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The effect of self-concept clarity on discretionary spending tendency☆



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ABSTRACT

Discretionary spending is an important indicator of economic well-being. However, prior research is limited in empirically testing who is more likely to make discretionary purchases. To address this research gap, this article suggests that those who have less clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable self-knowledge (i.e., those who have low self-concept clarity [SCC]) have higher discretionary spending tendencies than high-SCC individuals. The results indicate that low-SCC individuals have higher discretionary spending tendencies because they are more likely to adopt avoidant coping strategies than are high-SCC individuals. This research further tests the effectiveness of elaboration on potential outcomes in reducing the discretionary spending tendencies of individuals with high- or low-SCC and demonstrates that it is effective only for high-SCC individuals. This article concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of the results.

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1. Introduction

Investigating discretionary purchases has long been of interest to both researchers and practitioners (Alhabeeb, 1996; Davis, 2013; Howell & Guevarra, 2013). Prior research defines discretionary spending as consumer spending on things that they want to buy rather than what they need (Danziger, 2004). To capture more share from consumers' discretionary spending, marketers often design and offer highly attractive products and services. They frame these offerings in such a way that consumers are lured into buying more and buying right away. Extensive research in economics, finance, and accounting has investigated how consumers allocate their discretionary income (Du & Kamakura, 2008). However, many of these studies are either descriptive, focusing on a particular demographic group (e.g., teenagers; Alhabeeb, 1996), or they identify the categories in which consumers spend their discretionary income (Du & Kamakura, 2008; Wagner & Hanna, 1983). Empirical evidence of who is more likely to make discretionary purchases and why is limited.

In this research, we investigate factors that might affect and the psychological processes that underlie discretionary spending tendencies. Specifically, we demonstrate that having a clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable

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self-knowledge (i.e., self-concept clarity [SCC]) influences discretionary purchase tendencies, such that low-SCC individuals spend more on discretionary items than high-SCC individuals. We further suggest that coping strategies mediate the effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendencies. That is, low-SCC individuals are more likely to adopt avoidant coping strategies than high-SCC individuals and thus have higher discretionary spending tendencies. Finally, we show that recommended self-regulation strategies, such as elaboration on potential outcomes (EPO), do not work for all individuals, because EPO increases perceived stress levels. When the perceived stress level of low-SCC individuals increases, they tend to adopt avoidant coping strategies, which do not help them cope effectively with the stressful situation. Therefore, they continue to exhibit high discretionary spending tendencies even when they elaborate on potential outcomes of their behavior.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Definition of SCC

Research distinguishes between contents of the self-concept and its structure (Campbell et al., 1996). The contents of the self-concept are subdivided into knowledge components (e.g., who/what I am) and evaluative components (e.g., how I feel about myself). Examples of knowledge components include beliefs about specific attributes (e.g., traits, physical characteristics), as well as roles, values, and personal goals. Evaluative components include the positivity of specific self-beliefs and self-esteem. Structural aspects of the self-concept refer to how the knowledge components or specific beliefs are organized.

In this context, SCC is a structural aspect of the self-concept (Campbell et al., 1996). It implies having clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable self-knowledge. Self-esteem and SCC are also correlated but distinct constructs (Campbell et al., 1996). Self-esteem pertains to how positively the person regards her- or himself; SCC entails how well the person knows him- or herself. Campbell et al. (1996) show that the SCC scale exhibits a consistent relationship with several traits (e.g., self-reflection, internal state awareness), after controlling for self-esteem. Subsequent research also provides evidence of the distinct nature of self-esteem and SCC (e.g., Morrison & Wheeler, 2010). For instance, there is evidence showing that the effect of self-esteem on outcomes such as depressive symptoms depends on the level of SCC (Lee-Flynn, Pomaki, DeLongis, Biesanz, & Puterman, 2011). Thus, without knowing the clarity of the self-concept, it can be difficult to predict how individuals with high or low self-esteem react to stressful situations. In conclusion, although SCC and self-esteem correlate, SCC is distinct from self-esteem; it clarifies the relationship between self-esteem and important adaptation outcomes.

2.2. SCC and consumer behavior

Previous research shows that low- (vs. high-) SCC individuals agree more with statements such as “life has no meaning” that imply they have no control over their lives (Blazek & Besta, 2012). Thus, low-SCC individuals are more likely to be influenced by externally imposed standards, because they do not have a clear sense of direction. One such standard is attractiveness (e.g., thin body image for women). Vartanian and Dey (2013) examine the link among SCC, the internalization of societal standards, body image, and dieting concerns and find that lower SCC levels predict a greater degree of internalization of societal standards for women but not for men. Furthermore, internalization for women and men predicts body image and dieting concerns, which in turn predict dieting behavior. These authors suggest that women's SCC might play a role in the development of body image problems, by making them vulnerable to (or, conversely, buffering them against) the internalization of societal standards of attractiveness. Their results also indicate that women who lack a clearly defined self-concept regularly compare their appearance with other women's and internalize a thin ideal as a means of defining their own identity.

Another stream of research investigates the relationship between SCC and compliance with product and service recommendations. For example, Lee, Lee, and Sanford (2010) show that consumers' compliance with product and service recommendations relates negatively to their level of SCC. Other recent research has shown that SCC is associated with compulsive buying and materialism. Noguti and Bokeyar (2014) demonstrate that lower SCC is associated with higher levels of materialism and greater compulsive buying tendencies. Consistently, Reeves, Baker, and Truluck (2012) suggest that lower SCC is related to materialism, compulsive buying behavior, and celebrity worship. Their research demonstrates specifically that those with low SCC are more likely to be overly involved with the details of a celebrity's personal life, which could influence their spending habits, because they attempt to match them to those of the celebrity they worship.

