the study.

4. Experiments 4a and 4b presented an interesting twist, but they share some common drawbacks. First of all, they seemed to contradict with earlier studies. If I get it right, in experiments 1, 2 and 3 the author demonstrated a main effect of personal control. However, there was only an interaction effect in experiment 4a and 4b. In addition, as there was no proper manipulation check in both studies, it was not clear whether individuals with religious belief and adequate resources were less affected by the manipulation or they were simply better able to recover from the threat. Further, it was not common to include individual difference scales in the same setting with the main study.

5. Experiment 5 extended the study into a different and interesting domain. I would like to see more details about experiment 5 (e.g. how many products were there in the simulated shop?). Also, when you report the results, please first report main effects, if any, before moving to interaction effects.

Other comments and suggestions:

1. At this stage, you might want to consider deleting one or two experiment(s) and adding a stronger and cleaner study to test of your central account.

2. It might be interesting to study whether contextual or situational factors (other than individual differences) could help individuals regain feelings of control and consequently attenuate the effect of personal control on choice.

3. Throughout the paper, there was no strong manipulation check suggesting that bounded products = greater control. Do you think choosing bounded products/logos is a conscious process or unconscious process?

4. It is quite intriguing to see that feelings of low personal control in a positive setting would still motivate individuals to seek for bounded products. It seems contradictory to the notion that people sometimes welcome “happy surprises”. Will there be any situation where a low level of personal control is preferred?

Good luck with the research!