How Asking “Who Am I?” Affects What You Buy:
The Influence of Self-Discovery on Consumption

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Abstract
Are you Type A or Type B? An optimist or a pessimist? Intuitive or analytical? Consumers are motivated to learn about the self but they may not always accept what they learn. This article explores how the desire for self-discovery leads individuals to seek but not necessarily accept the feedback they receive and the implications this has for consumption behavior. Specifically, this article examines the case of consumers who value being unconstrained: individuals with independent self-construals and those that are high in reactance motivation. The authors argue that these individuals often view self-knowledge as a constraint on the self and subsequently reject it – even when the self-knowledge has neutral or positive implications for self-esteem. Results across five studies demonstrate that independents and high reactants feel constrained by self-knowledge and that this causes them to reject and make consumption choices inconsistent with it even as they actively seek to learn about themselves. Interdependents and low reactants, in contrast, do not feel constrained by self-knowledge and consequently, they accept and incorporate it into their consumption decisions.

Keywords: self-knowledge, self-construal, reactance, identity threat
Are you an introvert or an extravert? Would your friends characterize you as a dreamer or a realist? Do you tend to plan things out or are you more of a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants type? For most individuals, self-discovery is an integral part of everyday life. We learn about ourselves through the choices we make, the interactions we have with others, the successes we achieve and the failures we suffer through. We discover different facets of ourselves through the emotions we feel, the praise or criticisms we receive from others and the reactions we have to the different events that occur in our lives. With each piece of self-knowledge that we garner, we learn more about ourselves and come closer to defining who we are.

Researchers have argued that we each have an innate desire to learn about our own selves (Baumeister 1998; Trope 1980). Consequently, we like to know what others think of us, how good we are at a certain skill, how successful we are relative to others and so on. Importantly, we not only learn about ourselves passively over the course of our daily lives but we often actively seek out self-related information as well. Accordingly, individuals in the laboratory have been found to prefer tasks of high informational value about one’s own ability to tasks of low informational value (Trope 1975) and to actually pay for information about the impressions others have formed of them (Swann and Read 1981).

Having noted this interest in self-discovery, firms have blanketed the marketplace with products and services aimed at helping individuals better understand and define the self. These self-discovery products and services range widely. High-end department stores such as Nordstrom and Bloomingdales offer color consultations to cosmetics shoppers so that they can learn whether “summer” or “winter” colors are better for their complexions. Gyms and fitness centers offer fitness assessments where trained professionals help consumers understand what type of exerciser they are and which activities and movements they should be doing to reach
their fitness goals. Self-help books such as *The Journey Called You: A Roadmap to Self-Discovery and Acceptance* and *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* profess to help consumers in learning about the self, and crafts classes promise to aid consumers in discovering the basket-weaver or cake decorator within themselves. Even products that are not explicitly aimed at self-discovery often have a self-discovery component to them. For example, many popular movies and books such as *Under the Tuscan Sun, Good Will Hunting* and *Eat, Pray, Love* glorify the process of self-discovery and acceptance.

From a logical standpoint, this drive towards self-discovery makes sense – the more clearly we understand ourselves, the more likely we are to make appropriate decisions about what job to take, who to marry, what goals to pursue and so on. Understanding our preferences and proclivities can save us valuable resources – if we recognize and appreciate our own personalities, we won’t waste money on “spring” make-up colors when we’re unmistakably a “winter” nor will we squander precious self-control resources on the Atkins diet when our specific body type would respond best to the Zone diet.

For self-discovery to be helpful however, individuals have to accept and incorporate the newly learned self-knowledge into their self-concepts and their daily behavior. That is, knowing that you have an hourglass rather than a rectangular figure is only useful so long as you purchase clothing that flatters your particular shape. We will argue, however, that the process of discovering and defining the self can also be perceived as a means of placing boundaries and constraints on what the self can be. If you are Type A, by definition you cannot also be Type B, and if you are a neat freak, you are not simultaneously a slob. This means that for individuals who are sensitive to the prospect of limitations, the findings from self-discovery can represent a type of constraint on who they can be. This is true even when the results of self-discovery are
neutral or even positive in their implications for self-esteem. Thus, we argue that these individuals may actually reject the findings of self-discovery instead of incorporating them into the self-concept and relying on them to make more informed life choices.

In this paper, we explore how the urge to accumulate self-knowledge might have unexpected effects on consumption behavior. More specifically, we investigate when individuals will accept and incorporate the conclusions of self-discovery into their consumption choices and when they will reject them. We argue that the degree to which people accept what they learn in a self-discovery process depends on whether the knowledge is ultimately perceived as a tool for understanding or as a constraint on the self. We suggest that for individuals who are sensitive to the prospect of constraint – e.g., those described by independent self-construals and by relatively high levels of reactance – the accrual of self-knowledge puts them between the proverbial rock and hard place; though these individuals are innately driven to discover the self, the very act of defining the self is inconsistent with their conception of the self as an indefinable whole. Thus, we expect that independents and high reactants will reject the findings of self-discovery and make consumption choices inconsistent with them, even as they actively seek to learn about themselves. For individuals who are not sensitive to the prospect of constraint however – e.g., those low in reactance and characterized by interdependent self-construals – the process of defining the self through self-discovery is not inconsistent with their self-conceptions. As a result, we expect interdependents and low reactants to accept the findings of self-discovery and to incorporate this new knowledge into their subsequent consumption decisions.

