

# Researchers need to pay attention to differences in self-control

October 7 2015

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Whether it's resisting buying a candy bar in the checkout lane or purchasing an unneeded pair of shoes on sale at the mall, self-control varies from person to person. Researchers must pay attention to these

differences in individuals' self-control when assessing the impact of public policies, according to a new study by marketing and consumer behavior experts at Rice University and Vanderbilt University.

The study is the first to compare general measures of self-control with so-called domain-specific measures. A domain could be health, food consumption or personal finances, for example. It found that researchers and practitioners who want to understand the effectiveness of a regulation or tax on a specific behavior—for example, spending or eating—should use a measure of self-control specific to that behavior.

"Self-control is an important and influential individual difference that impacts a wide variety of consumer decisions and behaviors," the authors wrote. "These effects manifest at both a general and a more domain-specific level." The researchers note that although examining self-control as a general construct that applies across a variety of contexts has merit, they prefer a measurement approach that is domain-specific because it may facilitate greater insight into consumer decision-making in various consumption arenas, especially when testing public policy interventions designed to help consumers make better decisions.

Examples of recent interventions include tax imposed on sugar-sweetened beverages, the prohibition of toys in children's fast-food meals, the provision of minimum payment warnings in credit card statements and the introduction of the U.S. Treasury Department's MyRA retirement savings account for low- and middle-income Americans who don't have access to employer-sponsored retirement plans.

The study was co-authored by Utpal Dholakia, the George R. Brown Chair of Marketing and professor of management at Rice's Jones Graduate School of Business; Kelly Haws, associate professor of marketing at Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Management; and

Scott Davis, postdoctoral fellow in marketing at the Jones School. It will be published in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*.

Consumer researchers routinely use either a general measure of self-control or a domain-specific measure, but they usually don't explain or defend the measure chosen, according to the authors. Dholakia, Haws and Davis conducted five studies with a total of more than 600 American male and female participants of various ages that measured self-control in relation to two specific behaviors: eating and shopping.

The general theory of self-control used by researchers is intended to capture tendencies common across self-control domains—controlling thoughts, emotions, impulses and performance. Some people are generally better at controlling their thoughts and actions than others, which leads to behaviors that may be less satisfying in the short term to the benefit of positive longer-term outcomes. Self-control is viewed as a general and limited resource that can be readily assessed at an individual level. The most commonly used measure in recent studies is the general self-control scale, which encompasses a measure consisting of 36 questions.

Within consumer research, self-control is often linked to spending decisions because consumers regularly wrestle with opposing forces of attractive products that encourage spending and a longer-term emphasis on saving and financial well-being.

Thus, domain-specific measures have offered an impulsive buying scale. For example, "I buy things according to how I feel at the moment" captures the tendency toward impulsivity in tempting buying situations as characterized by a lack of planning, the authors said.

Similarly, other researchers have developed a measure of compulsive buying, a more intense variation of impulsive buying that impacts a

fairly small percentage of the population who experience an overwhelming compulsion to buy. For example, "Much of my life centers around buying things."

On the other end of the spectrum, another study of frugality used a scale that accounts for both careful acquisition and resourceful use of goods and services, such as "I am willing to wait on a purchase I want so that I can save my money." Other researchers have examined consumer-spending self-control and found that it predicts the likelihood to make unexpected purchases and willingness to pay for attractive items better than the general self-control measure. For example, "I am able to resist temptation in order to achieve my budget goals."

The authors ultimately recommended 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," the authors wrote. "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."

From a public policy perspective, intervention testing can be conducted with samples of consumers to understand differences based on individual-level self-control, the authors said. Advocating interventions that show the most promise to help naturally vulnerable (low self-control) consumers will lead to the best results. It may often be the case—as in one of the authors' studies—that people higher in self-control are less impacted by specific interventions, but meaningful differences emerge for those lower in self-control within that domain. "We therefore recommend that self-control measures be assessed for study participants

in every experiment in which outcomes are intended to assess control over one's behavior or influence responses through [public policy](#)-oriented interventions," they wrote. "This will allow, at a minimum, to control for any effects, and more likely to avoid recommending strategies that appear to be helpful when in reality, the least help or most harm is inflicted upon those consumers the intervention was intended to help most."

Dholakia has advice for individuals attempting to improve [self-control](#). "Most of us struggle with success in some domain or other in our lives," Dholakia said. "Some of us may be excellent savers but struggle with maintaining our weight. Others may be in great shape physically but live with the stress of having no savings. Still others are chronic procrastinators. It is time to think about the places in our lives where we are successful and use the methods that make us successful there to our advantage in other life domains."

**More information:** "Control Over What? Individual Differences in General Versus Eating and Spending Self-Control,"  
[papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2616318](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2616318)

Provided by Rice University

Citation: Researchers need to pay attention to differences in self-control (2015, October 7)  
retrieved 1 May 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2015-10-attention-differences-self-control.html>

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