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Signaling Trustworthiness: A Self-Regulation Account

Samantha P. Lapka and Franki Y.H. Kung

Abstract

Trustworthiness is generally considered a positive trait, and past research has investigated different factors that lead a person to be deemed trustworthy. As suggested in recent work, one important predictor and signal of trustworthiness is self-control. In this chapter, we offer a literature review on the social effects of self-control on trustworthiness. We first outline basic models of self-control and review empirical evidence of the interpersonal processes through which perceptions of self-control and trustworthiness are formed and connected. Then, we review evidence to identify and propose implications, both potential upsides and downsides, of self-control induced trustworthiness. We conclude by discussing understudied and novel factors that may potentially influence the associations between self-control and trust, and offer ideas for future directions.

Keywords: self-control, trust-signaling, social perception, mindset, goals, interpersonal processes

1. Introduction

Given the importance of the organizational and interpersonal benefits shown from people's ability to gain trust, it is crucial to see what influences how trustworthy a person is deemed. Past research has identified predictors of trustworthiness that include personality traits and physical attributes. Trait agreeableness and honesty-humility show positive correlations with trustworthiness [1–3]. Guilt-proneness—how guilty a person thinks they would feel about doing something wrong—was found to predict trustworthiness even better than agreeableness and other Big Five personality traits (i.e., extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness), and this relationship was mediated by interpersonal responsibility [2]. Facial expressions were also found to have a significant relationship with perceived trustworthiness [4, 5]. Although these elements are important to understand, there are additional influential factors of trust that still need more research. In this chapter, we underscore a growing body of research [6] that reveals one essential yet understudied personal trait that reliably impacts trustworthiness: self-control. Below, we review and highlight the role self-control plays in garnering trustworthiness, identifying the range of related positive and negative outcomes and questions for future research to explore.

2. Trust and trustworthiness

Trust and trustworthiness are critical factors in social dynamics. Trust (a.k.a. propensity to trust) is described as the amount of vulnerability a person allows

themselves in a particular situation [7]. Broadly speaking, trust occurs between two or more people, groups, or entities (e.g., romantic partners, co-workers, organizations with shared interests, an athlete and their team, and a political party and their candidate) and is characterized by feelings of confidence that the trustee will meet expectations of the trustor, which are generally positive or non-negative [8]. Trust is especially relevant in situations with no certain or guaranteed outcomes, where the trustor allows themselves to be vulnerable to the possibility that their expectations will not be met [9].

Separately, trustworthiness encompasses the perception the trustor has of the trustee's ability to meet their expectations. It is often developed from past experiences and can differ depending on the context of the expectations. Past research has identified both a 2 and 3-dimensional model to conceptualize the way we understand trustworthiness. The 2-dimensional model suggests that trustworthiness is formed by both affect-based and cognition-based trust, where affect-based-trust describes the belief or perception that the trustee will act in a manner that preserves the relationship, and cognition-based trust entails the trustee behaving in a competent and dependable manner [10]. The other model proposes three components that form perceptions of trustworthiness—benevolence, integrity, and ability [7]. A person who demonstrates that they [1] are capable of meeting an expectation, [2] without defying their accepted principles, and [3] without exploiting or taking advantage of the trustor's vulnerability, would be viewed as trustworthy. While distinct, these models appear to overlap in their theory, as noted by Ferrin [11], who suggested that perceived ability and integrity signal cognition-based trust, and perceived benevolence communicates affect-based trust. Research has since supported this belief, finding that, for cognition-based trust, ability and integrity were better predictors, while benevolence was the best predictor of affect-based trust [12]. These findings overall support the idea that cognitive and affect-based trust are distinct from each other.

Trust and trustworthiness provide benefits to a wide range of situations. Research in management and organizational psychology suggests these traits lead to more productive workplace outcomes. For instance, in management settings, increased trust and trustworthiness in co-workers promotes openness, cooperation, information sharing, the exchange of ideas, opportunities for the development of beliefs and attitudes, and the acceptance of shared ideas [13, 14]. Trust has also been positively associated with job performance and citizenship behavior, and negatively associated with counterproductive behavior [15–17]. One study [18], found that “trustworthy managers preside over more productive organizations and are better able to maintain and even increase organizational outcomes in agencies challenged by low levels of performance and perturbations in the external environment.” More trustworthy managers were also associated with greater procedural and interpersonal justice in the workplace [19], and perceptions of trustworthiness provided by coworkers have been identified as predictors of work performance, specifically through impressions of ability and integrity [20].