Across a series of studies, we first explore how differences in self-construal lead to dissimilarities in how individuals respond to the acquisition of self-knowledge. Specifically, we find that independents reject their self-discovery findings and make consumption choices that are
inconsistent with what one might expect based on their newly acquired self-knowledge. We find that interdependents, on the other hand, accept and utilize their self-discovery findings in making their consumption decisions. This effect occurs regardless of whether the self-information has neutral or even positive implications for self-esteem, suggesting that it is in fact the limiting nature of self-definition and not threat from negative self-information that is driving the results. Next, we rely on the strong emphasis individuals high in reactance place on personal freedom to show that it is indeed the restrictions created by self-discovery that may cause individuals to reject self-discovery conclusions. Specifically, we find that individuals high in reactance reject and make choices inconsistent with their self-discovery findings while individuals low in reactance accept and make self-discovery consistent choices. And finally, we establish that it is in fact the limiting nature of self-definition that drives independents’ self-discovery-inconsistent choices by showing that feelings of being constrained mediate the relationship between self-construal and product choice. We begin by briefly reviewing the research on self-discovery and then discussing the literatures on self-construal and reactance before presenting our hypotheses and the results of five studies. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

"Who in the World Am I? Ah, that’s the Great Puzzle" – Lewis Carroll

As so elegantly put by the writer Lewis Carroll, the self is a mystery. We do not directly perceive or know the self; instead we (with the help of others around us) build up a body of beliefs about it (Higgins 1996). One way in which we acquire beliefs about the self is through seeking out self-related information. Ample work in both psychology and organizational
behavior suggests that we actively seek out self-knowledge. As an example, individuals in the lab have been shown to solicit feedback from interaction partners (Swann and Read 1981) and to prefer high-diagnostic tasks to low-diagnostic tasks (Strube and Roemmele 1985) while individuals in corporate settings have been shown to actively request feedback from their supervisors (Williams and Johnson 2000).

In the present research, we build on this work to suggest that the degree to which individuals will accept the self-knowledge they acquire depends on whether the self-knowledge is ultimately perceived as a tool for understanding the self or as a constraint on what the self can be. Here, we choose not to focus on the specific motivations that drive the pursuit of self-knowledge (e.g., self-verification, self-assessment, self-improvement and self-enhancement (Sedikides and Strube 1997). Instead, we focus on what accepting or rejecting self-knowledge means for the broader way in which people define themselves. Specifically, we suggest that for individuals who see themselves as indefinable wholes, self-knowledge may be perceived as a constraint on the self and consequently rejected. For those who do not emphasize the “wholeness” of the self, self-knowledge may be viewed as a tool for understanding the self and as a result, accepted and incorporated into the working self definition.

Overview of Studies

In this paper, we explore how the desire for self-discovery leads individuals to seek out but not necessarily accept self-knowledge and the important consequences this has for consumption behavior. In the studies that follow, we operationalize self-knowledge as feedback from personality quizzes. Personality quizzes have long been a staple of popular magazines such
as *Men’s Health, Reader’s Digest* and *Glamour*, and with the advent of the Internet, such quizzes have become even more widespread. For instance, a Google search for “personality quiz” returned 2,420,000 hits, ranging from the fun and quirky (e.g., “Which superhero are you?”) to more serious personality assessments (e.g., the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator). Importantly, personality quiz profiles resemble many commercial self-discovery products and services (e.g., color consultations or fitness assessments) in that the feedback they give has neither clearly positive nor negative implications for self-esteem. For example, it is unclear whether it is a positive or negative thing to be described as a “dreamer” or a “realist”. The ambiguous nature of personality quiz feedback is in direct contrast to the majority of the research on self-knowledge seeking, in which it is apparent whether it is a good or bad thing to have received the feedback given (e.g., Baumeister and Cairns 1992). While it follows from existing research that individuals will generally reject negative but not positive self-knowledge, we suggest that certain classes of individuals will reject all self-knowledge regardless of its implications for self-esteem. In other words, we propose that individuals who are sensitive to constraint will resent the limitations imposed on them by being categorized as one type or another and that this will lead them to reject negative, neutral and positive self-knowledge.

Importantly, we offer each participant the chance to take part in multiple studies including, but not limited to, the ones included in this research. In giving participants the choice to participate or not, we both mimic the real world of many possibilities as well as rule out the possibility that individuals will react against the violation of personal freedom implied in being compelled to take these studies rather than against the limiting nature of self-knowledge as we suggest. In addition, participants’ voluntary participation in these studies supports our contention that individuals are naturally drawn towards self-discovery, even if they do not always accept the
findings. Thus, we know that all individuals voluntarily took part in our studies, but expect that individuals who are highly sensitive to limitations will reject the findings of self-discovery while less sensitive individuals will not.

**Study 1A: “There’s No Limit Possible to the Expansion Of Each One of Us” – Charles Schwab**

If you were asked to describe yourself, would you talk about the unique traits and distinctive mannerisms that describe you and you alone? Or would you talk about yourself in the context of your role as a friend, partner, sibling or parent? Research on self-construal suggests that individuals differ fundamentally in how they conceptualize the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Singelis 1994). Individuals characterized by independent self-construals see themselves as separate and autonomous entities comprised of unique sets of attributes. Independents believe that these attributes – which include traits, abilities, motives and values – are an essential aspect of the self and the primary determinant of one’s success (Heine et al. 1999; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Thus, an independent soccer player is likely to believe that his soccer skills are due to his own natural abilities and his own distinctive blend of perseverance and determination.

Individuals characterized by interdependent self-construals, on the other hand, view and define themselves in the context of their social relationships, roles and duties. For interdependents, self-definition is about seeing oneself as part of a greater whole rather than being a self-sufficient individual. Success is not defined on the individual’s unique set of attributes nor is being a separate and self-contained whole valued. Accordingly, an interdependent soccer player is less likely to attribute his success solely to his own skills and abilities and more likely to credit his coach and supportive family for his athletic prowess.
Consistent with this line of reasoning, media in Japan (traditionally defined as an interdependent culture) have been shown to attribute the success of Olympic athletes not just to personal attributes but also to their background, social and emotional experiences. In contrast, media in the United States (typically portrayed as an independent culture) have been shown to explain successful Olympic performance predominantly through personal characteristics (Markus et al. 2006). Thus, independents view themselves as primarily responsible for their successes whereas interdependents see their victories more as a product of their relationships and place in society.

