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Authentic for thee but not for me: Perceived authenticity in self-control conflicts

Katie E. Garrison

University of Alabama

Grace N. Rivera

University of Mississippi

Rebecca J. Schlegel

Joshua A. Hicks

Brandon J. Schmeichel

Texas A&M University

Author Note

Katie E. Garrison and Grace N. Rivera contributed equally to this work.

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Abstract

Is self-control authentic? Across several hypothetical scenarios, participants perceived impulsive actions as more authentic for others (Study 1a) but self-control as more authentic for themselves (Study 1b). Study 2 partially replicated this asymmetry. Study 3 accounted for behavior positivity because self-control was typically the more positive action in the previous studies. Study 4 minimized the influence of positivity by framing the same behaviors as either impulsive or controlled; impulsive actions were deemed more authentic than self-control, but only for other people. An internal meta-analysis controlling for behavior positivity revealed that 1) more positive behaviors are more authentic, and 2) impulsive actions are more authentic than self-controlled actions, especially for others. This actor-observer asymmetry suggests that, even in the face of a strong tendency to perceive positive actions as authentic, there exists a competing tendency to view others’ impulsive actions as more authentic than self-control.

*Keywords*: authenticity, person perception, self-control, actor-observer
AUTHENTICITY IN SELF-CONTROL CONFLICTS

Authentic for thee but not for me: Perceived authenticity in self-control conflicts

People frequently make choices that entail self-control—the capacity to override or alter a predominant response tendency (e.g., Mischel & Gilligan, 1964; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Self-control may be required to forego unhealthy foods in favor of healthy foods, to study and ignore the TV, or to voice one’s opinion versus keep quiet. In each case an impulsive behavior (e.g., to watch TV) is in conflict with a more controlled behavior inspired by a higher order goal (e.g., to do well in school). In such scenarios, both the impulsive action and the controlled action seem to originate from the self, which raises an intriguing question as to which action is perceived as more authentic. This is a consequential consideration given the high degree of concern surrounding authenticity in modern society (e.g., Baumeister, 1987; Schlegel et al., 2013) and the robust relationship between authenticity and psychological well-being (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006). The current paper reports four studies examining whether acting on impulse or exercising self-control is perceived as more authentic.

The Importance of Perceptions of Authenticity

Concerns with personal authenticity abound and have far-reaching roots in Western cultural traditions (e.g., Baumeister, 1987; Kraut, 2018). Common mantras in popular culture extol individuals to “follow your true self” or “be who you really are.” People explicitly endorse the idea that following one’s true self leads to personally satisfying decisions (Schlegel et al., 2013), and subjective authenticity has been linked to various measures of psychological well-being (Ryan et al., 2005; Smallenbroek et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2008), including happiness (Sarıçam, 2015), life satisfaction (Goldman & Kernis, 2002), meaning in life (Schlegel et al., 2009; 2011), and relationship functioning (English & John, 2013). Additionally, people tend to like and trust others who appear authentic (Liu & Perrewes, 2006; West et al., 2018; 2020) and
experience greater satisfaction in romantic relationships (Wickham, 2013) and in the workplace (Wong & Laschinger, 2013; Walumbwa et al., 2008) when their partner or leader is perceived as authentic. Thus, perceptions of authenticity are important for both personal wellbeing and interpersonal interactions.

**What is Perceived as Authentic?**

Whereas past research has documented the value of authenticity, less attention has been given to understanding the factors that promote feelings of authenticity or perceiving someone else as authentic. One intuitive hypothesis is that authentic behaviors are consistent with underlying traits, but this view has not received consistent empirical support (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016). Rather, certain behaviors, such as those that are socially desirable or moral, consistently feel and are perceived as more authentic, regardless of the actor’s underlying traits (Christy et al., 2017; Lenton et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2014). This pattern has been referred to as the state-content significance hypothesis (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Kim et al., 2019).

Self-control conflicts present a unique context for examining the state-content significance hypothesis because they involve a conflict between two aspects of self—an impulse toward one action and an alternate controlled action. Which aspect of self is seen as more authentic? Existing research suggests clues on both sides.

On the one hand, lay descriptions of authentic individuals frequently include language such as “transparent,” “uninhibited,” and “not influenced by other people” (Rivera et al., 2022), suggesting that following impulses may be perceived as more authentic. Indeed, research has linked the habitual use of emotional suppression, a form of self-control, with subjective feelings of inauthenticity (English & John, 2013), suggesting that uninhibited or uncontrolled responding
may be experienced as more authentic than self-control. Additional indirect support for this idea comes from evidence associating authenticity with approach motivation (Kim et al., 2019; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018), a motivational orientation associated with impulsivity (Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1981).

On the other hand, self-controlled actions may be perceived as more authentic because they involve the pursuit of goals, which tend to align with one’s values and presumably stem from more agentic parts of the self (Baumeister et al., 2007). Recent evidence suggested that individuals feel more authentic when exercising self-control to the extent that they rely on reason versus feelings in their decision making (Kokkoris et al., 2019). Controlled behavior in self-control conflicts may also be considered moral, good, and desirable; such positively-valenced behaviors have been linked to authenticity. For instance, studying may be seen as the “right” thing to do compared to watching TV. Viewed in this light, self-controlled behaviors may be perceived as more authentic because they are more moral, socially desirable, or positive than impulsive actions. Of course, in some instances acting on impulse may seem like the “right” thing to do, such as the impulse to hug an acquaintance who seems sad.