Trust and trustworthiness are related to beneficial outcomes in non-work relationships as well. Interpersonal trust increases the closeness, quality and communication within interpersonal relationships with intimate partners, siblings, and children and parents [21–25]. Rotter [25] found that those who are more trusting are less likely to participate in immoral behaviors such as lying, stealing or cheating, and have a decreased likelihood of being maladjusted or unhappy. Divergently, high trustors are more likely to respect the rights of others, give second chances, be desired as a friend more, and be more well liked [25]. Greater perceived trustworthiness was found to contribute to peer acceptance, school adjustment and performance [26], and was positively related to developing relations with peers

and having more friendships [26–28]. Considering the many benefits that trust and trustworthiness can produce, it is advantageous and important to understand what predicts it, and some recent research has identified self-control as a signal of trust.

3. Self-control

Self-control has been vastly studied through the decades, with over 2 million related search results on Google Scholar as a testament to the topic's importance. By definition, self-control is the regulation of behaviors and thoughts to pursue a more distant and abstract goal or motive when a directly conflicting opportunity to satisfy an immediate and concrete motive or goal is present [29, 30]. In other words, self-control is demonstrated in your decision to forgo the tasty treat that is currently available to you, in order to remain committed to your diet and long-term goals of a healthy lifestyle. It is no surprise that this characteristic, and its related outcomes, have maintained the interest of psychologists for so long.

The outcomes related to self-control are as important as the trait itself. Research has identified that trait self-control is positively linked to better physical health and performance in school and work [30–32], along with greater attainment and subjective well-being [33, 34]. It has also been shown that those with greater self-control show more empathy, perspective taking, less deception, and report better behaviors in romantic relationships [21, 35, 36]. These positive associations with self-control have naturally led researchers to investigate how individuals can increase this beneficial trait. Past findings have recommended methods related to goal setting, monitoring, and implementing [37], and described various types of interventions (i.e., social skills development programs, cognitive coping strategies interventions, video tape training/role-playing interventions, immediate/delayed rewards clinical interventions, and relaxation training) that have helped increase self-control and reduce delinquency in children [38]. Practicing mindfulness and small acts of self-control, such as eating fewer sweets, has also led to improved performance on self-control tasks [39].

While having trait self-control and being seen as someone who demonstrates self-control are not necessarily the same, positive consequences have been identified based on mere perceptions of the trait. A person who is viewed as being self-controlled has better social relationships, with greater satisfaction and success [31, 40, 41]. Perceived self-control is also related to greater organizational outcomes like being viewed as more fair at work [42]. However, these perceptions have also been associated with some negative outcomes including assumptions that the work done by highly controlled individuals is less arduous and time-consuming, which can lead to the employee being overburdened with extra assignments [43]. High perceptions of self-control can also cause an individual to face negative consequences in social settings where their company may be less desired [44] or in academic settings where their peers may be less likely to offer them assistance [45].

While self-control is commonly considered an intrapersonal trait, our perceptions of other people's self-control are important signals during interpersonal settings. The amount of self-control a person demonstrates significantly impacts other perceptions we have about them, which can ultimately influence our behaviors and attitudes towards the person.

4. Self-control signaling trust

As suggested by an increasing amount of recent empirical evidence [6, 21], we argue that perceptions of self-control function as a reliable signal for trustworthiness.

Below, we summarize the varied emerging evidence and elaborate on how self-control induced trustworthiness manifests across different relationship contexts.