Since independent selves see their personal attributes as responsible for their successes in particular and their behavior in general, it follows that independents should place great emphasis on their own collection of traits. For an independent to admit that he lacks a particular ability or a specific trait is to acknowledge that he has a weakness or deficiency that may preclude success in a particular domain. Given that individuals generally believe themselves to have a better-than-average chance of succeeding at most activities (Regan, Snyder, and Kassin 1995) and to be above average at a wide range of personal characteristics (e.g., Brown 1986), we expect independents to view the limiting nature of self-knowledge as threatening. Thus, we expect that independents will reject the findings of self-discovery instead of using them to update their self-concepts and to make more informed decisions. In contrast, because interdependents attribute their success to their relationships rather than their personal abilities, the prospect of a constrained self should not threaten their prospects of success. Therefore, we expect that interdependents should accept the findings of self-discovery and incorporate them into their subsequent choices.

**Method**
Participants. Potential participants were given the option of participating in a number of studies including this one. Seventy-nine undergraduates chose to take part in this study.

Design. This study used a 2 (manipulated quiz profile; low competence/high excitement or high competence/low excitement profile) by measured self-construal between-subjects design.

Quiz profile manipulation. Participants were asked to complete a short personality quiz consisting of personality items (“I prefer a life that revolves around spontaneity and flexibility rather than schedules and organization”), IQ questions (“Which one of the letters does not belong in the following series: A - D - G - J - M - O - P – S?”), and the 24-item Singelis Self-Construal Scale (1994). All participants were told that they performed better than 95% of similar college students on one dimension and better than 70% on a second dimension. As the participant population is a very talented and competitive one, pretesting showed that being in the 70th percentile of similar college students was taken as a negative, while being in the 95th percentile was taken as a positive. Thus, we gave participants self-information that was ambiguous in terms of its overall self-esteem implications. In the low competence/high excitement condition, participants received profiles that included the following details alongside a histogram highlighting the percentiles:

Your score indicates that you performed better than 70% of North Carolina college students in regard to having a Competent personality (as judged by levels of reliability, responsibility, dependability and efficiency). Your score also indicates that you scored better than 95% of North Carolina college students in regard to having an Exciting personality (as judged by levels of spiritedness and creativity).

In the high competence/low excitement condition, participants received profiles and a histogram indicating:

Your score indicates that you performed better than 70% of North Carolina college students in regard to having an Exciting personality (as judged by levels of spiritedness and creativity). Your score also indicates that you scored better than 95% of North
Carolina college students in regard to having a Competent personality (as judged by levels of reliability, responsibility, dependability and efficiency).

After completing the personality quiz, participants received their quiz profiles and were asked to indicate the extent to which the profile was accurate on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Not True At All) to 7 (Extremely True).

Though we could have given participants information regarding their levels of conceivably any trait, we chose to focus on competence and excitement for several reasons. First, both individuals and brands may be characterized in terms of competence and excitement (Aaker 1997). In our theorizing, we predicted that the choices made by independents, interdependents and high and low reactants would depend on whether the product options were seen as being consistent or inconsistent with the self-information received. Thus, it was important to choose self-information that would apply to both the individuals receiving the information and the products they could choose from. Second, competence and excitement are each prized as highly desirable personality traits (Anderson 1968). Excitement is a component of extraversion, which has been linked to a host of positive outcomes including elevated social status (Anderson et al. 2001) and increased subjective well-being (Costa and McCrae 1980). Competence, in turn, is a component of conscientiousness and has been related to such advantageous consequences as longevity (Friedman et al. 1995) and increased job performance (Barrick and Mount 1991).

Singelis Self-Construal Scale. Participants completed both the independent and the interdependent subscales of the Singelis Self-Construal Scale (1994). Each subscale consisted of twelve 7-point scale items ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Interdependent subscale items included “It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group” while independent items included “I act the same way no matter who I am with”.

Magazine Choice. Participants were asked to select one of two nationally distributed magazines: Business 2.0 and Consumer Reports. The two magazines were previously pre-tested on a separate group of undergraduates from the same population using Aaker’s (1997) brand personality dimensions. Pretest results indicated that Consumer Reports was seen as higher in competence ($t(14) = 4.73, p = .0003$) but lower in excitement ($t(14) = -2.94, p = .01$) relative to Business 2.0. Choice of magazine constituted the main dependent measure. We expected that independent selves would reject the information given by their quiz profile and select the magazine with a personality opposite to that in their profile. We anticipated that interdependent selves, on the other hand, would incorporate the information given by their quiz profile into their decision by selecting the magazine with a personality similar to that in their profile.

Procedure. Upon arriving at the study site, participants were randomly assigned to a quiz profile condition. Participants then began the experiment by taking the personality quiz, receiving the profile and making a choice between the two magazines. Participants then provided some basic demographic information before being thanked and fully debriefed.

Results

To allow us to compare predominantly independent individuals against predominantly interdependent individuals, we first created an index measure of self-construal by subtracting the mean score on the independence scale (12 items, $\alpha = .78$) from the mean score on the interdependence scale (12 items, $\alpha = .82$) (Holland et al. 2004). We then analyzed the magazine choice data using a logistic regression model with self-construal, quiz profile condition and their interaction as predictors. The degree to which participants believed the quiz profile accurately reflected themselves was included as a covariate in the analysis.
As predicted, the study results revealed a significant interaction between self-construal and quiz profile type ($\beta = .53, \chi^2 = 4.89, p = .03$). To examine this interaction in more depth, we performed a spotlight analysis (Aiken and West 1991) in which the probability of Business 2.0 (the low competence/high excitement magazine) being chosen by participants in the low competence/high excitement and in the high competence/low excitement profile conditions was compared at two standard deviations above and below the mean level of self-construal. Results revealed that interdependents were more likely to choose Business 2.0 (the low competence/high excitement magazine) when they were in the low competence/high excitement condition and Consumer Reports (the high competence/low excitement magazine) when they were in the high competence/low excitement condition ($\beta = .69, \chi^2 = 4.38, p = .04$). In other words, interdependent individuals in both conditions incorporated their quiz profiles into their decisions and chose the brand with traits most similar to their own. In contrast, independents were more likely to choose Consumer Reports (the high competence/low excitement option) when they were in the low competence/high excitement condition and Business 2.0 (the low competence/high excitement option) when they were in the high competence/low excitement condition ($\beta = -.66, \chi^2 = 3.78, p = .05$). In other words, independents in both conditions tended to reject their self-discovery findings and to choose the brand with traits different from their own. Of note, neither independence nor interdependence significantly predicted feedback accuracy beliefs, reducing the plausibility that independent individuals chose brands with different traits and interdependent individuals chose brands with similar traits because of differences in likelihood to be persuaded.