2.3. SCC and discretionary spending

Previous research suggests SCC is a key influence on the appraisal and outcomes of stressful events (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). People experience many stressful episodes in their daily lives (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). How they appraise these episodes largely defines their ability to cope with them (Baum, Fleming, & Singer, 1983). In this research, we predict that resisting attractive offers might be stressful for consumers who do not have a clear view of themselves. It is much easier to accept an attractive offer on a discretionary item than to exert the required level of self-regulation to decline it. Previous research suggests that low-SCC individuals might not be effective at self-regulation because they are more likely to adopt avoidant coping strategies in situations when self-regulation is required (Smith, Wethington, & Zhan, 1996). Their relatively less stable self-concept presumably does not provide them with effective ways to cope with their stressful situation (Lee-Flynn et al., 2011). Because low-SCC individuals are less likely to have an accessible portfolio of options from which to draw when faced with stressful situations,

they are unlikely to know what works and thus more likely to use avoidant coping strategies (e.g., pretend the situation is not stressful, avoid thinking about the stressful situation). For example, Baumeister (1986) suggests that low SCC leads to problems in processing the kinds of self-relevant information that can guide behavior in various situations. Setterlund and Niedenthal (1993) suggest that experimentally induced low SCC can lead to diminished use of the self as a basis for decision making. Therefore, low-SCC individuals might have more difficulty resisting a tempting discretionary item.

In contrast, high-SCC individuals are more likely to have an accessible portfolio of options from which to draw when faced with stressful situations. Smith et al. (1996) demonstrate that a clearer self-concept is related to taking action and positive reinterpretations or acceptance of the stressful situation. They demonstrate that high-SCC individuals can more readily handle the stressful situation. Therefore, we suggest that because high-SCC individuals are more likely to face the stressful situation and deal with it than low-SCC individuals, they also are less likely to adopt avoidant coping strategies. Because they use more problem-solving coping strategies, they have lower discretionary spending tendencies than low-SCC individuals.

Baumeister and Heatherton (1996) argue that effective self-regulation requires a person to transcend the immediate situation by considering long-term consequences and implications. Consistent with this view, elaboration on potential outcomes (EPO) can facilitate effective self-regulation. As a generalized predisposition toward thinking about consequences, EPO captures the degree to which people generate and evaluate the potential consequences of their behaviors (Nenkov, Inman, & Hulland, 2008). The generation and evaluation of potential consequences before making a decision are important determinants of effective self-regulation and may help consumers go beyond the immediate situation to consider future consequences of their behaviors. Doing so can help individuals consider what they will gain or lose in the future as a result of their behavior, carefully estimate the risk of various outcomes occurring, or assess how important the potential consequences of their decisions might be (Nenkov et al., 2008).

In a departure from this literature stream, we suggest that thinking about the potential consequences of behavior might not work for all individuals, especially for those with low SCC. Considering all the outcomes before making a decision, estimating the risk of various outcomes, and thinking about what might be gained or lost in the future could increase individuals' perceived stress. Without thinking about the consequences, individuals might readily make a decision. However, when trying to regulate the self by thinking about the potential outcomes of their behavior, individuals could become more stressed, which would not help low-SCC individuals effectively regulate their behavior. When the perceived stress level of low-SCC individuals increases, without knowing how to solve their stressful situation, they might avoid addressing the problem entirely (Smith et al., 1996). In contrast, EPO might be an effective self-regulation strategy for high-SCC individuals. Previous research demonstrates that when individuals are threatened (e.g., when their perceived stress level is increased), those who believe that they have the enough resources and efficacy to alleviate the threat adopt problem-focused coping strategies (Han, Duhachek, & Rucker, 2015; Sujan, Sujan, Bettman, & Verhallen, 1999). In a similar vein, we suggest that high-SCC individuals adopt more problem-solving coping strategies that involve planning when they perceive stress. By adopting more problem-solving coping strategies that involve planning, high-SCC individuals can concentrate on ways the problem could be solved, try to make a plan of action, think about the best ways to handle things, and concentrate their efforts on doing something about their problem (Duhachek, 2005). In summary, EPO might be a better self-regulation strategy for high-SCC individuals than for low-SCC individuals.

2.4. Studies

We test our predictions in five studies. In studies 1A and 1B, we test our prediction that low-SCC individuals have higher discretionary spending tendencies than high-SCC individuals. Specifically, in study 1A, we determine the relationship between SCC on discretionary spending tendencies by measuring both. In study 1B, we investigate the main effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendencies by manipulating SCC. In study 2, we replicate the results of studies 1A and 1B and test our prediction related to the mediating effect of coping strategies on the effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendencies. For this study, we recruited a sample of individuals who had at least three months of revolving credit card debt. We used this sample specifically because they would be likely to need to exert control over their behavior when deciding whether to purchase a discretionary item. In study 3, we test our prediction that EPO is less effective for low-SCC individuals by manipulating both SCC and EPO and measuring discretionary spending tendencies for various product categories. In study 4, we conducted a field study in a bank, which replicates study 3's result.

