



Measures of state self-control and its causes for trackable activities

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have developed measures of trait self-control, or one's general tendency to have self-control. However, measures that provide insight into state self-control, or self-control for specific behaviors, are lacking. The current research addresses this gap for trackable activities, or behaviors an actor monitors over time with the goal of engaging in an acceptable amount of the behavior (e.g., eating, shopping). The authors develop multi-item perceptual measures of standards, monitoring capacity, and monitoring, three factors that contribute to self-control for these types of behaviors, as well as a measure of state self-control that can be used in conjunction with these measures. Seven studies support the measures' reliability and validity and demonstrate the measures' adaptability to a variety of trackable activities, including eating, shopping, drinking, smoking, and gambling. The measures provide a tool for researchers seeking to gain insight into self-control for specific behaviors, with practical implications for policymakers, marketers, and managers.

1. Introduction

People constantly make decisions about their behaviors. Many situations involve dichotomous, or yes/no, decisions about whether to engage in a behavior. Do I order a dessert with my meal? Do I attend class? Do I return an insult when someone insults me? Other situations involve decisions not only about whether to engage in a behavior, but also about how much of the behavior is appropriate. Examples include eating, shopping, exercising, gambling, and drinking. These behaviors occur over a period of time, the person can cease the behaviors at any point, and the behaviors can be quantified and tracked, either mentally or with one of the numerous tools that have recently been developed to aid people in doing so (e.g., Fitbit, smartphone apps, pedometers). Such behaviors, which we refer to as trackable activities, are the focus of our research.

Our goal is to provide researchers with means for gaining a better understanding of self-control for trackable activities by developing multi-item perceptual measures that are relevant to this domain. This endeavor is worthwhile for at least three reasons. First, while consumer researchers and psychologists have long studied self-control, they often treat self-control as a trait. Indeed, there is value in doing so, as behavioral patterns differ for people who possess high versus low levels of trait self-control (e.g., Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; Friese & Hofmann, 2009; Romal & Kaplan, 1995). However, trait self-control only partially explains outcomes of specific behaviors, with substantial variance in its effect across life domains and types of behaviors (de

Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012). Domain-specific measures, as opposed to broader measures, tend to be better predictors of specific outcomes (e.g., Ajzen, 1987; Böttger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky, & Pfrang, 2017; Zemack-Rugar, Corus, & Brinberg, 2012). However, validated, domain-specific scales relevant to self-control are lacking. This has forced researchers to develop ad-hoc scales, sometimes by modifying trait-based scales (e.g., Haws, Davis, & Dholakia, 2016), or use a mixture of trait-based and domain-specific scales (e.g., Roberts & Manolis, 2012). Standardized, empirically validated scales would allow researchers to build a body of knowledge by enabling comparisons across studies (Goldsmith & Hofacker, 1991). Second, limited existing research on trackable activities has quantified self-control with objective measures such as the amount eaten or gambled (e.g., Siemens & Kopp, 2011; Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). While objective measures may reflect self-control, people's perceptions, not objective information, often drive their behavior (Zeithaml, 1988). Further, because a trackable activity occurs over time, perceptions relevant to engaging in self-control may change over the course of the activity. Thus, measures that capture perceptions of, as opposed to actual, behavior and measures that can reveal changes in these perceptions over the course of the behavior can offer unique insight into self-control. Third, although self-control is the ultimate outcome, various factors contribute to self-control. In particular, Baumeister (2002) argues that self-control is likely to fail if one does not (a) have a behavioral standard, (b) monitor the behavior, and (c) have sufficient capacity. However, no existing measures provide insight into these

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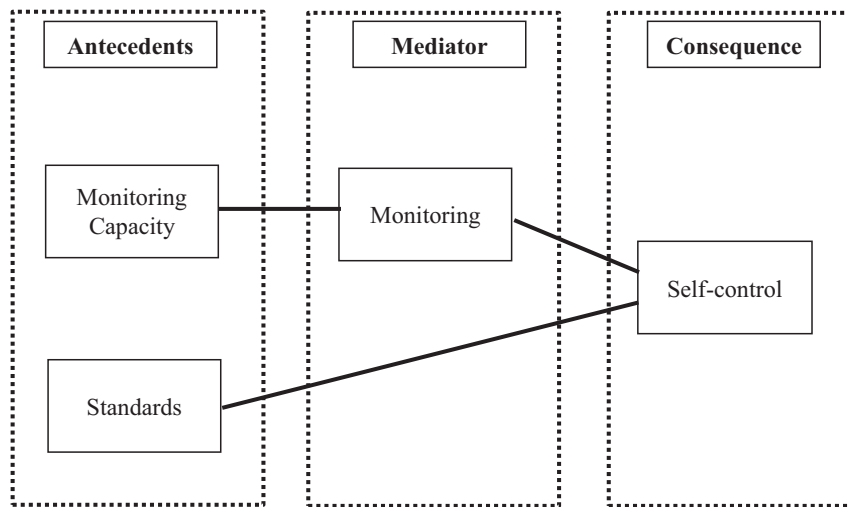


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

causes of (un)successful self-control for specific behaviors.