--- Insert Figure 1 ---
Discussion

Consistent with our predictions, independent individuals made consumption decisions that were at odds with the information given to them by their personality quiz profiles. In contrast, interdependent individuals made consumption choices that were in harmony with the self-information given by their quiz profiles. Together, these results are in line with the notion that it is independents’ hesitance and interdependents’ readiness to embrace new self-knowledge that lead them to respond to their self-discovery findings in such different ways. However, though these results are consistent with that idea, they do not show that independents and interdependents differ in their acceptance of self-knowledge explicitly, making it difficult to rule out alternative explanations. It is possible, for instance, that all participants accepted the new self-information equally, but that independents and interdependents differed in some other respect that led them to choose as they did. We address this concern in study 1B.

Study 1B: “Trying to Define Yourself is Like Trying to Bite Your Own Teeth” – Alan Watts

In Study 1B, our goal is to examine whether independents and interdependents do indeed differ in their reluctance and willingness to change their self-concepts in response to their self-discovery findings. We expect that interdependents will readily accept and incorporate new self-information into their self-concepts while independents will be reluctant to do so.

Method

Participants. Forty undergraduates chose to take part in this study.

Design. This study used a 2 (manipulated quiz profile; low competence/high excitement or high competence/low excitement profile) by measured self-construal between-subjects design.
**Quiz profile manipulation and self-construal measure.** Participants were asked to complete the same personality quiz used in study 1A and received the same quiz profiles.

**Self-concept changes.** As our dependent variable, participants were asked to respond to several questions regarding whether they accepted their quiz profiles and incorporated the information into their self-views. Specifically, participants were asked: “How likely are you to incorporate this feedback into your own descriptions of yourself?” “If someone were to ask you about your personality as it relates to being competent and exciting, how likely are you to consider the information you received in the personality quiz in your response?” “How likely are you to consider the ways in which this information can help you make better decisions?” “How likely are you to remember this feedback?” and “How helpful was this feedback in helping you understand more about yourself?” The first four questions were answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely). The final question was answered on a separate 7 point scale ranging from 1 (not at all helpful) to 7 (very helpful).

**Procedure.** Upon arriving at the study site, participants were randomly assigned to a quiz profile condition. Participants then completed the personality quiz and received their quiz profiles before answering the questions regarding their self-concept changes. Upon completion of all tasks related to the study, participants were thanked and fully debriefed.

**Results**

To conduct our analyses, we created two index measures: an index of the changing self-concept scale items ($\alpha = .88$) and an index measure of self-construal where the mean of the independence scale ($\alpha = .78$) was subtracted from the mean of the interdependence scale ($\alpha = .85$) (Holland et al. 2004). We then regressed self-construal, quiz profile condition and their interaction on the self-concept index. The degree to which participants believed the personality
quiz profile to be accurate about themselves was again included in the analysis as a covariate. As expected, we found a main effect of self-construal ($\beta = .45$, $t(36) = 2.48$, $p = .02$) such that the more interdependent people were, the more likely they were to report changes in their self-concepts based on the information in their quiz profiles. There were no other significant effects.

**Discussion**

Consistent with our expectations, interdependents reported that they were more willing to accept and incorporate the self-information they received into their self-concepts relative to independents. Taken together with the results from study 1A, these findings suggest that independents are reluctant to accept new self-knowledge, and that this can have some unexpected consequences for consumption. Of note, the self-information in studies 1A and 1B was of an indeterminate valence – that is, participants were told that they were strong in one dimension and weak in another. One alternate explanation for our results is that independents were reacting to the negative information in the profile rather than the prospect of a limitation to the self. Past research has shown that independents are particularly sensitive to negative feedback (e.g., Brockner and Chen 1996) and so independents could have chosen the brand inconsistent with their profile as a way of proving the assessment wrong rather than as a reaction to the self being bounded and constrained. We attempt to rule out this alternate explanation in study 1C.

*Study 1C: “Each of Us is in Truth an Unlimited Idea of Freedom. Everything that Limits Us, We Have to Put Aside” – Richard Bach*

In study 1C, our goal is to rule out the possibility that independents were reacting to the negative self-information we gave them in previous studies rather than the self-limitation that being categorized as one type or another presents. To rule this out, we use only positive self-information in study 1C. Given that individuals are generally more than amenable to learning
favorable things about the self (e.g., Baumeister and Cairns 1992), a replication of our results with only positive self-information would suggest that it is indeed the prospect of limitations that is driving our results and not a response to negative self-information. Thus, we expect independents to again select brands that are inconsistent with the self-information they receive and we expect interdependents to again make choices that apply the self-information they learn.

**Method**

*Participants.* Fifty-eight undergraduates chose to take part in this study.

*Design.* This study used a 2 (manipulated quiz profile; high excitement or high competence profile) by measured self-construal between subjects design.

*Quiz profile manipulation and self-construal measure.* Participants were asked to complete the same personality quiz as in previous studies before receiving quiz profiles that depicted them as being either high in competence or high in excitement. Specifically, results were presented with a histogram highlighting percentiles and the following details:

- **High Excitement Condition**—“Your score indicates that you scored better than 95% of North Carolina college students that have taken this quiz in regard to having an Exciting personality (as judged by levels of spiritedness and creativity).”