3. Study 1

We conducted two studies to test the basic effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendencies. We predicted that respondents who score low on SCC would have higher discretionary spending tendencies than those who score high. Study 1A and study 1B differed from each other in several ways. First, in study 1A, we measured SCC; in study 1B, we manipulated SCC to test its effect on discretionary spending tendencies. Furthermore, in study 1A, we measured participants' willingness to pay for discretionary items and in study 1B, we measured their intentions to purchase discretionary items. Finally, in study 1A, we used a sample from a university population while in study 1B, we recruited our participants by purchasing a panel from Qualtrics. Hence, we tested the basic effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendencies using different sample populations, different ways to measure and test independent and dependent variables.

3.1. Study 1A

3.1.1. Sample and procedures

One hundred nine (73 female) graduate students of a major European university participated in the study in exchange for course credit. The average age was 22.30 years (range = 21–33, $M = 22.3$, $SD = 1.47$).

To examine the relationship between SCC and discretionary spending tendency, we measured SCC by administering the SCC scale developed by Campbell et al. (1996). This scale contains 12 items that tap into what constitutes a clear and consistent self-view. Sample items are as follows: “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another,” “On one day, I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion,” “I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am,” and “Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be.” Participants rated these items on a five-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” and 5 = “strongly agree”). We recoded some items so that higher numbers indicated higher SCC and averaged all items to form an overall SCC scale, which exhibited good reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$; $M = 3.13$).

Then, participants were told that they would be exposed to various products during the study. We asked them to indicate the amount (in euros) that they would be willing to spend for each product. They then saw eight different discretionary products. All were perceived as discretionary products, as evidenced by the results of our pretest (for the items, see Appendix A). We averaged the amount participants were willing to spend for each of these products and composed a willingness-to-pay score. The scale had good reliability ($\alpha = 0.69$; $M = 82.71$).

3.1.2. Results

We ran a regression analysis to investigate the association between SCC and willingness to pay. The results indicated a significant relationship; as expected, as the SCC score increased, willingness to pay for the discretionary items decreased ($\beta = -10.41$, $t(105) = -2.04$, $p < 0.05$).

We then tested whether age or gender interacted with SCC to influence willingness to pay for discretionary items. As expected, neither did (age, $p = .82$; gender, $p = .74$).

3.2. Study 1B

3.2.1. Sample and procedure

Sixty-four women and 36 men from the United States participated in a computer-based e-panel (i.e., Qualtrics). The participants' average age was 33 years (range = 18–63, $SD = 9.81$).

To simulate a situation in which participants might have to exert control over their spending, we asked all of the participants to read the following scenario:

People sometimes experience financial constraints. Assume you have mortgage payments to make for three months. Moreover, your spouse may be sick, and you have to pay additional medical bills for the coming three months. On top of all this, you have three months of revolving credit card debt.

Next, consistent with previous research (Guadagno & Burger, 2007), participants responded to a computer-administered (bogus) personality questionnaire. This questionnaire consisted of 15 items that were based on personality scales reported by Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman (1999). Example questions included, “Spontaneity can be an excuse for irresponsibility,” “Settling in another country is probably difficult,” and “Many people feel uneasy when there is little work for them to do.” All items were rated on five-point scales (1 = “strongly disagree,” and 5 = “strongly agree”). After completing this questionnaire, participants were told that the computer had recorded their responses and would compute their personality profile.

In the low-SCC condition, participants read that the program was unable to compute a clear personality profile:

The consistency of your responses is not sufficiently high to construct a clear picture of who you are. For your information, this is uncommon. Sixty percent of the time, the computer program we use to compute the consistency of an individual's personality is able to construct a clear profile.

In the high-SCC condition, participants were told that the computer was able to compute a clear and consistent personality profile.

The consistency of your responses is sufficiently high to construct a clear picture of who you are. For your information, this is uncommon. Sixty percent of the time, the computer program we use to compute the consistency of an individual's personality is unable to construct a clear profile.

After participants read the feedback, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that they find their self as stable; consistent on 5-point scales (1 = not at all and 5 = very much; all were averaged; $\alpha = .76$; $M = 3.30$).

To measure participants' discretionary spending tendencies, we asked them to rate the extent to which they were willing to make the following purchases on a five-point scale (1 = “not very likely,” and 5 = “very likely”): “a bag that they can use with every combination of their clothes which is on sale at 50% off,” “a sweater from their favorite brand, which is on sale at

50% off,” “shoes that they wanted to buy during the season which are now on sale at 50% off,” “have dinner with their partner in a good restaurant which offers 30% off on meals after 8 PM,” and “buy a ticket to a concert for which they have been waiting for a long time with a ‘buy 2 get 1 free’ promotion.” We developed a composite measure of discretionary spending tendency using these five measures ($\alpha = 0.72$; $M = 3.65$).

3.2.2. Results

As a check for our SCC manipulation, we confirmed that participants in the low-SCC condition felt their self-view was less consistent and less stable than participants in the high-SCC condition ($M_{\text{lowSCC}} = 2.89$, $SD = 0.97$ vs. $M_{\text{highSCC}} = 3.70$, $SD = 0.84$; $F(1, 98) = -4.47$, $p < 0.001$). No other effects were significant.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of discretionary spending tendencies revealed a significant effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendencies. Consistent with our predictions, participants in the low-SCC condition reported higher discretionary spending tendencies than those in the high-SCC condition ($M_{\text{lowSCC}} = 4.12$, $SD = 0.88$ vs. $M_{\text{highSCC}} = 3.18$, $SD = 1.23$; $t(98) = 4.39$, $p < 0.001$).

