

Self-control motive: On the manifestation and implication of wanting to have more self-control

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Introduction

A large volume of research documents the adaptive outcomes of high self-control. Self-control facilitates goal-attainment, interpersonal and social success, as well as academic achievement (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988). Self-control also has a few downsides: Exerting self-control involves making immediate sacrifices and high trait self-control is associated with safer yet less exciting life. Most people would probably like to have more self-control, but it is reasonable to expect that some people may seek at times less self-control.

While self-control represents capacity, *self-control motive - the extent to which one wants to have more self-control* - represents a subjective sense of success in attaining a desired level of self-control. To the extent that one's goals and aspirations affect motivation, affect, and performance, self-control motive should be an important moderator of the various effects of self-control. Notwithstanding, to date, no instrument was developed to measure self-control motive.

The present research introduces a new scale to measure self-control motive along with results from two studies that explored the effect of this motive on stress and performance under demanding conditions. It was hypothesized that a high self-control motive would bring about negative short-term effects, especially for individuals low in trait self-control, because they would be more inclined to experience the challenges ahead of them as surpassing their ability.

The Self-Control Motive Scale (SCMS)

- The SCMS measures the extent to which individuals seek to have more self-control.
- The scale is comprised of 8 items that ask about one's motive to have more control over one's thoughts, feelings, impulses, and behavior.
- It has both trait ("in my life in general") and state ("right now") versions.

In my life in general... (or) right now...		Strongly disagree				Strongly agree
1.	I want to be more self-disciplined	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I want to be better able to concentrate on tasks	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I wish I had more control over my responses in stressing situations	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I want to be better able to resist temptations	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I want to be better able to hold back bad thoughts when they come to my mind	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I wish I had a better ability to change unwanted habits	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I want to have more control over my feelings	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I want to be better able to persist in pursuing goals	1	2	3	4	5

The properties of the scale were derived from samples in the US (N = 83) and Israel (N = 166):

- The scale has very good internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha = .87/.84.
- US mean = 3.50 (sd = .76; range: 1.1 – 5.0). Israeli mean = 3.58 (sd = .75; range: 1.6 – 5.0).
- The mean is above the mid-point, implying that most people want to have more self-control.
- The SCMS has: A moderate negative correlation with trait self-control (r's = -.35/-.50), a weak-moderate positive correlation with neuroticism (.33, US), a weak negative correlation with extraversion (-.20, US) and social desirability (-.16/-.17), and null correlation with satisfaction with life (-.11, Israel), and sex (.04/ -.14).

ABSTRACT

Self-control often brings about favorable outcomes that facilitate adaptation. Notwithstanding, high levels of self-control sometimes come with personal costs (e.g., resisting one's desires). It is therefore reasonable to expect that, in general, people would want to have more self-control, but also that there will be variability in the expression of this motive. In the present research we introduce a new scale to measure (state and trait) motive to have more self-control, the *Self-Control Motive Scale (SCMS)*. In two studies (a longitudinal field study and a laboratory experiment) we demonstrate that the SCMS has very good internal consistency, that it is sensitive to changes in external demand for self-control, and that it interacts with trait self-control in predicting levels of stress and success in task performance.

Study 1: Longitudinal field study

Overview: This study explored longitudinally the effect of increasing academic pressure on students' self-control motive. It also explored the role of self-control motive in mediating ensuing stress reaction.

Participants: Seventy-six students (83% females; mean age = 22) volunteered to participate in the two measurement occasions.

Tools & Procedure: In T1 (first two weeks of the Fall semester) and T2 (final two weeks of the Fall semester) participants filled in: the SCMS, trait self-control scale (Tangney et al., 2004), and a scale measuring their level of academic stress.

Results

- Compared with T1, in T2 participants felt more stress (4.61 < 5.30; p < .01), less self-control (3.32 > 3.18; p < .01), and a stronger motive for self-control (3.63 < 3.78; p < .05).
- That is, as academic pressure increased participants felt more stress and a stronger motive for self-control.
- Among individuals low in trait self-control, T1 self-control motive was associated with greater T2 academic stress (r = .62, p < .01).
- In this group, T1 stress was not associated with T2 self-control motive (r = .25, ns), indicating that the causal process starts with one's level of self-control motive.
- Among individuals high in trait self-control, T1 self-control motive was not associated with greater T2 academic stress (r = .10, ns).

Study 2: Laboratory experiment

Overview: Participants' self-control capacity was measured following ego-depletion manipulation.

Participants: 77 students (72% females; M age = 18) participated in exchange for credit.