In *romantic relationships*, because self-control is related to increased perspective taking, keeping more promises, and being more empathic and forgiving [31, 35, 46, 47], it is no wonder that greater perceptions of self-control lead to increased relationship satisfaction and success [40]. A partner who demonstrates that they have the capacity to meet long-term goals and successfully avoid or suppress temptation showcases their potential for meeting standards. This can translate to their ability to meet the expectations of others, and therefore how trustworthy they should be considered by their partner. For example, a person who refuses to respond to a flirty message from a stranger—because it could damage their long-term goal of maintaining a good relationship with their partner—would illustrate to their partner how they are capable of pursuing long-term goals over short term satisfaction. Subsequently, their partner would be more inclined to believe that the person will meet their expectations of staying faithful in the relationship, and would deem them more trustworthy. When trustworthiness is signaled, the relationship quality is better, there is more positive communication, and partners feel closer [21]. Self-control perceptions are thereby inherently critical for quality romantic relationships, for they are affiliated with trustworthiness [22].

Close relationships naturally reap similar benefits as romantic relationships in regard to self-control—as being more empathetic, forgiving, and having better positive communication also promotes greater friendships and family relationships [21, 35, 47]. Research has shown that non-romantic relationships benefit from self-control in other aspects as well. Fewer deceptive behaviors are observed in those with greater self-control [36], and more positive perceptions of a high self-control person are found, such as being seen as more popular [41]. These positive views towards the person carry over to promote other positive qualities, like trustworthiness, which results in increased communication and greater development in friendship quality and quantity [27, 28, 48, 49]. It has also been shown that a child's trustworthiness positively contributes to their school adjustment which is partially due to increased acceptance from their peers [26]. Overall, greater perceptions of self-control support positive perceptions of trustworthiness, which, in turn, relate to better close relationships [31].

Organizational and work relationships also benefit from high self-control perceptions, while in slightly different ways. In organizations, those seen as highly self-controlled are preferred as partners for work-related tasks such as proofreading an application or being part of a team [44], and supervisors who are perceived as higher in self-control are considered to be fairer by their employees [42]. These positive perceptions naturally signal trustworthiness, by supporting the notion that the high self-control person is reliable and effective, and therefore trustworthy as a co-worker or boss. For example, a supervisor who demonstrates high self-control would refrain from abusing the company expense account for pricey lunch outings—even though they crave a nice meal and break from the office—in an effort to maintain respect from other members of the company. By reserving the lunches for appropriate instances, the boss meets the expectation from subordinates that they will use the expense account responsibly. Similarly, a worker who stays late to finish a last-minute proposal—thereby missing the sports game they were planning to watch—showcases their work ethic, and increases their likelihood of being promoted, by meeting the high expectations of the project. Co-workers and associates who recognize those expectations being met will then consider the employee or boss to be trustworthy, resulting in downstream beneficial outcomes. Organizations and associates who are viewed as more trustworthy show increases in productivity, organizational outcomes, and cooperation for intergroup and interpersonal exchanges [13, 18]. In a study by Dirks and Skarlicki [20], the

perceptions of capability and integrity towards a co-worker, two components of trust [7], predicted that co-worker's performance. Additionally, trait trust within an organization positively corresponds with greater communication, openness, and cooperation [14], along with increased task performance and citizenship behavior, and less counterproductive behaviors [17]. Overall, trust and trustworthiness result in many advantageous organizational outcomes, and importantly, self-control acts as a signal of this trustworthiness, leading to positive work behaviors and ultimately a more productive workplace.

Notably, while there are many upsides of high self-control perceptions in organizational relationships, some downsides have been identified by more recent research as well. While high self-control individuals benefit by being trusted and desired more as partners in work-related settings [44], they are also relied on more, and have more expected of them by their workmates, compared to those perceived as lower in self-control [43]. Their associates also tend to think the work done by those with high self-control takes less effort and is easier [43]. High self-control people may then be asked or expected to complete more tasks because their associates trust them to meet the heightened expectations, while receiving less recognition compared to their co-workers who are lower in self-control. These beliefs can lead to high self-control individuals feeling overburdened and underappreciated, resulting in a decrease in relationship satisfaction [43].

Organizational relationships are not alone in their potential for negative consequences of high self-control perceptions. Research by Röseler [44] has found that, while those perceived as having greater self-control are preferred in settings of work, they are less preferred in social settings, such as parties, compared to people with lower levels of self-control. This may result from the belief that the high self-control person, who suppresses desires and forgoes immediate satisfaction in pursuit of long-term goals, will continue to meet that expectation as they have previously. If it is trusted that these expectations will be maintained, then the person's high self-control "may interfere with being perceived as good company during leisure time and at parties" [44].