We then tested whether age or gender interacted with SCC to influence discretionary spending tendencies. As expected, neither did (age, $p = .24$; gender, $p = .35$).

Study 1A had people to think about their self-views and rate their selves on several items to measure SCC. Afterwards, they indicated their willingness to pay for several discretionary items. In study 1B, we manipulated SCC and asked people their intentions to purchase several discretionary items. As predicted, in both studies, SCC was related to willingness to pay and intentions to purchase discretionary items. Those who had low SCC or who were in the low-SCC condition expressed stronger willingness to pay for discretionary items and stronger intentions to purchase discretionary items. In short, in studies 1A and 1B, we provided initial evidence for the basic effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendency by measuring and manipulating SCC using different sample populations and dependent variables.

4. Study 2

In study 1, we demonstrated the basic effect of SCC on discretionary spending. Study 1 improves on study 2 in several ways. First, study 2 is a conceptual replication and extension that tests a specific population: consumers who have at least three months of revolving credit card debt. Revolving credit card debt is defined as a credit card balance that is not paid in full at the end of the month (Robb & Sharpe, 2009). Previous research indicates that typical U.S. households have assets to cover emergency expenses for only three months (Chang & Huston, 1995). Thus, after a three-month period, these consumers would be considered to have financial debt. Anecdotal evidence shows that those who have revolving credit card debt should exert more control over their spending, which might be stressful (Anthony, 2004; Berger, 2015). Study 2 randomly assigned participants to either high or low-SCC conditions and predicted that those who are in the low-SCC condition would have higher discretionary spending tendencies than those who are in the high-SCC condition. We measured discretionary spending tendency by asking people to indicate the extent to which they agree on several items related to their spending behavior rather than asking them their willingness to pay for several discretionary items or their intentions to purchase discretionary items.

Study 2's key goal was to test the mechanism underlying the effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendency. We posited that those who have low SCC would have higher discretionary spending tendency compared to those people who have high SCC because those who have low SCC adopt more avoidant coping strategies when they must decide whether or not to purchase a discretionary item when they have revolving credit card debt compared to those people who have high SCC.

4.1. Sample and procedure

For this study, we recruited a panel from a U.S.-based company (i.e., Qualtrics). One hundred ninety participants (108 female) participated in the survey. The average age of the sample was 35.39 years (range = 18–58, $SD = 9.16$). We specifically recruited people who had, on average, three to five months of revolving credit card debt (range = 3–7 months; $M = 4.61$ months).

The survey consisted of three sections. The first manipulated SCC. The second section contained measures related to general discretionary spending tendency, and the third section included variables that assessed coping strategies. We manipulated SCC as in study 1B.

We measured discretionary spending tendency using the following eight items: “My spending generally exceeds my budget,” “I don't hesitate to buy new products even when I exceed my budget,” “If I had more budget, I would have exceeded that budget as well,” “When I see an appealing offer, I can't keep myself from buying it,” “When I exceed my budget, I do not hesitate to borrow money to make additional purchases,” “I find it difficult to make my credit card payments on time,” “My expenses usually exceed my current and future income,” and “When I have money, I usually spend it rather than save it.” Participants rated these statements along five-point scales (1 = “strongly disagree,” and 5 = “strongly agree”). We averaged scores to form an overall scale, with higher numbers indicating higher discretionary spending tendency ($\alpha = 0.89$; $M = 2.84$).

Next, participants completed a five-item coping scale adapted from Duhachek (2005) as a process measure. Items included the following: “I pretend as if I have no revolving credit card debt,” “I try to take my mind off of my debt by doing other things,” “I avoid thinking about my revolving credit card debt,” “I deny that I have a revolving credit card debt,” and “I refuse to believe that I have revolving credit debt.” Participants rated these statements along seven-point scales (1 = “very unlikely,” and 7 = “very

likely”). We averaged the measures to compose an avoidant coping score ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 4.60$). Finally, the participants were thanked and debriefed.

4.2. Results and discussion

4.2.1. Discretionary spending tendency

We tested the hypothesis that participants in the low-SCC condition would have higher discretionary spending tendency compared to the participants in the high-SCC condition. Consistent with the prediction, participants in the low-SCC condition reported higher discretionary spending tendencies ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.34$) than those in the high-SCC condition ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.07$, $t(188) = 2.88$, $p < .01$).

4.2.2. Avoidant coping strategies

As predicted, SCC caused a significant increase in adopting avoidant coping strategies for those who were in the low-SCC condition compared to those who were in the high-SCC condition ($M_{\text{low SCC}} = 5.19$, $SD = 1.28$ vs. $M_{\text{high SCC}} = 4.20$, $SD = 1.96$, $t(188) = 4.08$, $p < .001$).

To test for mediation, we followed Preacher and Hayes's (2008) recommendation to use a bootstrapping procedure to compute a confidence interval around the indirect effect. In this analysis, SCC was the independent variable, discretionary spending tendency was the dependent variable, and avoidant coping strategy was the mediator. The results revealed a significant indirect effect on discretionary spending tendency via avoidant coping strategy ($\beta = -.09$, 95% CI $[-.217, -.004]$).

We then tested whether age or gender interacted with SCC to influence discretionary spending tendency. As expected, neither did (age, $p = .32$; gender, $p = .83$).