Tools

- *Inventories.* Trait self-control (alpha = .77) and SCMS (alpha = .87) were administered.
- *Self-control manipulation.* (1) Complex multiplication problem while memorizing a 9-digit number (control: simple addition problem, no memorization); followed by (2) a challenging 'use of objects' task (control: simple 'use of objects' task).
- *Self-control measurement.* 'Spot the difference' task. P's were asked to spot all differences between 2 drawings. Number of differences found and work time were measured.

Procedure: Participants first filled in the self-control and self-control motive scales. They were then randomly assigned to either the ego-depletion or the control condition. Finally, all participants worked on the 'spot the difference' task.

Results

- Among individuals low in trait self-control, self-control motive was associated with finding fewer differences in the 'spot the difference' task. The effect approached significance in the depleting condition (r = -.54, p < .06; Figure 1), but was also negative in the control condition (r = -.32, ns).
- A (non-significant) negative association was also found for the time spent working on the task.
- Furthermore, low trait self-control-high SCM participants also reported feeling more negative affect in the depleting condition (r = .66, p < .05; Figure 2).

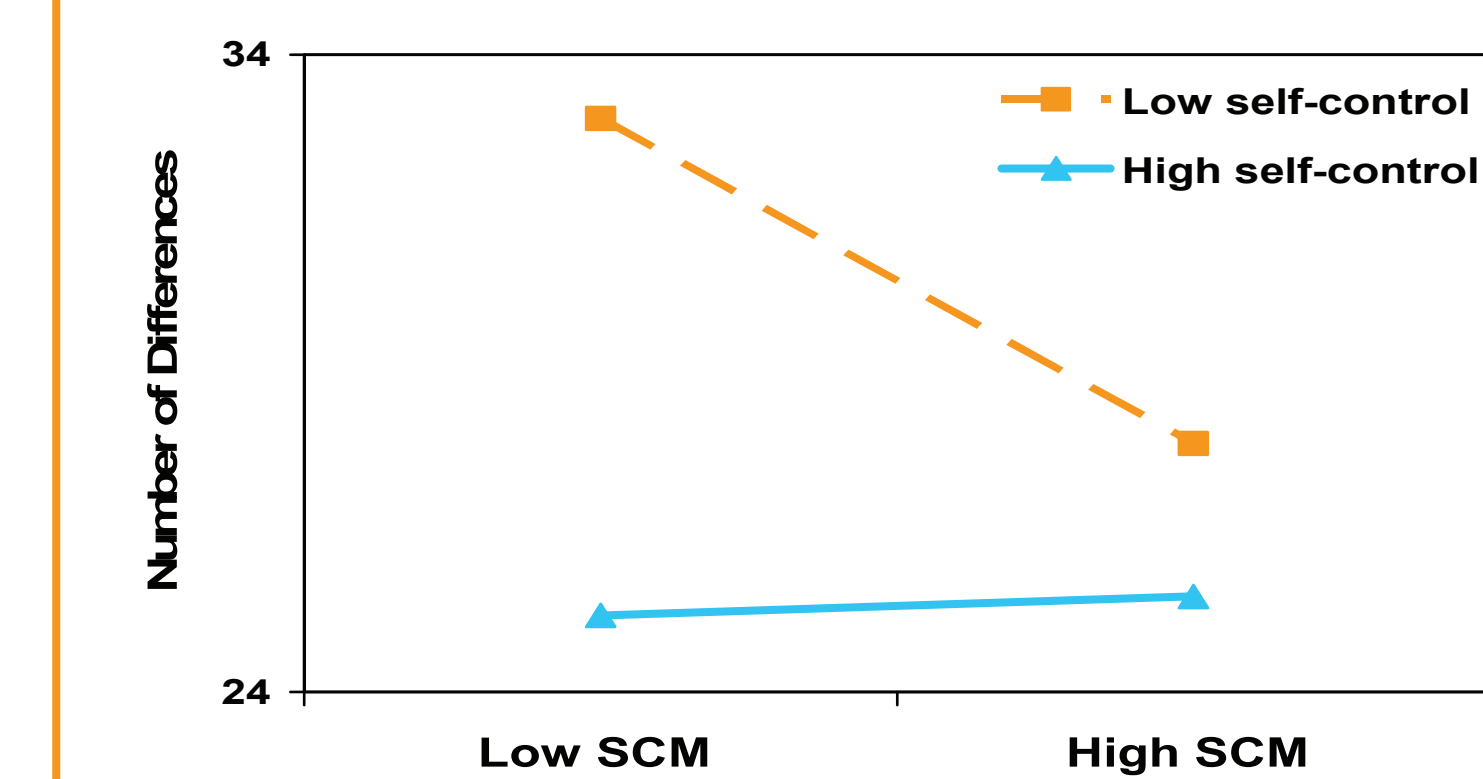


Figure 1: The effect of self-control motive on task performance among low and high trait self-control participants after an ego-depletion manipulation