- **High Competence Condition**—“Your score indicates that you scored better than 95% of North Carolina college students that have taken this quiz in regard to having a Competent personality (as judged by levels of reliability, responsibility, dependability and efficiency).”

Participants also indicated how accurate they believed the quiz profile to be about themselves on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely true).

*Magazine Choice.* We retained the same magazine choice dependent variable as was used in study 1A – a choice between Business 2.0 and Consumer Reports magazines.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly assigned to receive either high excitement or high competence self-information. Participants first completed the personality quiz before receiving
the profile information and making a choice between the two magazines. Lastly, participants provided basic demographic information and were thanked and debriefed.

**Results**

As in previous studies, we created an index measure of self-construal by subtracting the mean score on the independence scale (12 items, $\alpha = .65$) from the mean score on the interdependence scale (12 items, $\alpha = .84$) (Holland et al. 2004) and included the degree to which participants believed the personality quiz profile to be accurate as a covariate. The model used in the analysis to predict brand choice was the same as in study 1A: a logistic regression model with measured self-construal, quiz profile condition, and the two-way interaction of self-construal and condition as predictors.

As we expected, we found a significant interaction between self-construal and condition ($\beta = .63$, $\chi^2 = 6.08$, $p = .01$) on magazine choice and no other significant effects. A spotlight analysis showed a significant simple effect of condition at high interdependence ($\beta = .98$, $\chi^2 = 5.75$, $p = .02$). Interdependents in the high excitement condition were more likely to choose Business 2.0 (high excitement) relative to Consumer Reports. Interdependents in the high competence condition were more likely to choose Consumer Reports (high competence) relative to Business 2.0. The simple effect of condition at high independence was also significant ($\beta = -.86$, Wald Chi-Square = 4.46, $p = .03$). Independents in the high excitement condition were more likely to choose Consumer Reports (high competence) than Business 2.0. Independents in the high competence condition were more likely to choose Business 2.0 (high excitement) than Consumer Reports. Taken as a whole, interdependents made choices that were consistent with the self-information they received and independents made choices that were inconsistent. As in
the previous studies, neither independence nor interdependence predicted accuracy beliefs, again reducing the plausibility that the results can be explained by differences in persuasion.

--- Insert Figure 2 ---

**Discussion**

Consistent with our expectations, the results of study 1C replicated those of study 1A – independents made consumption choices that were inconsistent with the self-information they received while interdependents made consumption choices that incorporated the self-information they received. Importantly, individuals in study 1C were given only positive self-information. The fact that independents still acted inconsistently with their self-discovery findings suggests that they were not simply reacting to the negative information given to them in study 1A. This lends support to our notion that independents viewed the particular quiz profile they received as a limitation to the self and that this then led them to make decisions that were contrary to what one might expect based on the self-knowledge they had just discovered.

It is possible, however, that independents’ choices were less motivated by a desire to be unconstrained than by a desire for uniqueness. Past research has suggested that independents value being distinct from others and that interdependents value conformity. Accordingly, subjects exposed to personal self-construals (“I”) have been shown to accentuate differences with others by displaying social comparison contrast effects while subjects exposed to social self-construals (“we”) have been shown to highlight similarities to others by exhibiting social comparison assimilation effects (Stapel and Koomen 2001). Similarly, independents have been shown to prefer brands that are framed as demonstrating points of distinction from others and
that interdependents have been shown to favor brands that are billed as establishing points of similarities with others (Aaker and Schmitt 2001). In studies 1A and 1C, however, the fact that independents are making choices that move away from their unique status – that is, the fact that they are choosing brands that are inconsistent with their unique strength of being in the “95th percentile” in excitement or competence – seems inconsistent with this explanation.

In study 2, we further explore the idea that self-knowledge can represent a limitation on the self. If self-knowledge is indeed constraining as we have argued, individuals who are known to react against constraints should also resent the limiting nature of self-knowledge. In this next study, we examine the case of individuals who differ in reactance motivation.

*Study 2: “Nothing is More Difficult and Therefore More Precious, Than to be Able to Decide” – Napoleon Bonaparte*

How do you react when you can’t do what you want? Psychological reactance theory suggests that individuals believe they are free to engage in “any conceivable act” and will act to regain that freedom if it is threatened or eliminated (Brehm 1966). When individuals encounter either a real or threatened restriction of freedom, they experience a state of psychological reactance which may lead them to engage in several behaviors. They may act to restore the specific freedom that was taken away (Brehm 1966), experience negative emotions such as frustration and hostility (Wicklund 1974), become increasingly interested in attaining the restricted behavior (Brehm 1966) and negatively evaluate the source of the restriction (Clee and Wicklund 1980). Past research has demonstrated that restrictions of freedom can encompass anything from stockouts (Fitzsimons 2000), to product recommendations (Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004), to explicit orders not to do something (Brehm 1966).
Reactance theory was originally hypothesized to be situation-specific and to apply to individuals in general, but research has demonstrated that individuals chronically differ in their levels of reactance proneness such that highly reactant individuals respond strongly to restrictions of freedom, whereas more weakly reactant individuals experience little reactance when their freedoms are threatened or eliminated (Hong and Faedda 1996). As a personality variable, reactance is positively correlated with other personality variables such as internal locus of control (Brehm and Brehm 1981), aggression, dominance, defensiveness and autonomy (Dowd and Wallbrown 1993). Dowd et al. (1994) characterized reactant individuals as being less concerned with making a good impression on others and less likely to follow social norms. Thus, reactant individuals tend to be those who “march to the beat of their own drum”, place high value on their autonomy and independence and resent being limited in any way.