Study 2 provided a third replication of the basic effect and went beyond by offering evidence in favor of the proposed process. Using a new dependent variable, we found that those people who were in the low-SCC condition had higher discretionary spending tendency compared to those who were in the high-SCC condition. More importantly, we found a significant indirect effect of avoidant coping strategies in predicting the influence of low SCC on discretionary spending tendency. As predicted, avoidant coping strategies seemed to matter, as shown in a meditational pathway.

5. Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that low-SCC people have higher discretionary spending tendencies than high-SCC people when they are in situations in which they must use self-regulation strategies (e.g., when they assume they are having a financial difficulty, when they have revolving credit card debt). We demonstrated that an avoidant coping strategy is the mediating mechanism. In study 3, we test whether priming individuals to use a self-regulation strategy (i.e., EPO) influences their discretionary spending tendencies in a stressful situation (e.g., when they have credit card debt). We specifically wanted to test this effect for low-SCC individuals because we wanted to test whether EPO might decrease their discretionary spending tendencies in a stressful situation.

5.1. Sample and procedure

One-hundred forty-three women and 129 men participated in a computer-based, nationwide U.S. e-panel (i.e., Qualtrics). They were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (salience of financially constrained situation: high, low) \times 2 (EPO: yes, no) \times 2 (SCC: high, low) between-subjects design.

Participants first received the SCC manipulation, as in studies 1B and 2. Afterward, half the participants read the financial constraint situation described in study 1b. Participants in the other half, the control condition, did not assume that they were in a financially constrained situation. Next, all participants indicated the extent to which they felt stressed, relaxed, happy, sick, and confused at the moment on five-point scales (1 = “not very likely,” and 5 = “very likely”). An ANOVA on perceived stress did not reveal a significant interaction of SCC by salience of financially constrained situation, but it did reveal a main effect of SCC. Consistent with previous research, participants in the high (vs. low) SCC condition indicated that they were less likely to perceive stress (2.65 vs. 3.37, $F(1, 268) = 4.41$, $p < 0.05$). Participants did not differ in terms of other feelings ($ps > 0.50$). These results indicate that, regardless of the salience of the financially constrained situation, participants in the high- (vs. low-) SCC conditions perceived lower levels of stress.

Participants next indicated the extent to which they were likely to purchase some discretionary items such as “a bag that they can use with a combination of their clothes that is on sale for 50% off,” “a pair of shoes that they wanted to purchase during the season that is 50% off,” and “a sweater from their favorite brand that is 50% off” on a five-point scale (1 = “very unlikely,” and 5 = “very likely”). We then averaged these three items to create a discretionary spending tendency index ($\alpha = 0.89$). In the EPO condition, participants were asked to think about the potential outcomes of their purchasing behavior before making a purchase. In the no-EPO condition, participants were not asked to think about potential outcomes of their purchasing behavior. To test whether EPO increases perceived stress, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they perceived stress when they formed their purchase intentions for discretionary items.

In addition, as a check for the salience of the financially constrained manipulation, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they would feel financially constrained as a result of being in the situation described in the scenario on a five-point scale (1 = “not very much,” and 5 = “very much”). Participants also indicated whether they thought that they had a clear and

confidently defined self on a five-point scale (1 = “not at all,” and 5 = “very much”). Furthermore, they also indicated the extent to which they thought about the potential outcomes of their behavior when they were answering the questions (1 = “not at all,” and 5 = “very much”). At the end of the study, participants responded to a suspicion probe and indicated what they thought the purpose of the study was. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

5.2. Results

We analyzed all dependent variables using a 2 (salience of financially constrained situation: high, low) \times 2 (EPO: yes, no) \times 2 (SCC: high, low) between-subjects design.

5.2.1. Manipulation and confound checks

As a check for SCC manipulation, we confirmed that participants in the high (vs. low) SCC condition felt more certain of themselves (4.01 vs. 2.65, $F(1, 264) = 14.66, p < 0.001$). No other effects were significant. An ANOVA on thinking about the potential outcomes of their behavior revealed only a main effect of EPO. Participants in the EPO condition indicated that they thought more about potential outcomes of their behavior than participants in the no-EPO condition (3.86 vs. 2.92, $F(1, 264) = 9.21, p < 0.05$). No other effects were significant. Furthermore, participants in the high (vs. low) financially constrained situation indicated that they felt financially constrained after reading the scenario (4.36 vs. 1.15, $F(1, 264) = 23.36, p < 0.001$). No other effects were significant.

In this study, we also directly examined whether EPO makes high-SCC individuals particularly stressed, such that they are more likely to reduce discretionary spending, or if the lack of EPO encourages them ignore stress. An ANOVA on perceived stress revealed only a significant two-way interaction of SCC and EPO ($F(1, 264) = 4.73, p < 0.05$). When the salience of a financially constrained situation was low, EPO increased the perceived stress level of both high-SCC (e.g., from 2.65 to 3.50, $F(1, 264) = 8.54, p < 0.05$) and low-SCC (e.g., from 3.37 to 3.95, $F(1, 264) = 4.95, p < 0.05$) respondents. Therefore, we suggest that a lack of EPO does not cause high-SCC individuals to ignore stress; rather, the EPO of their behavior causes high-SCC individuals to feel more stressed.