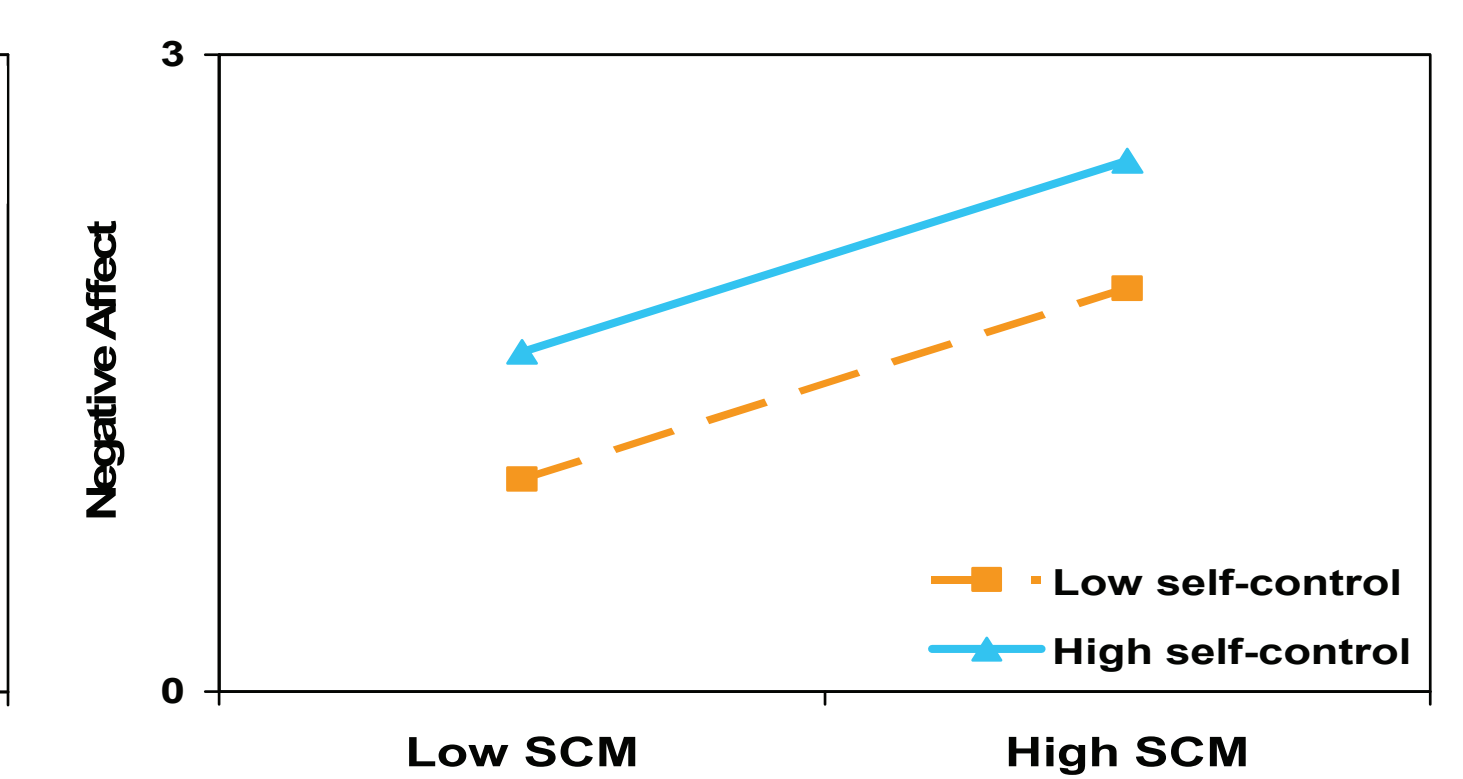


Figure 2: The effect of self-control motive on negative affect among low and high trait self-control participants after an ego-depletion manipulation

Conclusions

- A reliable scale was introduced to measure a motive to have more self-control.
- On average, most people want to have more self-control.
- Being low on trait self-control and external demands for self-control increase self-control motive.
- A high motive for self-control among low trait self-control individuals predicts increased stress and reduced ability to exert self-control, especially when demands are taxing one's ability.
- In the self-control domain, when one lacks capacity, one is better off having low expectations.
- Future studies should explore long-term effects of self-control motive.