**Possible Actor-Observer Differences**

Recent research has suggested that true self beliefs (i.e., beliefs about who one is “deep down inside”) are relatively immune to actor-observer biases. For example, both one’s own and others’ true selves are seen as moral and good (Bench et al., 2015; De Freitas & Cikara, 2018; Heiphetz et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2014; Strohminger et al., 2017). Nonetheless, some evidence has suggested that although people tend to see all true selves as good, they also seem to perceive their own true self as more morally good than other people’s true selves (Zhang & Alicke, 2021). This pattern suggests that true self judgments may be prone to self-enhancement
motivations. Consistent with this perspective, some theorists have suggested that authenticity self-perceptions are so contaminated by positive valence that it may be impossible to disentangle authenticity and positivity (i.e., whatever is positive is viewed as authentic; Jongman-Serano & Leary, 2016). To that end, self-enhancement motivations may influence the degree to which following impulses or exercising control is viewed as more authentic for oneself versus others (e.g., Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Dunning, 1999). If control is more moral, desirable, or good, then people may be especially likely to consider their own controlled actions to be authentic compared to others’ controlled actions (i.e., self-enhancement bias). Alternatively, if people deem impulses to be more moral, desirable, or good, then one’s own impulses may be considered more authentic than others’ impulses.

Self-control conflicts present a unique context for assessing perceptions of authenticity above and beyond valence because both impulsive and controlled actions originate from the actor and thus have the potential to be seen as authentic. We thus asked people to make judgments about the perceived authenticity of both self and others in a variety of self-control scenarios to answer to the question of whether people perceive impulsive or controlled actions to be more authentic.

The Current Research

In the current research we sought to ascertain whether people view impulsive or controlled actions as more authentic. As outlined above, we did not make definitive a priori predictions given indirect clues from past research and theory suggesting competing possibilities. We conducted four studies in which participants responded to various self-control conflict scenarios. Our primary goal was to assess perceptions of authenticity across impulsive versus
controlled behaviors. We also explored whether perceptions of authenticity are susceptible to perspective-based differences and valence effects.

Participants imagined and evaluated the behaviors of a hypothetical other person (Study 1a) or themselves (Study 1b) in a series of self-control scenarios. In Study 2, we manipulated both target (self or other) and behavior type (impulse or control) in the same design. In Study 3, we crossed the behavior type and target manipulations with a manipulation of behavior positivity. Last, in Study 4 we eliminated the possibility of valence confounds in the behaviors described in the scenarios. The data from all four studies are available online (https://osf.io/a3qj2/), and the hypotheses, data collection, and planned analyses for Studies 2, 3, and 4 were preregistered. Below we report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in these studies.

**Study 1**

**Method**

**Participants and Design**

We manipulated behavior type (impulse or control) in a within-subjects design in two samples (Studies 1a and 1b). Whereas Study 1a focused on perceptions of another person in hypothetical self-control scenarios, Study 1b focused on imagining oneself in the same scenarios.

**Study 1a.** One hundred eighty-two undergraduate students (age $M = 19.29$, $SD = 1.27$; 70.3% women) completed Study 1a. A sample of this size afforded 80% power to detect a within-subjects effect size of $d = 0.21$. We defined outliers as participants whose responses fell more than 3 $SD$s from the mean on authenticity ratings. There were no outliers in this sample.

**Study 1b.** One hundred sixty-one undergraduates completed Study 1b online. Four participants did not respond to the main dependent measures, and one participant was an outlier.
(more than 3 \(SD\)) on ratings of authenticity, leaving a final sample of 156 (age \(M = 19.23, SD = 1.51\); 64% women). A sample of this size afforded 80% power to detect a within-subjects effect size of \(d = 0.22\).

Self-Control Vignettes

Participants read 11 vignettes describing self-control conflicts. In Study 1a, participants were asked to imagine a hypothetical other person (Alex) in each vignette. Approximately half of the participants imagined Alex as a man \((n = 99)\) and the other half imagined Alex as a woman \((n = 83)\). In Study 1b, participants were asked to imagine themselves.

The vignettes set up scenarios in which the protagonist felt an impulse that conflicted with a goal. We explicitly labeled the scenario as a conflict and identified one behavior as following the impulse and the other as exercising self-control. See Table 1 for the text from all vignettes (“self” perspective only) used in the current studies. In constructing scenarios, we attempted to vary whether the controlled action was more positive, similarly positive, or less positive than the impulsive action. Creating realistic scenarios in which the controlled action was less positive than the impulse was particularly challenging; we return to this issue in Study 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Scenario Summary</th>
<th>Follow your Impulse</th>
<th>Exercise Self-Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Self Control</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Netflix vs. study</em>²</td>
<td>It’s the middle of the week and you just got home from a long day of class. You have the whole evening free. You are tired and want to watch your favorite show on Netflix, but you also have an exam coming up that you need to study for.</td>
<td>Watch Netflix</td>
<td>Start studying for your test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sex vs. make out</em>²</td>
<td>You are in heated sexual encounter with an individual and you really want to have sex. However, neither you nor your partner has a condom.</td>
<td>Have sex anyway</td>
<td>Just making out instead</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