5.2.2. Discretionary spending tendencies

An ANOVA on purchase tendencies revealed only a significant two-way interaction of SCC and EPO ($F(1, 264) = 9.86, p < 0.05$; Fig. 1). A simple effects test indicated that high-SCC respondents had lower discretionary purchase tendencies when they elaborated (vs. did not elaborate) on potential outcomes of their behavior ($M_s = 2.77$ vs. 3.56; $F(1, 264) = 7.52, p < 0.05$). In contrast, low-SCC respondents' discretionary purchase tendencies did not vary as a function of EPO ($M_s = 3.46$ vs. 3.64, $p > 0.73$). These results indicate that even when the salience of the financially constrained situation is low, there is significant interaction of EPO and SCC on discretionary purchase tendency, suggesting that our results apply not only to financial constraint contexts but also to contexts in which people might perceive stress (e.g., EPO of their behavior).

The results of this study demonstrate that adopting additional self-regulation strategies (e.g., EPO) might be effective for high-SCC individuals but less so for low-SCC individuals. Our findings suggest that low-SCC individuals might continue with their discretionary purchases even when they are asked to use a self-regulation strategy. However, for high-SCC individuals, EPO could further reduce their discretionary spending tendencies.

6. Study 4

Studies 1–3 demonstrate the effect of SCC on discretionary spending in online and lab contexts. With Study 4, we aim advance these prior studies by moving to the behavioral realm. Behavior is often difficult to study (which is why it is somewhat neglected in behavioral sciences; Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007) but also provides an essential test of hypotheses, beyond imagined

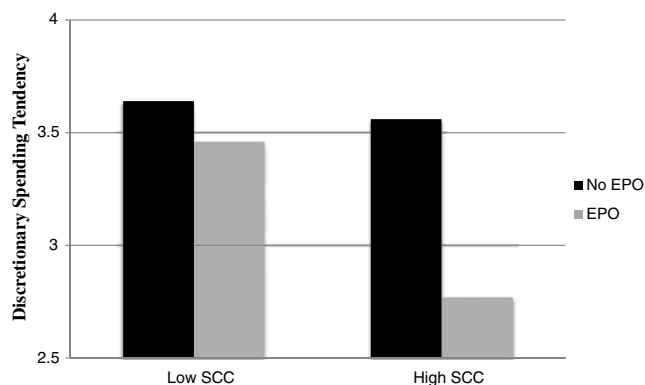


Fig. 1. Interactive effect of SCC and EPO on discretionary spending tendency (Study 3).

scenarios and ratings of intentional behaviors. Although we tried to conduct our previous studies in settings that were as realistic as possible, they could be limited by their controlled, experimental context. Therefore, study 4 tests our predictions in the context of a field study, such that we attempt to replicate our findings with bank customers.

6.1. Procedure and measures

We collected data from customers of a South Korean bank. First, an e-mail was sent to two groups of customers: one with no revolving credit card debt and the other with at least three months of revolving credit card debt. They were asked to participate in a short survey and were motivated with a small monetary incentive. The first 130 customers from each group who responded to all of the questions were included in the sample. Participants filled out a survey that contained the SCC scale ($\alpha_{\text{SCC}} = 0.81$; Campbell et al., 1996) and EPO scale (Nenkov et al., 2008). Sample items in the EPO scale included the following: “Before I make a decision, I consider all possible outcomes,” “I always try to assess how important the potential consequences of my decisions might be,” and “Usually I carefully estimate the risk of various outcomes occurring.” Respondents rated the statements on a five-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” and 5 = “strongly agree”). We recoded some items so that higher numbers indicated higher levels of EPO and averaged all items to form an overall EPO scale ($\alpha = 0.72$).

6.2. Results and discussion

To test our prediction, we used Preacher and Hayes's (2008) Model 1 by treating both SCC and EPO as continuous variables in a logistic regression, where SCC was the independent variable and EPO was the moderator. The results support our predictions, in that both the main effects of SCC ($\beta = -3.00, p < .04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-5.69, -0.30]$) and EPO ($\beta = -4.00, p < .02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-6.78, -1.21]$) were significant. More important, there was a significant two-way interaction between SCC and EPO ($\beta = 0.92, p < .03, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.16, 1.69]$).

Next, we conducted a spotlight analysis at the EPO level at one standard deviation above and below the mean (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch, & McClelland, 2013). Consistent with our prediction, we found that when EPO is one standard deviation below the mean, SCC had no significant influence on revolving credit card debt ($\beta = -0.30, p = .36, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.92, 0.33]$). However, when the EPO is one standard deviation above the mean, SCC had a significant influence on revolving credit card debt ($\beta = 0.69, p < .04, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.09, 1.30]$).

We further conducted a floodlight analysis to decompose the interaction. We used the Johnson–Neyman technique to identify the range of EPO for which the simple effect of the SCC was significant. This analysis revealed that there was a significant effect of SCC on revolving credit card debt for EPO levels higher than 3.81 ($\beta = 0.53, p = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 1.06]$) and lower than 1.67 ($\beta = -1.46, p = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-2.92, 0.00]$).

The results of this study demonstrate that when high-SCC individuals score high on EPO, they are less likely to have revolving credit card debt. In contrast, for low-SCC individuals, EPO does not significantly influence the revolving credit card debt level. This result, consistent with results from previous studies, demonstrates that for low-SCC individuals, a strategy other than EPO should be used to reduce discretionary spending tendencies. A caveat is that we could not control for the amount of debt in this study, because the bank did not provide this information. Despite this limitation, our conceptualization has a potentially useful application: financial service providers can identify customers who are likely to exceed their budget by measuring their SCC and EPO during the credit card application process.