As a result of their fierce insistence on personal freedom, reactant individuals should display a heightened sensitivity to potential restrictions of freedom including those inherent in self-definition. That is, reactants should resent being characterized as Type A because this limits their ability to also be Type B. Study 2 was designed to examine whether individuals characterized by chronically high levels of reactance might be especially sensitive to and threatened by the limiting nature of self-knowledge. We expect that relative to low reactants, high reactants should be more likely to react against the quiz feedback they receive. Study 2 was also designed to rule out the possibility that our effects are manipulation-specific. Accordingly the experimental manipulations used in study 2 differ from those used in earlier studies.

**Method**

*Participants.* Seventy-five undergraduates chose to take part in this study.
Design. This study used a 2 (manipulated quiz profile; brand conscious or not brand conscious) by measured reactance between-subjects factorial design.

Quiz profile manipulation. In this study, participants were asked to complete a short product choice quiz. The product choice quiz consisted of an initial series of product choices followed by a quiz profile and then a second series of product choices. The two product choice series each consisted of several product pairs in an assortment of consumer packaged goods categories – participants were asked to select one product per pair. Product pairs consisted of either two name brand products (e.g., Jelly Belly and Starburst jelly beans), two generic products (e.g., Kroger brand and Lowes Foods brand canned kidney beans) or one name brand product and one generic product (e.g., Energizer and CVS brand batteries) in the same product category.

In the brand conscious condition, participants received self-information that read:

Your choices reveal that you are more brand conscious than the average consumer. When making choices within a given product category, you are more likely to use brand information to make your selection than the average consumer. Thus, you are more likely to pick the brand name product over its generic counterpart.

In the not brand conscious condition, participants received self-information that read:

Your choices reveal that you are less brand conscious than the average consumer. When making choices within a given product category, you are less likely to use brand information to make your selection than the average consumer. Thus, you are equally as likely to pick the generic product as its brand name counterpart.

Dependent measure. The number of name brand product choices made in the second choice set constituted our main dependent measure. We expect that when shown the brand conscious profile, high reactants should make choices that are inconsistent with their self-information by selecting fewer name brand items. Low reactants, in contrast, should select more name brand items. Conversely, when shown the not brand conscious profile, high reactants should select more branded items while low reactants should select fewer branded items.
**Hong Reactance Scale.** Participants were asked to complete the 11-item Hong Psychological Reactance Scale (Hong and Faedda 1996). The questions were 5-point scale items ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Questions included: “When something is prohibited, I usually think, ‘That’s exactly what I’m going to do’” and “I become frustrated when I am unable to make free and independent decisions”.

**Procedure.** Upon arrival, participants were randomly assigned to a quiz profile condition. Participants then began the study by taking the product choice quiz, receiving the quiz profiles and making a second set of product choices. Finally, participants completed the Hong Reactance Scale and provided demographic information before being thanked and fully debriefed.

**Results**

To conduct our analyses, we first averaged individuals’ responses to the Hong Reactance Scale (Hong and Faedda 1996) to obtain a reactance index score for each participant ($\alpha = .77$). Then, we created a measure of name brand choices by summing the number of name brand products picked in the second choice set. This index constituted our main dependent measure.

Since reactance was a continuous variable, the data were analyzed using regression with measured reactance, quiz profile type and the interaction between the two as predictors. As expected, the study results revealed a significant interaction between reactance and profile type ($\beta = -1.28$, $t(71) = -2.31$, $p = .02$). We then examined this interaction using a spotlight analysis (Aiken and West 1991) in which the number of name brand choices made by participants in the two profile conditions were compared at two standard deviations above and below the mean reactance level. Results of the analysis showed that individuals high in trait reactance chose more generic products when they received the brand conscious profile and more name brand products when they received the not brand conscious profile ($\beta = -2.31$, $t(71) = -1.96$, $p = .05$). Individuals
low in trait reactance, on the other hand, chose more generic products when they received the not brand conscious profile and more name brand products when they received the brand conscious profile ($\beta = 1.41$, $t(71) = 2.18$, $p = .03$). Importantly, reactance was not predicted by condition.

--- Insert Figure 3 ---

**Discussion**

Consistent with our hypotheses, individuals low in reactance accepted and applied the self-knowledge they received in making their decisions while individuals high in reactance did not. Importantly, this effect occurred irrespective of the self-knowledge’s content – that is, highly reactant individuals reacted against both knowledge stating that they were less brand conscious than the average consumer and knowledge stating that they were more brand conscious. Thus, for highly reactant individuals, the very fact of receiving self-knowledge and being classified in a specific way was enough to arouse feelings of self-threat, regardless of what that knowledge was.

Taken together, the results of studies 1 and 2 reveal that independents and high reactants reject self-discovery findings while interdependents and low reactants accept them. Though reactance is by definition about constraints, it does not necessarily follow from our results at this point that sensitivity to limitation is also driving the behavior of independents and interdependents. In study 3, we explore the relationship between self-construal and reactance in order to shed light on exactly why independents behave like high reactants and why interdependents act like low reactants in response to self-discovery findings.

*Study 3: “To define is to limit” – Oscar Wilde*
Study 3 was designed with several goals in mind. First, study 3 was intended to examine the relationship between self-construal and reactance. Though individuals do differ chronically in their levels of reactance proneness, feelings of reactance may also arise in response to particular situations. If independents chafe against self-limits the way high reactants do, we would expect that independents should report increased levels of state reactance in response to the limitations inherent in self-discovery findings. Conversely, if interdependents are not bothered by self-limits, we would expect them to report decreased levels of state reactance. Importantly, we would also expect these feelings of state reactance to mediate the relationship between self-construal and subsequent choice— that is, for feelings of reactance to explain why independents and interdependents react to self-information the way that they do. Second, study 3 includes a “no self-information” condition to provide a neutral baseline for comparison. If our effects are indeed being driven by differences in how independents and interdependents react to self-information, we would not expect to see differences between the two types of individuals in the no self-information conditions. Third and finally, this study was also meant to rule out the possibility that our results from studies 1A through 1C were driven by individual differences other than self-construal that might correlate with measured self-construal. Thus, we prime rather than measure self-construal in this study.