Given these considerations, we employ established scale-development procedures to create multi-item perceptual measures of standards, capacity, and monitoring, as well as a measure of self-control. As we demonstrate, researchers can easily adapt this suite of measures to a variety of trackable activities. Further, the measures are appropriate for any context; for example, researchers can use the measures with or without dedicated activity-tracking devices. By complementing existing trait-based and objective measures of self-control, as well as providing a means of quantifying determinants of self-control, the measures offer researchers tools to gain theoretical insight by identifying mediators and moderators of self-control. While such insight has obvious implications for psychologists and public policymakers, it also offers value to businesses in several ways. For example, it may guide product and service development, as it suggests the types of behaviors for which marketers should develop activity tracking tools and programs, as well as how the tools and programs should be designed. The measures can provide insight into employee perceptions of goal-oriented tasks, such as those involving manufacturing and shipping, potentially enabling improvements in the processes underlying these tasks. Because self-control predicts project management effectiveness (Dainty, Cheng, & Moore, 2005), our measures also offer the potential to enhance the performance of managers.

In the following section, we discuss the focal constructs, as well as existing measures that are relevant to self-control, in more detail. We then present a series of studies used to develop the resulting scales. We conclude by discussing the scales' implications, benefits, and uses.

2. Theoretical background and literature review

2.1. Definition of constructs

As indicated, this research focuses on trackable activities, which we define as activities (1) that have a clear beginning and ending, (2) that a person can choose to stop or continue at any point, and (3) for which some quantifiable amount is deemed appropriate or acceptable. We begin by considering Baumeister's (2002) definition of self-control as the self's capacity to alter its own states and responses, including thoughts, emotions, impulses, and performance. For trackable activities, performance is the most relevant response. Baumeister (2002) argues that self-control depends on three major elements—standards, monitoring, and capacity. Standards refer to “goals, ideals, norms, and other guidelines that specify the desired response” (p. 671). For the current context, standards pertain to the amount of the focal behavior deemed desirable or appropriate. Standards can be internally

established (i.e., by the person performing the activity) or externally established (i.e., by someone or something other than the person performing the activity). For example, a person on a shopping trip may set her/his own \$200 spending limit (internal), or the person's spouse may set the \$200 spending limit (external).

Monitoring is the act of “keeping track of the relevant behavior” (p. 672), and it can be done mentally or with the aid of a device. For example, a shopper may mentally track the amount she/he has spent, or the shopper may use a calculator to tally purchases. Finally, self-control requires the person to have sufficient capacity to exercise self-control. Without such capacity, standards and monitoring are useless. Baumeister (2002) views capacity in terms of the ability to alter one's responses. Our focus on trackable activities leads us to view capacity in terms of one's ability to monitor the behavior, which we refer to as monitoring capacity. When people monitor mentally, monitoring capacity is a cognitive resource. However, monitoring devices (e.g., a calculator) may supplement monitoring capacity. Finally, given our focus on behaviors for which the person can establish a standard, we view self-control as the extent to which the amount of the behavior matches the standard.

For trackable activities, people may assess at least some of these constructs objectively. For example, either one establishes a standard or not, and either the amount of behavior compares favorably to the standard or it does not. However, we focus on subjective, perceptual measures by considering the extent to which a person feels she/he (1) has a standard, (2) possesses sufficient capacity for monitoring, (3) actually monitors, and (4) engages in self-control. As we discuss, perceptual measures often provide value over objective measures. Though we focus on measurement development, Fig. 1 presents a simple conceptual model relating these constructs. As noted in Section 4, the model may be more complex for trackable activities.

2.2. Framework for existing measures

Researchers have used a variety of measures to capture self-control (or impulsivity, its converse) and its causes. In a meta-analysis, Duckworth and Kern (2011) divide these measures into four categories based on the underlying measurement approach: executive function tasks, delay-of-gratification tasks, self-report questionnaires, and informant-report questionnaires. Of these approaches, delay-of-gratification tasks and self-report questionnaires are perhaps the most common in consumer and business research. Regardless of the measurement approach, there is value in categorizing relevant measures based on whether they are (1) objective or subjective and (2) trait-based or state-based. Objective measures incorporate actual behavior (e.g., “I spent

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