_Self-Control Conflict Vignette Summaries_
**AUTHENTICITY IN SELF-CONTROL CONFLICTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eat vs. decline</th>
<th>Eat the piece of cake</th>
<th>Politely declining the piece of cake</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>b</strong> You’re on a diet and you are trying to lose weight. You go to a friend’s birthday party, and there is a delicious-looking birthday cake. The host comes around and offers you a piece of cake.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Snap vs. help</th>
<th>Snap at your co-worker</th>
<th>Being friendly and helping him out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>b</strong> Your co-worker keeps interrupting you while you are trying to concentrate on a project. You’re really irritated and want to snap at him and tell him to go figure it out for himself, but that would be rude and inappropriate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quiet vs. ask</th>
<th>Stay quiet</th>
<th>Raising your hand to ask the question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a</strong> You’re taking a difficult class this semester, which you find very intimidating. You typically don’t say anything in class because you are afraid to speak up. However, the teacher says something that you don’t fully understand, and you need to ask a follow-up question to clarify.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bed vs. gym</th>
<th>Stay in bed</th>
<th>Getting up and going to the gym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a</strong> You have a goal to go to the gym this Saturday morning because you are trying to get in shape. When your alarm goes off on Saturday morning you really just want to stay in bed, skipping the gym.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flirt vs. walk away</th>
<th>Go and flirt</th>
<th>Walk away</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a</strong> It is Friday night and you are at a party with some friends. You see an attractive person across the room, and sparks fly when the two of you make eye contact. You really want to go over and flirt with the person (it’s harmless, right?), but you are in a committed relationship and feel like it would be better to just walk away.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fries vs. salad</th>
<th>Order the French fries</th>
<th>Order a garden salad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a</strong> You are out to lunch with friends and you are really hungry. You notice that the daily special is a chicken sandwich and you decide to order it. You have the option of getting French fries or a garden salad on the side. You really want the French fries (your favorite!), but recently you have been concerned with eating healthy and incorporating more fresh veggies into your diet.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speak up vs. say nothing</th>
<th>Speak up to the stranger</th>
<th>Say nothing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>b</strong> You are out at a bar having a drink with some friends when you overhear someone talking loudly about your favorite political candidate. He is saying some very rude things about the candidate, which is making you angry. You really want to speak up and tell him off, but you feel it is socially inappropriate to confront him.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Negative/Ambiguous Self Control**
### AUTHENTICITY IN SELF-CONTROL CONFLICTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Decision Options</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Talk vs. go to work</strong>&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>You are on your way to a meeting and you’re rushing because you don’t want to be late. You see a homeless man sitting on the street corner, and you feel a strong desire to stop and see if there’s anything you could do for him.</td>
<td>Stop and talk to the man</td>
<td>Continuing on to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humble vs. exaggerate</strong>&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>You are applying for a job and the application asks for a cover letter. You feel a desire to be modest in describing your achievements, but all the advice you’ve been given says to paint the best picture of yourself by beefing up your accomplishments.</td>
<td>Be humble</td>
<td>Exaggerate your accomplishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Honesty vs. polite</strong>&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>You are at a dinner party at a new friend’s house. The host made salmon for dinner, but you HATE salmon - the thought of it makes you nauseous. When she goes to serve you some, you want to be honest and tell her you don’t eat salmon. However, it would be easier to just accept the food without comment even though you know you won’t eat it.</td>
<td>Tell the truth</td>
<td>Accept the food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cry vs. control emotion</strong>&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>You are at a work meeting when you get a text from your roommate saying that your pet is dead. You have had the pet for five years and have grown very close to it. You really want to cry, but you don’t want your co-workers to see.</td>
<td>Cry</td>
<td>Not let your co-workers see that you are sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wear mask vs. no</strong>&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>You are going to the grocery store with some friends. You really want to wear a mask but none of your friends have them on. You are worried they will judge you if you wear one.</td>
<td>Wear a mask</td>
<td>Not wear a mask</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.**<sup>a</sup> Vignette used in Studies 1-3, <sup>b</sup>Vignette used only in Studies 1a, 1b, and 2, <sup>c</sup>Vignette used only in Study 3

Following each vignette participants answered the following questions: “How authentic would you perceive Alex to be if he followed his impulse (watches Netflix)?” (1 = highly inauthentic to 7 = highly authentic), “How authentic would you perceive Alex to be if he exercised self-control (begins studying)?” (1 = highly inauthentic to 7 = highly authentic), “Which action is Alex most likely to take?” (0 = follow the impulse, 1 = exercise self-control),

...
and “If you had to choose, which action is more authentic for Alex?” (0 = follow the impulse, 1 = exercise self-control).¹ (In Study 1b, the questions always referred to “you” instead of Alex.)

We focused our analysis on the continuous authenticity ratings of impulses and controlled behaviors, respectively. We averaged the authenticity ratings across the scenarios for impulses (Study 1a: α = .72; Study 1b: α = .51) and controlled behaviors (Study 1a: α = .73; Study 1b: α = .52).

**Results and Discussion**

**Study 1a.** When evaluating the behaviors of a hypothetical other person in self-control conflicts, participants perceived that acting on impulse was more authentic (M = 4.61, SD = 0.82) than exercising self-control (M = 4.39, SD = 0.83), *t* (181) = 2.09, *p* = .038, *d* = 0.16.²³

**Study 1b.** When imagining themselves, participants indicated that they would feel more authentic when exercising self-control (M = 4.66, SD = 0.69) versus following an impulse (M = 4.08, SD = 0.76), *t* (155) = -6.43, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.49.⁴ This pattern is opposite to what we observed in Study 1a (See Figure 1).

**Combined Analyses.** We combined the samples from Studies 1a and 1b to test the interaction between target (self or other) and behavior type (impulse or control) on perceptions of authenticity. The results revealed a Target × Behavior Type interaction, *F* (1, 336) = 32.24, *p* <

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¹ Results for the forced choice measures are presented in the supplementary materials. Below, we have footnoted instances in which the results differed between the forced choice versus continuous ratings. In each study, we also included relevant individual difference measures for exploratory purposes; results pertaining to those measures can be found in the supplementary materials.