Overall, perceptions of self-control play an important role in how trustworthy a person is considered and the ramified positive and negative outcomes. While this connection is recognized across relationship types, distinct differences remain between their contexts. Naturally, organizational and work relationships are unique from social relationships. Social relationships are less formal and usually focus on personal connection, while organizational relationships often revolve around productivity and teamwork [50, 51]. These divergent characteristics likely contribute to how self-control and trust are understood in the respective relationships, breeding the variation of outcomes across contexts.

The unique findings from past research on self-control create an interesting paradigm for its relationship with trust and their related outcomes. Diving deeper into this relationship, we ask, what else might impact self-control's signal of trustworthiness, and what would it mean?

5. Emerging future directions

Thus far, we have discussed the self-control and trust relationship in a quantitative sense, examining the extent to which high self-control is associated with greater perceptions of trust. While informative, a holistic understanding beyond the intensity of the relationship remains to be studied, and it requires us to better understand how and when the relationship occurs. We propose that the less explored, qualitative differences underlying self-control may impact the dynamic of the self-control

and trust relationship, along with its potential outcomes. Here we offer our ideas and some relevant questions for future research.

5.1 Differences in goal content

As discussed above, self-control is conceptualized by choosing to pursue higher-order goals over lower-order goals [29]. Considering this definition, it is important to understand *what* the higher-order goals consist of. Whereas it is possible for two people to exert the same level of self-control; the goal towards which they pursue can be different [52]. For example, common goals described in self-control situations relate to academic or professional achievement (e.g., getting good grades or promoted), health (e.g., eating healthy or working out), and financial spending (e.g., saving money each month) [53–55]. Understanding the goals that underlie self-control action may shed new light on how self-control affects trust perceptions.

One popular framework of goal content has been agentic and communal. Agentic goals are pursued in an effort to improve or satisfy oneself, while communal goals relate to the more interpersonal and connected pursuits of the person [56]. Agentic goals could include working out more to lose weight and look fit or reading more to grow your knowledge on different subjects. The person's level of success in pursuing these goals can signal their competence or ability to others. Separately, communal goals could include being more proactive in reaching out to others to be a better friend or working hard to make extra money and better support your family. These goals can signal a person's benevolence, or care and interest in others. These different types of goals serve varied functions in our lives, therefore, the content of a goal is important for the message it translates. The type of goal that is pursued can foster different perceptions of a person's self-control abilities, even if the intensity of the person's regulation is the same across the varied goals.

If someone is successful in pursuing their agentic goals it will signal high competence and ability in the person. This will subsequently act as a signal for cognition-based trust, which is partially formed from perceptions of ability, and thus cognition-based trust perceptions will increase towards the person. For example, someone that studies for an extra 5 hours during the week may be viewed as highly capable of improving their GPA, and thus more trustworthy in situations that test ability, which could lead to positive downstream outcomes like increased peer acceptance and better school adjustment [26].

In contrast, someone that is successful in pursuing their communal goals, which are based on interpersonal connection and care for others, will signal their high benevolence, promoting perceptions of affect-based trust. For example, a person that dedicates 5 hours a week to calling their family members to catch up may be seen as very caring, which would signal their affect-based trustworthiness. This would likely lead to positive outcomes for that person such as more friendships and greater acceptance from their peers [26–28].

While the promotion of cognitive-based or affect-based trust is likely beneficial to the perceived person, some recent research suggests that perceptions of high self-control can lead to negative outcomes as well, and those could be the result of a differential activation of the two kinds of trust. In one study, those viewed as high in self-control were seen as more “robot-like,” more competent, and less warm than those perceived as lower in self-control [42]. Those perceptions of high ability and competence would likely foster cognition-based but not affective-based trustworthiness in the perceived person. This asymmetry or lack of perceived benevolence (or warmth) then explains downstream negative social outcomes (e.g., reduced interest in socially connecting with the person) [45]. Additionally, this suggests a possible remedy that the presence of affect-based trust would act as a buffer to the negative

outcomes. Fostering affect-based trust through successful self-control of communal goal pursuits, in addition to the already present cognition-based trust, may eliminate the negative outcomes that can be observed from perceptions of high self-control.