**Method**

*Participants.* One-hundred and twelve adults were recruited through a marketing research firm to take this study online.
Design. This study used a 3 (manipulated quiz profile: brand conscious, not brand conscious, or no information at all) by 2 (manipulated self-construal: independent or interdependent) between-subjects design.

Quiz profile manipulation. Participants in this study completed the same product choice quiz as did participants in study 2. In the brand conscious condition, participants received self-information that they were more brand conscious than the average consumer. In the not brand conscious condition, participants were told that they were less brand conscious than the average consumer. Participants in the no information condition did not receive any self-information.

Self-construal manipulation. Participants were asked to complete a ‘cognitive word exercise’ that was in reality the Brewer and Gardner (1996) self-construal prime. As part of the prime, participants read a paragraph describing a trip to the city and were asked to carefully count all the pronouns that appeared in the text. In the independent paragraph, the text contained 19 pronouns that referred to “I” and “me” and in the interdependent paragraph, the passage contained 19 pronouns that referred to “we” and “us”. As a measure of attention, the degree to which participants counted pronouns incorrectly (i.e., the absolute value of the difference from the correct count) was included as a covariate in the analyses that follow.

State Measure of Reactance. All participants who received quiz profiles were asked about their feelings toward the profile. To measure state feelings of reactance, we followed Lindsey’s (2005) approach and modified four items based on Hong’s psychological reactance scale (Hong and Faedd 1996). We simply replaced Lindsey’s (2005) original concern (reactions to bone marrow donation requests) with our own (reactions to brand consciousness information). Thus, participants were asked to respond to the following five-point scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) (α = .76): “I am uncomfortable with being told how
brand conscious I am”, “I do not like that I am being told how my consumer personality compares to others”, “It irritates me that the study told me about my levels of brand consciousness relative to others” and “I dislike that I am being told how brand conscious I am”.

Dependent measure. We retained the same dependent measure as in study 2: number of name brand products chosen. We expect that individuals who are primed to be independent will make choices that are inconsistent with their quiz profiles while individuals primed to be interdependent will make choices that are consistent with their profiles.

Procedure. Upon consenting to take part in the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions. Participants began by taking the initial product choice quiz before completing either the prime of independence or interdependence. Then, individuals in the self-information conditions received their quiz profiles, answered questions regarding feelings of reactance towards the information received, and made their second set of product choices. Individuals in the no information condition made the second set of product choices directly after completing the self-construal prime. All participants provided demographic information before being thanked and debriefed.

Results

To test whether the self-construal primes would affect the choices individuals made in response to the self-information they received, we analyzed the data using ANOVA with quiz profile condition, self-construal condition, and their interaction as predictors. As expected, the data revealed a significant interaction of self-information and self-construal ($F(2, 105) = 6.14, p = .003$). Planned contrasts revealed that individuals who were primed to be independent chose fewer name brand products in response to the brand conscious profile relative to the not brand conscious profile ($F(1, 105) = 5.65, p = .02$; $M_{\text{independent/brand conscious}} = 3.13$; $M_{\text{independent/not brand}}$
In contrast, individuals primed to be interdependent chose more name brand products after receiving the brand conscious profile than after receiving the not brand conscious profile \((F(1, 105) = 6.79, p = .01; M_{\text{interdependent/brand conscious}} = 5.09 ; M_{\text{interdependent/not brand conscious}} = 3.00)\). Within the brand conscious profile conditions, individuals in the independent condition chose fewer brands relative to those in the interdependent condition \((F(1, 105) = 6.17, p = .01; M_{\text{independent/brand conscious}} = 3.13 ; M_{\text{interdependent/brand conscious}} = 5.09)\). Within the not brand conscious feedback conditions, independents chose significantly more name brand products relative to their interdependent counterparts \((F(1, 105) = 6.21, p = .01; M_{\text{independent/not brand conscious}} = 5.05 ; M_{\text{interdependent/not brand conscious}} = 3.00)\). In the no feedback conditions, self-construal did not influence brand choice \((F(1, 105) = .08, p = .78; M_{\text{independent/no feedback}} = 4.06 ; M_{\text{interdependent/no feedback}} = 3.83)\).

To determine whether feelings of state reactance mediated the relationship between self-construal and subsequent choice, we conducted the series of regression analyses recommended by Muller, Judd and Yzerbyt (2005) for establishing mediated moderation. Focusing on just the self-information conditions, we first re-established the significance of the previously discussed self-construal and feedback condition interaction \((t(1, 72) = 3.20, p < .01)\). Next, we determined that self-construal had a significant main effect on the mediator \((t(1, 72) = -2.76, p = .01)\), such that individuals in the independent conditions reported higher levels of state reactance relative to individuals in the interdependent conditions \((M_{\text{independent}} = 4.57, M_{\text{interdependent}} = 3.52)\), regardless of the feedback they received. And finally, we ascertained that the interaction of the self-construal and feedback condition on brand choice was no longer significant \((t(1, 70) = 1.66, p = .10)\) when the mediator (state reactance) and its interaction with self-information was controlled for. Instead, we found a significant interaction between the mediator and feedback condition \((t(1, 70) = -2.95, p < .01)\), indicating that the partial effect of the mediator on brand choices depends
on the feedback condition. In sum, the overall effect of self-construal on choice is moderated by the feedback that individuals received and within each feedback condition, the relationship between self-construal and choice is mediated by feelings of state reactance.

--- Insert Figure 4 ---

*Discussion*

Consistent with our hypotheses, individuals primed to be independent made product choices that were inconsistent with the self-knowledge they received while individuals primed to be interdependent made choices in line with their self-information. In the no self-knowledge conditions, independent individuals did not differ from interdependent individuals in terms of their choices. Importantly, reactance mediated the relationship between self-construal and brand choice. In the brand conscious conditions, feelings of state reactance led independents to select fewer name brand products while the absence of reactance led interdependents to select more name brand products. Conversely, in the not brand conscious conditions, feelings of state reactance led independents to select more name brand products and the absence of reactance led interdependents to select fewer name brand products. Together, these results suggest that the presence or absence of feelings of constriction are crucial in determining whether individuals will accept self-discovery findings and apply them to make better and more adaptive consumption decisions.