7. General discussion

In a series of studies, we find strong support for the hypothesized mechanism underlying discretionary spending tendencies. First, we demonstrate that SCC significantly influences discretionary spending tendencies, such that low-SCC individuals have higher tendencies than high-SCC individuals (studies 1A, 1B, and 2). Second, we provide evidence of an underlying mechanism for the effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendencies (study 2). Low-SCC individuals tend to adopt avoidant coping strategies in situations that require them to control themselves (e.g., when they have financial problems). Third, we demonstrate that the use of an effective self-regulation strategy, shown in prior research (i.e., EPO) could further increase consumers' perceived stress level and be effective only for high-SCC individuals in conditions in which they must use self-regulation strategies. This result is also supported with a field study, in which we demonstrate that high-SCC bank customers who elaborate on the outcomes of their behavior are least likely to have credit card debt (study 4).

7.1. Theoretical contributions

This research makes several theoretical contributions to existing consumer behavior and psychology literature. First, extant consumer behavior research demonstrates that SCC is related to people's perceptions of having control over events (Gramzow, Sedikides, Panter, & Insko, 2000), susceptibility to social influence (Guadagno & Burger, 2007), compulsive buying intentions (Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014), materialism (Reeves et al., 2012), and coping strategies during stressful times (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). Extending this research, we reveal the effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendencies and demonstrate its boundary conditions and mediating processes.

Second, we contribute to prior literature by showing that stress and subsequent coping strategies can influence the extent to which consumers spend on discretionary items. Anecdotal evidence points to a possible link between consumers' deliberations to make discretionary purchases and their level of stress (Morad, 2015; Slide, 2010). However, to the best of our knowledge, little empirical research investigates the associations between stress, subsequent coping strategies, and discretionary spending. Our findings may explain why some consumers continue to make discretionary purchases and cannot regulate their expenses even when they have revolving credit card debt. The results of our field study (i.e., study 4) with bank customers show that SCC is a significant variable in predicting whether customers are likely to carry revolving credit card debt. Furthermore, the current research also provides evidence of the effectiveness of planning for high-SCC individuals when they are in stressful situations. Although previous research suggests that high SCC is not related to planning per se (Smith et al., 1996), we demonstrate that using planning as part of a self-regulation strategy can help high-SCC individuals cope effectively with the stressful situation.

Third, this research contributes to existing literature on discretionary spending. Previous research suggests that a discretionary spending tendency is associated with impulsiveness and compulsiveness (Dittmar, 2005). Furthermore, research on hedonic consumption demonstrates the association of hedonic consumption with discretionary spending (Khan, Dhar, & Wertenbroch, 2005). For example, Okada (2005) shows that compared with utilitarian consumption, hedonic consumption is likely perceived as more discretionary. We add to this body of research by demonstrating that discretionary spending tendencies could be related to the type of coping strategies consumers adopt. Specifically, low-SCC consumers tend to adopt avoidant coping strategies when they face a situation that requires them to exert control over their behavior (e.g., deciding to purchase a discretionary item when they have financial problems).

Fourth, this research contributes to existing literature on self-regulation. Previous research suggests that EPO is an effective means to regulate behavior, such as for reducing consumers' discretionary spending (Nenkov et al., 2008). We extend this literature by showing that EPO may not be enough to reduce discretionary purchase tendencies for low-SCC consumers, for whom self-regulation strategies might backfire, because they might increase the salience of their inability to rely on themselves in situations that require them to control their behavior. Further research could investigate whether other self-regulation strategies are similarly less effective for low-SCC consumers.

7.2. Managerial implications

Our results suggest several possible implications for marketers. For example, they might aim to target a low-SCC customer base. Low-SCC consumers can benefit the firm, in that they may express a greater willingness to pay and show greater interest for discretionary products, both material and experiential, than high-SCC consumers. In other words, efforts to stimulate discretionary purchases would be most effective for low-SCC consumers. Banks and financial institutions in particular could segment their customers according to SCC. The results of our studies, conducted both online and in the field, demonstrate that low-SCC customers are more vulnerable to revolving credit card debt, due to their high discretionary spending tendencies. These firms might be able to segment their customers according to SCC and use correlations to identify those who are more likely to default on their credit card debt or credit accounts. While banks seem to benefit from revolving credit card debt, managers remain concerned about the high risks associated with individual bankruptcies. We also concur with the view that promoting excessive consumption among vulnerable targets is unethical (Boedecker, Morgan, & Stoltman, 1999). Another way to take these results is that ethical companies might decide not to go after customers who have low SCC as they would be the ones who would have higher discretionary spending tendency. Companies that are ethical might want to help low-SCC individuals to control their discretionary spending tendency to avoid bad personal outcomes.

Experts suggest that consumers with overspending problems or eating problems think before they act (Morgan, 2014; Roth, 2011). For example, individuals who want to lose weight should think twice before eating delicious but high-calorie food. If individuals think about the consequences of their behavior, they seemingly might change their eating tendencies. However, the results of our studies demonstrate that the EPO of behavior is particularly effective for high-SCC individuals and less so for low-SCC individuals, who are also the most problematic. Therefore, to reduce overconsumption for low-SCC consumers, rather than suggesting that they think twice before acting, it might be more useful to provide therapy to help them perceive their self-concept more clearly and with greater stability. Additional research examining the link between SCC and self-regulation would further increase our understanding of how SCC affects behavior.