² The forced-choice items revealed non-significant effects of behavior type on which action the individual would take and which action was more authentic, *ts* < 1.74, *ps* > .084.

³ When controlling for the target’s gender, the main effect of behavior type remained significant, *F* (1, 180) = 4.00, *p* = .047, and the target’s gender did not exert a main effect or interact with behavior type to influence authenticity ratings, *Fs* < 1.05, *ps* > .306.

⁴ When the one outlier was included, the main effect of behavior type remained significant, *t* (156) = -6.42, *p* < .001.
.001, $\eta^2_p = .088$, such that perceptions of authenticity for impulsive versus controlled behavior differed depending on whether participants judged themselves or another person (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Authenticity as a Function of Behavior Type (Impulse vs. Self-control) in Studies 1a and 1b. Error bars represent the standard error.

**Discussion**

The observed pattern of results in Study 1a is consistent with lay theories that view authentic selves as “uninhibited.” We found that a hypothetical other person was perceived as relatively more authentic when they acted on impulse as opposed to exerted self-control. In contrast, the results from Study 1b revealed that participants perceived themselves as more authentic when exercising self-control as opposed to acting on impulse in the same self-control conflicts. However, comparisons across these two studies should be interpreted with caution because participants were not randomly assigned to evaluate themselves versus another person.
Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to manipulate the target person (self vs. other) and the behavior type (impulse vs. self-control) in the same study. Following the results from Studies 1a and 1b, we expected to find that exercising self-control would be perceived as more authentic for oneself whereas following impulses would be perceived as more authentic for others. We preregistered the method, hypotheses, and analysis plan online (https://osf.io/8kp2b).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Three hundred sixty-three undergraduates completed the experiment online. The experiment used a 2 (Target: self vs. other) × 2 (Behavior Type: impulse vs. self-control) mixed design, with Target manipulated between-subjects and Behavior Type manipulated within-subjects. We preregistered our intent to test a sample of at least 300 participants and ended up collecting data until the end of the semester after exceeding the target sample size. We did not analyze the data until data collection was complete. We also preregistered our plan to exclude participants who had taken the survey before or were outliers on a main dependent measure (more than 3 SDs from the sample mean; n = 13). The final sample included 350 participants (age $M = 20.49$, $SD = 1.73$; 77.6% women), which afforded 80% power to detect a between-subjects effect of $d = 0.30$.

Participants read and responded to the same self-control vignettes from the previous studies (impulse authenticity $\alpha = .71$, control authenticity $\alpha = .67$) and were randomly assigned to imagine themselves or a hypothetical other person (male or female versions) in the scenarios.

Our main prediction was a Target × Behavior Type interaction such that when participants imagined themselves in self-control conflicts they would perceive the controlled
behavior as more authentic, but when participants imagined another person they would perceive
the impulsive behavior as more authentic.

**Results**

The predicted Target × Behavior Type interaction on perceived authenticity was
significant, \( F (1, 348) = 9.52, p = .002, \eta^2_p = .027 \). When imagining oneself in self-control
conflicts, participants viewed exercising self-control \( (M = 4.77, SD = 0.73) \) as more authentic
than acting on impulse \( (M = 4.09, SD = 0.85) \), \( t (181) = 6.88, p < .001, d = 0.56 \). This pattern
replicated the results from Study 1b. When imagining another person, perceived authenticity did
not depend on whether the target exercised self-control \( (M = 4.61, SD = 0.91) \) or acted on
impulse \( (M = 4.40, SD = 1.01) \), \( t (167) = 1.75, p = .082, d = 0.13 \) (See Figure 2).\(^5\)\(^6\) Hence, unlike
Study 1a, participants in Study 2 did not perceive acting on impulse to be more authentic for
others than exerting control.

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\(^5\) The forced choice measure of which action (impulse or control) participants chose as most authentic revealed no
main effect of behavior type.

\(^6\) When outliers were included in the analysis, the Target x Behavior Type interaction remained significant, \( F (1, 361) = 13.74, p < .001 \).
Discussion

The results from Study 2 revealed that perceptions of authenticity in self-control conflicts depend on the target depicted in the scenario. When imagining oneself, exercising self-control was perceived as more authentic. When imaging another person, however, self-control and acting on impulse were viewed as similarly authentic.

Perceptions of authenticity may be influenced by characteristics of the behaviors such as how moral, socially appropriate, and positive they are (e.g., Christy et al., 2016; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Strohminger et al., 2017). Participants may have perceived themselves as more authentic when exercising self-control in Studies 1 and 2 because the self-controlled behavior was often the “right” thing to do. Indeed, in 9 of the 11 scenarios used in the prior studies the self-controlled action was deemed the more morally right or positive behavior compared to the
impulsive action (e.g., studying versus watching TV, exercising versus staying in bed). The positivity of the behavior was thus partially confounded with behavior type (impulse vs. control) in our initial studies. We attempted to address this issue in Studies 3 and 4 while continuing to assess differences in what is perceived as authentic for oneself versus others.

**Study 3**

In Study 3, we experimentally manipulated whether the controlled action or the impulsive action was the more positive option in different self-control conflict scenarios. The purpose of this approach was to ascertain the extent to which the positivity of a behavior is crucial for determining which behavior type (impulsive or controlled) is perceived as more authentic—and for whom (self or other). The method, hypotheses, and analysis plan for Study 3 were preregistered online (https://osf.io/j4hpu).