*General Discussion*
Taken as a whole, studies 1 through 3 suggest that though self-discovery findings have the potential to help us make more informed decisions, certain individuals may make choices that are inconsistent with their self-discovery findings because they view the new self-knowledge as constraining. More specifically, we found that for individuals characterized by independent self-construals or by high reactance motivation, the accrual of self-knowledge puts them in a catch-22; though these individuals are innately driven to discover the self, the very act of defining the self is inconsistent with their conception of the self as an indefinable whole. Thus, independents and high reactants rejected the findings of self-discovery and made consumption choices inconsistent with them even as they actively sought to learn about themselves. For individuals described by low reactance or by interdependent self-construals, however, the process of defining the self through self-discovery is not inconsistent with their self-conceptions. Accordingly, interdependents and low reactants accepted the findings of self-discovery and applied this new knowledge to their subsequent consumption decisions. Importantly, we found that independents and high reactants rejected their self-information regardless of what the information was. This suggests that it was indeed the constraint inherent in being categorized as one type or another that triggered our effects and not threat reactions to negative information.

We believe this research offers several important contributions to research on self-motives and self-discovery. Specifically, we demonstrate a key theoretical refinement in terms of when individuals will seek and yet reject self-discovery findings and we establish that this has significant consequences for subsequent consumption behavior. Importantly, we show that individuals may reject self-discovery findings even when the findings have neutral or positive implications for self-esteem. We also contribute to the growing body of literature in consumer behavior that suggests that individuals use consumption as a tool to enhance the self, especially
when threatened (e.g., Dalton 2008; Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009). In particular, we show that individuals’ broad conceptualization of the self will determine how they use self-discovery findings and consumption to enhance the self. This research also brings together the reactance and self-construal literatures in a novel way, offering new insights regarding when and why they exert similar effects on consumers’ choices.

Though we chose not to focus on the specific motivations driving the pursuit of self-knowledge, our work can be situated within the wider context of motivated self-discovery. Recent work has proposed that though the self-verification, self-improvement, and self-assessment motives each affect self-evaluation, they ultimately serve self-enhancement ends by gathering information that can then be used to strategically create situations or to react to environmental events in ways that maximize the positivity of the self (Sedikides and Strube 1997). In the current research, we identify sensitivity to limitations as a potential moderator of how individuals will respond to self-knowledge once it is acquired. Thus, whereas work on self-discovery motives focuses on why we seek self-knowledge and how this affects our response to that knowledge, our work concentrates on how sensitivity to limitations might moderate that response. This in turn suggests that the different self-motives might interact with sensitivity to constraints to determine the exact manner in which individuals will respond to new self-knowledge. Specifically, individuals who are sensitive to limitations might be more open to acquiring new self-knowledge when the self-verification, self-improvement and self-assessment motives are activated relative to when the self-enhancement motive is active. Consequently, the motives behind why we seek self-knowledge may be an important moderator of how individuals will respond to self-discovery.
This work offers several directions for future research. One of the most interesting possibilities involves further exploration of how the content of self-knowledge may matter. The fact that independents and high reactants rejected both positive and mixed self-information raises the question of whether independents and high reactants would reject absolutely all feedback. For example, would independents reject self-information that says that they are unique and would high reactants rebuff self-information that characterizes them as fiercely autonomous? Our conceptualization suggests that independents and high reactants should still react against such self-information but this is of course speculative and would be an interesting avenue for future research. The fact that independents and high-reactants reject positive information, however, does suggest that they do at least reject information that is flattering to the self and consistent with the general tendency to have an overly positive self-concept (e.g., Brown 1986).

A second intriguing avenue for future research concerns the differences between sources of self-information. As noted previously, individuals may acquire self-knowledge in a variety of ways ranging from externally-provided feedback such as that studied in the current research to acquiring self-knowledge through personal experience. Though self-information is self-information, the source of the information may be an important boundary condition in shaping exactly how individuals will react. Specifically, it is possible that self-knowledge is perceived as less limiting when it is personally acquired relative to when it is externally-provided. This may occur either because individuals are more prone to resisting the constraints provided by an external source (though see Carver and Scheier 1981 on self-imposed restrictions of freedom) or because self-knowledge accrued from experience is simply less salient to the individual. Thus, both the source and the salience of self-knowledge may be key moderators in determining how individuals will respond.
Broadly, our results propose that the desire for self-knowledge can significantly influence individuals’ consumption choices. This suggests that marketers may want to take care when they rely on self-discovery products and services to encourage their customers to buy their products. For example, color consultations and fitness assessments may actually lead consumers to make less adaptive choices rather than more informed ones. Thus, consumers’ innate desire for self-discovery may be one need that marketers should be wary of tapping into, as it may lead to some surprising and unintended consequences.
REFERENCES


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FIGURE 1

Study 1A: Probability of the Low Competence/High Excitement Magazine Being Chosen by Condition and Self-Construal
FIGURE 2

Study 1C: Probability of the High Excitement Magazine Being Chosen by Condition and Self-Construal
FIGURE 3

Study 2: Number of Name Brand Products Chosen by Condition and Reactance

[Graph showing the number of name brand choices by condition and reactance]
FIGURE 4

Study 3: Number of Name Brand Products Chosen by Condition

![Bar Chart]

- **Brand Conscious**
  - Independent: 3
  - Interdependent: 5

- **Not Brand Conscious**
  - Independent: 5
  - Interdependent: 4

- **No Feedback**
  - Independent: 4
  - Interdependent: 5

Legend:
- **Blue**: Independent
- **Red**: Interdependent