Overall, we propose that the goal content (e.g., agentic or communal) has an important impact on the formation of trust perceptions due to self-control, which can potentially lead to both positive and negative outcomes for the perceived. This proposition gives rise to new questions for the study of the relationship between self-control and trust perceptions. We have suggested that the negative social outcomes identified in recent research may be corrected by the addition of affect-based trust perceptions formed from successful communal goal pursuits. Alternatively, would relationships that demonstrate high self-control through only communal goals, producing solely affect-based trust perceptions, also result in negative outcomes? If so, would these consequences be exclusively agentic, and what would they entail? Additionally, how does the ratio of agentic and communal goal success relate to the formation of trust perceptions, and does this differ based on the context of the relationship (e.g., co-workers vs. romantic partners)? Finally, how would failed agentic or communal goal pursuits affect the outcomes of trust perceptions? These questions offer interesting potential avenues for future research.

5.2 Self-control mindsets and trust perceptions

An additional interesting qualitative factor to consider in the self-control and trust relationship is how differences in beliefs about self-control, in general, can impact perceptions of trustworthiness.

5.2.1 Limited vs. nonlimited

Lay theories of self-control recognize views that are commonly held about a person's ability to self-regulate. Lay theories, or mindsets, are developed from our socialization and past experiences, and different types of lay theories have been identified in the self-control literature. The first relates to the belief that a person generally has a limited (slowly replenishing) or nonlimited (quickly replenishing) amount of self-control [57]. For example, if an individual successfully demonstrated their self-control abilities, someone with a limited self-control mindset would believe that the person no longer has their full capacity for implementing self-control, and that it will take time to be completely restored. Alternatively, a person with a nonlimited mindset would believe that an individual who demonstrated their self-control ability would have the same full capacity for self-control before their implementation of it, as well as quickly after.

This difference in mindset may create an important nuance for self-control's relationship with trust perceptions. If a person holds a limited mindset about self-control abilities, they would believe that once an individual exhibits successful self-control, they will be less capable of successfully implementing self-control in subsequent tasks, as they have already used up some of their resource. While this would likely increase self-control perceptions for the already completed task, it may reduce expectations for the person's future self-control abilities. In other words, the perceiver may have weaker trust perceptions because they expect the person to fail in demonstrating self-control in subsequent tasks, if there is not adequate time for their self-control abilities to replenish. An individual with a nonlimited mindset, however, would likely have greater trust perceptions, as they believe the person who just demonstrated successful self-control will have the same full capacity to do so in all subsequent self-control conflicts. This would likely lead to more positive outcomes for the perceived person.

Future research should test this idea, by investigating if those with limited self-control mindsets view others as less trustworthy after successfully demonstrating self-control. Other interesting questions remain as well, such as “How much time is needed for self-control abilities to replenish?” “Would the perceived person face negative outcomes from reduced trust perceptions?” “Do the types of goals pursued in the self-control action ‘use up’ one’s self-control reserves differently?” “Is self-control for agentic goals different from self-control for communal goals?” Lastly, “Would trustworthiness be reduced overall, or would perceptions of affect-based and cognition-based trust be impacted independently?”

5.2.2 Fixed vs. malleable

The second type of mindset related to self-control focuses on the trait’s plasticity. It consists of a fixed (stable and unchanging) or malleable (varied and mutable) mindset [58]. Fixed vs. malleable mindset affects dispositional judgments [59]. Someone with a fixed mindset of self-control would believe that the amount of self-control displayed by a person in a particular situation represents their overall self-control abilities. Conversely, someone with a malleable mindset would believe that a person’s self-control abilities are susceptible to change, and therefore, a single instance that demonstrates self-control may not be indicative of the person’s abilities overall.

Similar to limited and nonlimited mindset, the assumptions that a person’s capacity for self-control will, or will not, change could color perceptions of the person’s trustworthiness. For instance, dispositionism in social judgments can be a double-edged sword, depending on the valence of first impressions. Those with a fixed mindset are more likely to believe that a person holds the same amount of self-control across different conflicts, and they would likely base their self-control perceptions off their first impressions of the perceived person’s self-control abilities. Thus, if they initially view a person to have low self-control, they may then see the person as untrustworthy overall. However, if the person is initially seen as high in self-control, they may then view them as an overall trustworthy person. Hence, the timing of the self-control incidence matters, and especially so for those with a fixed mindset of self-control.