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Four hundred twenty-four participants recruited from an undergraduate subject pool (n = 67) and Prolific (n = 356) completed the experiment online. Ten participants did not respond to the main dependent measures, and one participant was an outlier on authenticity ratings, leaving a final sample of 413 (age $M = 23.21, SD = 5.64$; 48% women). We preregistered our intent to collect a sample of at least 350 participants because Study 2 found a statistically significant Target $\times$ Behavior Type interaction in a sample of that size. We attempted to replicate this interaction while probing the role of behavior positivity in perceptions of authenticity. We decided to continue data collection while we had the resources to do so (e.g., time, money),

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7 An independent sample of participants ($N = 51$) rated both the decision to act on impulse and the decision to exercise control in each scenario in terms of the morality, social appropriateness, and positivity of the behavior. These ratings are reported in the supplemental Table S4.
which resulted in a final sample slightly larger than our preregistered target. Analyses were preregistered and we did not analyze the data until all the data had been collected.

Participants read and responded to vignettes of self-control conflicts as in the prior studies (impulse authenticity $\alpha = .69$, control authenticity $\alpha = .66$). To manipulate behavior positivity, half the scenarios ($n = 5$) depicted a positive self-control behavior relative to the impulse (e.g., impulse to watch Netflix, but need to study), whereas half the scenarios ($n = 5$) depicted an ambiguous or negative self-control behavior relative to the impulse (e.g., impulse to talk with homeless man, but need to rush to work; see Table 1). The positive self-control scenarios included the scenarios from the previous studies with the most positive self-controlled behaviors (see ratings from independent judges in supplemental Table S4). The negative/ambiguous self-control scenarios included a combination of those from the prior studies with the least-positive self-control ($n = 2$) plus newly created scenarios ($n = 3$; see Table 1).

As in the prior studies participants imagined either themselves ($n = 206$) or a hypothetical other person ($n = 207$) in the scenarios. Thus, the experiment was a 2 (Target: self vs. other) × 2 (Behavior Type: impulse vs. self-control) × 2 (Self-Control Positivity: positive vs. negative/ambiguous) mixed design, with Target manipulated between-subjects and Behavior Type and Self-Control Positivity manipulated within-subjects.

**Predictions**

We predicted a Target × Behavior Type × Self-Control Positivity interaction. In the positive self-control condition, we expected to replicate the Target × Behavior Type interaction from Study 2, with higher perceptions of authenticity for self-controlled behaviors (versus impulses) for oneself but not for another person. In the negative/ambiguous self-control condition, in contrast, we predicted a main effect of behavior type such that perceptions of
authenticity would be higher for impulses (i.e., the more positive behavior in the scenario) than for controlled behavior for both self and others.

**Results**

The predicted three-way interaction was not statistically significant, $F(1, 411) = 0.75, p = .389, \eta^2_p = .002$, See Figure 3.\(^8\)\(^9\) However, there were significant lower-level main effects and interactions to consider.

Figure 3. Authenticity as a Function of Target (Self vs. Other) and Behavior Type (Impulse vs. Self-control) within the Positive Self-Control Scenarios (Positive SC) and Negative/Ambiguous Self-Control Scenarios (Negative SC), respectively, in Study 3. Error bars represent standard errors.

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\(^8\) When the one outlier was included, the three-way interaction remained unchanged, $F(1, 412) = 0.83, p = .363$.

\(^9\) Regarding forced-choice responding, we observed a Target × Self-Control Positivity interaction on the choice of which action the target would take, $p < .001$. When the self-controlled behaviors were positive, participants were more likely to choose the controlled action when imaging themselves versus others, $p < .001$, but when the self-controlled behaviors were negative, the main effect of target was non-significant.
Specifically, we found a main effect of behavior type, $F(1, 411) = 153.21, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .272$, such that impulsive actions ($M = 4.87, SD = 0.85$) were viewed as more authentic than self-controlled actions ($M = 4.24, SD = 0.83$); a main effect of the target actor in the scenario, $F(1, 411) = 12.76, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .030$, such that others ($M = 4.67, SD = 0.59$) were viewed as more authentic than selves ($M = 4.44, SD = 0.45$); and a main effect of self-control positivity, $F(1, 412) = 89.28, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .178$, such that authenticity ratings were higher overall in scenarios depicting the actor engaging in more positive self-controlled behaviors ($M = 4.76, SD = 0.66$) versus more negative/ambiguous self-controlled behaviors ($M = 4.51, SD = 0.56$).

Those main effects were qualified by a significant Behavior Type $\times$ Self-Control Positivity interaction, $F(1, 411) = 399.41, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .493$, a significant Target $\times$ Self-
Control Positivity interaction, $F(1, 411) = 4.91, p = .027, \eta_p^2 = .012$, and a nonsignificant Target × Behavior Type interaction, $F(1, 411) = 3.43, p = .065, \eta_p^2 = .008$.\(^{10}\)

To decompose the Behavior Type × Self-Control Positivity interaction, we assessed the main effect of behavior type within the self-control positivity conditions. In the positive self-control scenarios, exercising control ($M = 4.99, SD = 1.05$) was perceived as more authentic than acting on impulse ($M = 4.53, SD = 1.29$), $t(413) = -4.73, p < .001$. When the scenarios depicted negative/ambiguous self-control behaviors, acting on impulse ($M = 5.54, SD = 0.97$) was perceived as more authentic than exercising self-control ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.05$), $t(412) = 24.69, p < .001$. Thus, the more positive behaviors were perceived as more authentic. However, the size of the valence effect differed across the positive versus negative/ambiguous self-control conditions and suggested that participants were particularly inclined to see positive impulses as authentic and negative/ambiguous self-control behaviors as less authentic.

