

Understanding self-control: Eating and spending are different public policy issues

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You can resist buying a candy bar while you're waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store—but you'll buy any pair of shoes that are on sale. Your best friend, in contrast, wouldn't dream of buying a pair of shoes he thinks he doesn't need, no matter how low the price—but he can't resist buying that same candy bar you so easily ignore. According to a new study in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, it is

precisely those differences in self-control that researchers need to pay attention to when assessing the impact of public policies. As the study reports, if you want to understand the effectiveness of a regulation or tax on a specific behavior, use a measure of self-control specific to that behavior.

"That may seem obvious. But our study is the first to compare general measures of self-control with so-called domain-specific measures of self-control," write the authors of the study, Kelly L. Haws (Vanderbilt University), Scott W. Davis (Texas A&M University), and Utpal M. Dholakia (Rice University). "And what we find is that domain-specific measures produce better predictions of consumer [behavior](#) when it comes to the impact of taxes or regulations intended to promote or discourage a particular behavior."

Consumer researchers routinely use either a general measure of self-control or a domain-specific measure—but without explaining or defending the measure chosen. What Haws, Davis, and Dholakia set out to find is which self-control measure is most appropriate for a given context. To that end, they conducted five studies that measured self-control in relation to two specific behaviors: eating and shopping. The authors ultimately recommend a particular approach to measuring domain-specific self-control, an approach that adapts an existing general measure to the specific context at hand.

"The approach we use here can be adapted to assess individual self-control in other domains such as time management, alcohol consumption, and so on. Whether one is interested in spending, eating or another self-control behavior, greater consistency in assessing individual differences will facilitate both theoretical advancement and the testing and discovery of effective interventions in future research," the authors write.

More information: Kelly L. Haws, Scott W. Davis, and Utpal M. Dholakia. "Control over What? Individual Differences in General vs. Eating and Spending Self-Control." Forthcoming in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*. [dx.doi.org/10.1509/jppm.14.149](https://doi.org/10.1509/jppm.14.149)

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