Control Over What? Assessing General and Domain-Specific Self-Control

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We examine the relationship between general and domain-specific self-control measures of eating and spending. Findings from four studies support specific recommendations to self-control researchers concerning the role of individual differences in self-control research, which measures to use under various conditions, and the types of outcomes to assess.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent research underscores the importance of better understanding how differences in self-control impact a wide range of behaviors. However, the plethora of related constructs and measures, the variety of self-control domains and manipulations, and the numerous and radically different ways in which self-control is captured as a dependent variable suggest there are challenges involved with self-control research. Furthermore, there is still a lack of clarity in the conceptualization and operationalization of self-control by psychologists and consumer researchers. On the one hand, extant theory, in particular the “self-control as resource” framework or the “strength model” (Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998), views self-control as a general resource that is applicable and transferable across multiple domains (Pocheptsova et al. 2009). When self-control is exercised in one domain, it is consumed or used up and is therefore shown to be available to a lesser degree in another domain or even an additional task in the same domain. On the other hand, many consumer behavior studies implicitly or explicitly utilize a domain-specific conceptualization for measuring self-control, for example, the consumer’s self-control regarding spending (Haws et al. 2011; Rick et al. 2008) or compulsive buying (e.g., Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney, and Monroe 2008), followed by an assessment of the person’s behavior within the same domain. Such studies usually remain silent on the potential impact of prior or subsequent acts of self-control outside the specific behavioral domain being examined. One can even argue that by their very existence, domain-specific analyses and measures of self-control reject its general nature.

Therefore, the objective of the present research is to explicitly consider a variety of contexts in which self-control has been examined in consumer research and to scrutinize the relations between general and domain-specific measures of self-control. We examine how well various self-control measures correlate with one another and the extent to which they predict a series of associated consumer attitudes and behaviors specifically in the area of financial decision making, eating control, and control over the use of one’s time. We then examine these issues in two studies, the first of which involves a 5-phase, 3-month long behavioral laboratory study, and the second of which utilizes credit card transaction data in conjunction with matched survey responses from a large financial institution. Our results reveal that although there is considerable supporting evidence for self-control as a general resource, a domain-specific approach to conceptualization and measurement is necessary to account for and predict a variety of consumer behaviors.

Study 1 consisted of a fairly complex, longitudinal study in which the 178 participants completed various tasks in the lab over the duration of a semester. This study allowed us to compare the various types of self-control as captured by a series of validated measures, and to examine whether or not the individual difference measures were able to predict a series of behaviors in a very conservative way in which these behaviors were assessed over a period of time. Specifically, would the more general measures tend to predict a wider range of behaviors than the more domain-specific measures? Favoring the general self-control account, results revealed moderate correlations in the expected directions both between general measures among themselves and between many of the general and domain-specific measures. However, on the negative side, only 6 of 28 possible predictions of behavioral outcomes in the longitudinal study are significantly achieved by the general measures. In contrast, the domain-specific measures are able to predict more than twice as many (13 of 28) outcomes in the expected directions. Furthermore, the correlations between the domain-specific measures are strong within domains, but weak across domains, supporting the domain specific account.

Study 2 was conducted to generalize the results of study 1 with an entirely different consumer sample, and using a combination of subjective and objective outcome variables. Consequently, we conducted this study with 600 adult customers belonging to a large financial institution with a consumer credit card business. First, survey responses, each of which included both general and specific self-control related measures, were collected from three separate groups of 200 customers. Then, credit card data history was provided by the financial institution and matched to the survey respondents. As such, this study included real financial consequences as well as a series of more subjective consequences included in the surveys. To summarize the results, as a whole this data provided some support to both the general and domain-specific views of self-control. In favor of the general view, the GSC is associated with domain-specific measures and predicts outcomes across domains. There are some cross-domain effects with domain-specific chronic measures (e.g., CSSC) predicting outcomes in other domains (e.g., eating and body-weight). However, by and large, the intra-domain effects are stronger, and the domain specific self-control measures predict the actual financial outcomes to a greater degree than general measures.

Across both studies, our results consistently show a duality, whereby some aspects support the general perspective on self-control and others favor a domain-specific view. Overall, we conclude that while examining self-control as a general construct that applies across a variety of contexts has merit, it is also useful to consider more domain specific self-control constructs, and in fact, this domain-based approach may indeed be more valuable in helping to understand how to improve consumers’ decision making abilities in various meaningful arenas of consumption. Simply put, general self-control does not always translate into decision making considered to be relevant to self-control.

REFERENCES