Another way to break down the Behavior Type × Self-Control Positivity interaction was to compare impulsive versus controlled actions as a function of the valence of the action. Positive impulses (i.e., the impulsive actions in the Negative/Ambiguous Self-Control scenarios) were perceived as more authentic than positive self-control (i.e., the controlled actions in the Positive Self-Control scenarios), $t(412) = 8.79, p < .001$. Further, negative impulses were perceived as more authentic than negative/ambiguous self-controlled actions, $t(412) = 13.69, p < .001$. This pattern mirrors the main effect of behavior type, such that impulses were viewed as more authentic than control when collapsing across target and positivity of scenarios.

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\(^{10}\) The main effect of target gender was non-significant, $p = .089$, and gender did not interact with behavior type or self-control positivity to impact authenticity ratings, $F$s < 0.45, $ps > .506$. 
The Target × Self-Control Positivity interaction was more difficult to interpret because it concerns the authenticity ratings of the scenario as a whole and not the distinct behaviors within scenarios. Thus, we opted not to break down this interaction.

The Target × Behavior Type interaction (collapsing across the behavior positivity manipulation) did not reach traditional levels of statistical significance, $F(1, 411) = 3.43, p = .065$, $\eta^2_p = .008$, but this interaction term most closely resembles the interaction effect observed in Study 2. When we probed this interaction term we found that impulses were perceived as more authentic than self-control both for the self (impulse $M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.74$; self-control $M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.72$; $p < .001$) and for others (impulse $M = 5.05$, $SD = 0.92$; self-control $M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.92$; $p < .001$), but the difference was descriptively larger for others.

**Discussion**

Study 3 attempted to overcome the confound between self-controlled behaviors and positive valence in the scenarios used in the prior studies by experimentally manipulating whether the self-controlled behavior was relatively positive or negative/ambiguous compared to the impulsive action. We found that 1) more positive behaviors were perceived as more authentic, and 2) acting on impulse was perceived as more authentic than exercising self-control.

However, this study had some limitations. First, it was challenging to generate realistic scenarios in which acting on impulse was more positive than exercising self-control—for instance, the scenario wherein the target had an impulse to be humble when describing their accomplishments but also tried to control that impulse to write a successful cover letter touting their accomplishments. When the scenarios depicted relatively more positive impulses, participants overwhelmingly reported that following the impulse was more authentic than exercising self-control (see Figure 3). Second, the behaviors in the scenarios were complex and
influenced by a variety of motivations (e.g., motivation to get a job, personal value of being humble). This complexity made it difficult to disentangle the role of behavior type (impulse vs. control) and target (self vs. other) on perceptions of authenticity. In Study 4 we took a different approach by minimizing the influence of positivity altogether.

**Study 4**

Studies 1-3 suggested that perceptions of authenticity are shaped by both the tendency to view more positive behaviors as more authentic and the tendency to view impulses as more authentic (perhaps especially for others). However, given the tight link between self-control and positivity, studying perceptions of authenticity in self-control conflicts free from the confound of valence is challenging. In Study 4, we tackled this challenge by framing the same bare-bones neutral behaviors as either following an impulse or exercising control. That way, the valence of the behavior would not be confounded with behavior type because the same behavior was characterized as either acting on impulse or as exercising self-control. Study 4 was thus the most stringent test so far of the extent to which judgments of authenticity are affected by whether the behavior is impulsive or controlled—and whether that judgment differs by target. The method, hypotheses, and analysis plan for Study 4 were preregistered online (https://osf.io/fd5ar).

**Pilot Test**

We pilot-tested an initial list of 60 behaviors to assess how positively they were perceived. The behaviors were simple, everyday behaviors (e.g., bought a new pair of pants, stayed late at a social event, ordered a cup of coffee) presented as both “doing” the behavior and “not doing” the behavior. Twenty-seven undergraduate students rated how positively they perceived each version of the behavior (see Table 2). We aimed to include behaviors in the final study that were 1) relatively neutral, and 2) similar in valence for both doing and not doing the
For instance, the behavior "posting to social media" was rated as 3.37 for doing it, compared to 3.29 for not doing it. In the end, we included 10 behaviors in Study 4. Bolded cells in Table 2 highlight the behaviors included in the study. For instance, participants evaluated a target who did not make a phone call, bought a pair of sunglasses, did not buy a new pair of pants, and so on.

Table 2.
Results of the pilot study ($N = 27$): Mean valence (1 = negative, 3 = neutral, 5 = positive) for doing versus not doing the behavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Did not ($M$)</th>
<th>Did ($M$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>made a phone call</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bought a pair of sunglasses</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bought a new pair of pants</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ordered a cup of coffee</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>browsed the internet</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stayed late at a social event</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posted to social media</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had second serving of food vs. stopped eating after first</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>continued working vs. took break</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>went out one evening vs. stayed home</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method

Participants and Procedure

Four hundred thirty-two undergraduate participants completed the online study. Sixty participants were excluded according to our preregistered criteria (missing/zero responses $n = 26$; invariable responding/0 $SD$ in responses $n = 23$; did not complete at least 30% of responses $n = 7$; more than 3 $SD$s from the sample mean on authenticity ratings $n = 4$). Due to an oversight, only 207 participants reported age and gender information. The demographic information from those participants matched expectations for an undergraduate student sample (Age $M = 19.2$, $SD = 0.92$; 49.8% female, 49.8% male, 0.5% other). In total, the final sample included 372 participants. Our goal was to collect a sample of at least 350 participants because our previous
research found a Target × Behavior Type interaction effect on authenticity ratings in a sample of that size. We collected as much data as we could in our time frame, so the final sample exceeded the target N.