7.3. Alternative explanations

One might argue that SCC is similar to other self-related constructs so that the effects can also be predicted by using other self-related constructs (e.g., self-concept stability, self-consistency). We agree that SCC is related to a variety of other self-related constructs such as self-certainty (Baumgardner, 1990), self-concept stability (Brownfain, 1952), self-consistency (Gergen & Morse, 1967), and self-confidence (Kleitman & Stankov, 2007). In the literature, self-certainty and SCC are used interchangeably (Campbell et al., 1996). Previous literature demonstrates that self-concept stability focuses on the temporal stability of self-beliefs, and self-consistency addresses the internal consistency of self-beliefs (Campbell et al., 1996). SCC predicts both stability and consistency of the self-concept (Campbell et al., 1996). Self-confidence is about believing in oneself (Benabou & Tirole, 2002). However, it does not imply stability and consistency of the self (Campbell et al., 1996). Any particular set of self-beliefs could, in principle, be organized with varying degrees of complexity or be held with different levels of confidence and stability (Campbell, 1990; Campbell & Fehr, 1990). Hence, self-confidence and SCC are related but distinct constructs. SCC is also distinct









from self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is defined as the sense of insight or awareness of one's behavioral potentials (Wicklund & Eckert, 1992). A person could hold highly articulated self-beliefs that are inaccurate on the basis of behavior, suggesting that self-knowledge and SCC are separate constructs.

Since self-esteem is a much widely used construct in the consumer behavior literature and it is related but distinct from SCC, we have conducted a study with 110 participants using a procedure similar to study 3. The only difference was that we manipulated self-esteem instead of SCC. An ANOVA on discretionary purchase intentions did not reveal a significant interaction of self-esteem and EPO ($p > .46$). Hence, we concluded that self-esteem does not explain our findings. In a similar vein, we have tested for the effects of other self-related variables in various studies. In none of these studies we have found a main effect on discretionary spending tendency or an interaction effect with EPO. These null findings bolster our conclusion that the effects that are found in this manuscript are due to SCC but not due to these other constructs.

In study 3 of the manuscript, we demonstrated that high EPO causes all participants to feel more stressed. One might argue that this might contradict with the theoretical prediction that individuals with low SCC should be indifferent to EPO levels as well as the prediction that when individuals with low SCC are stressed they are more likely to adopt avoidant coping strategies. In study 3, we measured stress twice and we first demonstrated that there was no significant interaction of SCC by salience of financially constrained situation on perceived stress, but there was a main effect of SCC. Participants who were in the high and low-SCC condition perceived lower levels of stress regardless of the salience of the financially constrained situation. Then, we measured stress for the second time after the EPO priming and we directly examined whether EPO makes high-SCC individuals particularly stressed, such that they are more likely to reduce discretionary spending, or if the lack of EPO encourages them to ignore stress. The results supported the prediction that the EPO of their behavior causes high-SCC consumers to feel more stressed; but not a lack of EPO does not cause high-SCC individuals to ignore stress. In line with these results, we support the theoretical prediction that EPO increases the perceived stress level of both high and low-SCC individuals. However, we agree that our data do not support the prediction that low-SCC individuals would have higher discretionary spending tendencies when they perceive more stress. Our speculation is that since they are already stressed, perceiving more stress did not result in more discretionary spending tendency in our study 3. Further research can examine whether EPO might have differential effects on discretionary spending tendencies of high and low-SCC individuals in situations where they do not have stress but their stress level increases as a result of EPO.

7.4. Limitations and future research

In general, an increase in consumer discretionary spending signals economic growth or recovery from financial crisis (Francis, 2014). For example, according to the Gallup 2014 Consumer Spending report (Fleming, 2014), one-third of Americans reported spending less on discretionary items such as travel (38%), dining out (38%), leisure activities (31%), consumer electronics (31%), and clothing (30%), which suggests that discretionary spending must increase to fuel economic growth. However, the results of

Stimulus	Needed	Wanted
	2.43	3.17
	2.67	3.68
	1.97	3.88
	3.17	4.24
	2.15	3.68
	3.88	4.47
	2.14	3.05
	2.53	3.29

our studies demonstrate that those who have low SCC are the ones who have higher discretionary spending tendencies than those who have high SCC. Hence, one might argue that signals of economic growth are potentially due to the discretionary spending of those who have low SCC. However, we do not know whether while boosting the economy, there can be some negative outcomes for those who have low SCC as a way to cope with their stress (e.g., increased alcohol consumption, bad interpersonal relationships, etc.). We suggest that future research might investigate the effect of SCC on interpersonal relationships when they are under stress (e.g., when they have high revolving credit card debt).

While this research demonstrated the effect of SCC on discretionary spending tendency, it is limited in a way that it does not investigate how the discretionary spending tendency of those who have low SCC might be reduced. A remaining question is whether low-SCC individuals ever use active coping strategies and hence have lower intentions to purchase discretionary items under financial constraints. Future research might investigate how to reduce discretionary spending tendencies for those who have low SCC.

Finally, we believe that this research is limited in a way that it does not investigate how SCC might influence consumption of necessities. While the results of this research demonstrate that those who have high SCC have lower discretionary spending tendencies, we do not know whether they have in general less spending tendencies for both the necessities and the discretionary items or it is only for the discretionary items that they have lower tendencies to purchase. We believe that future research might also investigate how SCC might influence tendencies to purchase necessary items.

Appendix A

Pretest for the Stimuli Used in Study 1.

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