The consideration of fixed and malleable mindset in relation to self-control trust perceptions breeds additional important questions. Primarily, since self-control abilities will likely fluctuate at some point, what does this mean for those with a fixed self-control mindset? What effect does a ‘slip up’ have on previously formed perceptions of self-control and trust? In relation to agentic and communal goals, would self-control perceptions formed by one of the goal types translate to assumptions for the other goal type? And regarding those with malleable mindsets, how strong can trust perceptions be if it is understood that one’s capacity for self-control is able to change?

5.2.3 Willpower vs. strategy

Another way people may conceptualize self-control is in the materialization of their self-control efforts. In the process of pursuing a higher-order and distal goal over a lower-order and proximal goal, one may choose to utilize their willpower to effortfully inhibit the desire and temptation of the proximal goal. Another route the person could take would be to use strategies that allow them to proactively reduce their exposure to, and impact of, the temptation [29]. This can be done through manipulating the situation itself, such as selecting to be in an environment where the desire is not apparent (situation selection), or modifying the situation so it is easier to overcome the temptation (situation modification). Other strategies focus on altering the responses to temptations, such as directing focus away from the

desire (attentional deployment) or manipulating the way we think about it, so it becomes less appealing (cognitive change) [60].

Research has shown that both types of strategies are used in self-control conflicts, however, there are mixed findings related to the success and prominence of these different methods [61–63]. Since both these dimensions of self-control implementation—willpower and strategies—show a range of conflicting results, it is understood that the way people demonstrate self-control can vary, and this could be due to their self-control beliefs. Some people may have a willpower-based mindset where they rely on effortful inhibition to overcome desire, while others could have a strategy-based mindset and utilize one or more strategies in their self-control efforts. The way a person thinks about self-control the method(s) of implementing it could influence how they perceive other's self-control abilities.

The consideration of willpower-based and strategy-based mindsets in relation to self-control and trust perceptions sprouts several important questions. How does demonstrating control over oneself (i.e., willpower), compared to controlling the environment (i.e., using strategies), impact how trustworthy a person is viewed? Some research has suggested a timeline for when strategies and willpower are implemented in self-control conflicts. It is suggested that situational self-control strategies (i.e., situation selection and situation modification) are used first, followed by intrapsychic strategies (i.e., attentional deployment and cognitive change) [61]. Willpower, also referred to as response modulation, offers the final opportunity to overcome the desire. Since willpower can be considered the “last line of defense” in resisting a temptation, would a person that demonstrates self-control through effortful inhibition (i.e., willpower) be considered less trustworthy, as they could only overcome the desire in their final opportunity to do so? Or, would a person that demonstrates self-control through the use of strategies be considered less trustworthy, as the opportunity to change one's environment may not always be present? Since one's environment is more susceptible to change than the person themselves, would someone that demonstrates strategy-based self-control be less reliable, and therefore less trustworthy than a person who demonstrates willpower-based self-control?

These questions are important for future research on self-control perceptions and their subsequent effects on trustworthiness. Willpower-based and strategy-based self-control mindsets may also lead to implications for the downstream outcomes of trustworthiness. Future research should examine the potential effects of willpower and strategy-based mindset, along with limited (nonlimited) and fixed (malleable) mindsets, on self-control and trust perceptions to increase insight into the relationship and its related outcomes.

6. Conclusion

Research has identified that self-control is an important predictor of trustworthiness. In considering the quantitative factors between self-control and trust, the relationship is almost exclusively positive, where greater self-control perceptions lead to increased perceptions of trustworthiness, which result in positive downstream outcomes. However, when considering the less researched potential qualitative factors that can impact the relationship, such as goal content and mindset, the connection between the traits and their subsequent outcomes becomes much more nuanced. This suggests that, future research should examine the impacts of goal content and mindset on the self-control and trust relationship, as well as their (positive and negative) downstream effects in order to form a more holistic understanding of self-control's relationship with trust.

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