The experiment used a 2 (Behavior Type: impulse vs. control) × 2 (Target: self vs. other) mixed design with Behavior Type manipulated within-subjects and Target manipulated between-subjects. Participants read vignettes of simple, everyday behavior from the perspective of themselves (n = 195) or someone else (n = 177). The vignettes depicted an individual having a strong impulse to do something, but at the same time wanting to control that impulse and not do it. Participants saw two versions of the vignette wherein the target ultimately follows their impulse or exercises self-control. Crucially, the end behavior was the same in both behavior framings. For example, participants in the Self condition saw:

1) You had a strong impulse to not make a phone call but there was also a part of you that wanted to control that impulse and make the phone call. The impulse won and you didn’t make the phone call.

2) You had a strong impulse to make a phone call but there was also a part of you that wanted to control that impulse and not make the phone call. You controlled your impulse and didn’t make the phone call.

In total, participants saw 10 behaviors framed as both following an impulse (α = .612) or exercising control (α = .644), for a total of 20 vignettes. The 10 behaviors were presented in a random order, but the two framings of the same behavior were presented in the first and second half of the task, respectively. After reading each vignette, participants rated how authentic the target in the scenario would be if they engaged in that behavior (from 1 = highly inauthentic to 7 = highly authentic). The full stimulus materials can be found in our preregistration document.
Predictions

We predicted a main effect of behavior type, such that behaviors framed as impulses would be viewed as more authentic than behaviors framed as self-control. This prediction was based on the notion—suggested by Study 3—that when positivity is minimized or eliminated, impulses are viewed as more authentic.

We also predicted a Target × Behavior Type interaction such that impulses would be viewed as more authentic than self-control especially for others. When judging the self, however, we expected the difference between the perceived authenticity of impulse versus control to be smaller or even to run in the opposite direction such that self-control is viewed as more authentic (as in Study 1b).¹¹

Last, we predicted a main effect of Target. We did not have strong predictions regarding this factor but figured that people may see themselves as more authentic than others (e.g., due to self-enhancement biases).

Results

We averaged authenticity ratings within participants and conducted a 2 (Behavior Type: impulse vs. control) × 2 (Target: self vs. other) mixed ANOVA. The main effect of behavior type was non-significant, $F(1, 370) = 1.35, p = .246, \eta^2_p = .004$, and the main effect of target was non-significant, $F(1, 370) = 0.055, p = .815, \eta^2_p < .001$. However, the predicted Behavior Type × Target interaction was significant, $F(1, 370) = 4.30, p = .039, \eta^2_p = .011$. When considering another person, following impulses ($M = 4.45, SD = 0.76$) was perceived as more authentic than exerting control ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.87$), $t(176) = 1.87, p = .064$, though this difference was not

¹¹ This prediction was based on an interim analysis of the first 3 studies that controlled for positivity and revealed a similar pattern. Results from this interim analysis can be found in the supplemental materials.
authenticity in self-control conflicts

statistically significant. When considering the self, the authenticity of behaviors framed as impulses \((M = 4.34, SD = 0.66)\) versus control \((M = 4.38, SD = 0.63)\) did not differ, \(t(194) = -0.847, p = .398\). This pattern is consistent with predictions. See Figure 4.

Figure 4. Authenticity as a Function of Behavior Type (Impulse vs. Self-control) and Target (Self vs. Other) in Study 4. Error bars represent the standard error.

We also conducted a multilevel model to assess authenticity ratings across the scenarios nested within participant (rather than averaging across scenario). We did not preregister this analysis but realized after creating the preregistration that this analytic approach was sensible given that authenticity ratings varied slightly across each scenario. Target \((\text{self} = -1, \text{other} = 1)\) was entered as a Level 2 predictor (participant-level), Behavior Type \((\text{control} = -1, \text{impulse} = 1)\) was entered as a Level 1 predictor (scenario-level), and the Target \(\times\) Behavior Type interaction
was entered as a cross-level interaction. We included a random slope for behavior type. The main effects of behavior type, $B = .030$, $SE = .025$, $t (370.24) = 1.18$, $p = .237$, and target, $B = .008$, $SE = .028$, $t (368.67) = 0.28$, $p = .777$, were non-significant. However, the predicted Target $\times$ Behavior Type interaction was again statistically significant, $B = .052$, $SE = .025$, $t (370.24) = 2.058$, $p = .040$. Following impulses was perceived as more authentic than exercising control when considering another person, $B = .082$, $SE = .036$, $t (369.56) = 2.42$, $p = .026$, but when considering the self, behavior type did not significantly influence perceptions of authenticity, $B = -.022$, $SE = .035$, $t (370.99) = -.63$, $p = .528$.

**Mini Meta-Analysis**

Given the similarity in methods across studies, and to increase the precision in our estimates, we analyzed the primary Target $\times$ Behavior Type interaction on the aggregate data across all four studies ($N = 1473$). Furthermore, we accounted for the positivity of the behaviors in each scenario. Whereas Studies 3 and 4 attempted to minimize the confound of valence with behavior type experimentally, we accounted for continuous ratings of positivity of each scenario in this aggregate analysis. These positivity ratings were obtained from independent samples of participants ($N = 51$ for Study 1 and 2 behaviors; $N = 63$ for Study 3 behaviors; $N = 27$ for Study 4 behaviors), who rated both the decision to act on impulse and the decision to exercise self-control in each scenario. Raters for Studies 1-3 judged the behaviors on morality, social appropriateness, and positivity, which were then combined into a single “positivity index” rating for each behavior (Study 1-2 $a = .78$; Study 3 $a = .79$; see supplemental materials for further details on how these ratings were obtained and Table S4 for ratings). Raters for Study 4 judged the behaviors on positivity (as described in the Study 4 pilot test). Positivity ratings were centered within study and then Z-scored (i.e., grand mean centered) so that each behavior in each
scenario would have a positivity value relative to all four studies. This analysis provided a more nuanced consideration of positivity than Studies 3 and 4 were able to provide insofar as positivity was quantified on a continuum as opposed to a dichotomy (as in Study 3) and made data across studies comparable.

Using the data from all four studies, we conducted a three-level multilevel model including the effect-coded behavior type (-1 = control, 1 = impulse), the effect-coded target (-1 = self, 1 = other), the grand mean-centered positivity index, and all two-way and three-way interactions to properly test for the role of and account for positivity (Yzerbyt et al., 2004). The behavior type variable and the positivity index were included at level one (scenario-level) in the model, target was included at level two (individual-level), and study number was a level three variable. The slope for behavior type was specified as random because we were testing a cross-level interaction (Page-Gould, 2017). Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>3589.32</td>
<td>272.95</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>30106.75</td>
<td>58.93</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Type (-1 = SC, 1 = imp)</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>3589.32</td>
<td>19.97</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target (-1 = self, 1 = other)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>3589.32</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target × Behavior Type</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>3589.32</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target × Positivity</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>30106.75</td>
<td>-4.17</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity × Behavior Type</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>30106.75</td>
<td>-5.11</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target × Behavior Type × Positivity</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>30106.75</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.977</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Imp = impulse, SC = self-control

First, as expected, more positive behaviors were perceived as more authentic, $B = 0.65$, $p < .001$. Second, when controlling for positivity, the effect of behavior type was significant, $B = 0.32$, $p < .001$, such that acting on impulse was viewed as more authentic than exercising self-
control. Third, the main effect of target was also significant, such that others were viewed as more authentic than selves, $B = 0.06, p = .001$.

Of primary interest: After accounting for behavior positivity, the Target $\times$ Behavior Type interaction was statistically significant, $B = 0.09, p < .001$. Simple effects tests revealed that acting on impulse was perceived as more authentic than exercising self-control, and this effect was stronger for others ($B = 0.42, SE = .02, p < .001$) than for oneself ($B = 0.23, SE = .02, p < .001$). Moreover, the three-way Target $\times$ Behavior Type $\times$ Positivity interaction was non-significant, which suggests that behavior positivity did not moderate the Target $\times$ Behavior Type interaction. In other words, positivity influenced perceptions of authenticity, but behavior type (impulse vs. control), target (self vs. other), and their interaction influenced perceptions of authenticity over and above the main effect of positivity (See Figure 5).\[12

Figure 5. Depiction of the Two-Way Target $\times$ Behavior Type Interaction on Perceived Authenticity from the Multilevel Regression Model Accounting for Positivity in Studies 1-4.

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\[12\] We also ran the analysis across all four studies without accounting for positivity. Those results revealed a significant Target $\times$ Behavior interaction, $B = 0.107, SE = 0.015, t (2952.09) = 6.91, p < .001$, such that when imagining another person, following impulses was perceived as more authentic than exercising self-control, $B = 0.13, p < .001$, but when imagining oneself, exercising self-control was perceived as more authentic than following impulses, $B = -0.08, p < .001$. This pattern may not accurately characterize the findings because positivity was confounded with behavior type in 2 of the 4 studies.
AUTHENTICITY IN SELF-CONTROL CONFLICTS

![Bar chart showing authenticity in self-control conflicts]

- **Impulse**
- **Control**

The chart compares authenticity levels for 'Other' and 'Self' between Impulse and Control conditions.
General Discussion

Four studies explored the perceived authenticity of controlled versus impulsive behaviors in hypothetical self-control scenarios. We found that perceived authenticity differed as a function of valence, behavior type, and the interaction between behavior type and target. In short, participants judged more positive behaviors to be more authentic, and they perceived acting on impulse to be more authentic than exercising self-control, particularly for others.

These three conclusions only became clear after we explored the research question from multiple angles. Indeed, the results from the first two studies painted a different picture and pointed to the conclusion that exercising self-control is perceived as more authentic than acting on impulse for oneself but not for others. However, behavior positivity and behavior type were confounded in the first two studies. Most (but not all) of the scenarios involved an act of self-control that was perceived more positively than the impulsive action (e.g., flirt vs. walk away). Given that more moral, positive, or socially desirable behaviors are considered more authentic (e.g., Christy et al., 2017; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Lenton et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2014; Strohminger et al., 2017), we reasoned that this positivity confound may have influenced the results. We addressed the positivity confound in Studies 3 and 4, and a mini meta-analysis incorporating positivity ratings for each scenario across all four studies.

In Study 3 we manipulated behavior positivity by including scenarios depicting negative or ambiguous self-controlled actions (e.g., impulse to talk to a homeless man, but need to rush to work) in addition to scenarios depicting relatively positive self-control (e.g., impulse to watch Netflix, but need to study). The predicted Target × Behavior Type × Self-Control Positive interaction was non-significant, but we found that more positive behaviors were perceived as
more authentic, impulses were perceived as more authentic than control, and others were perceived as more authentic than selves.

In Study 4 we minimized positivity altogether by framing the same bare-bones neutral behaviors as either following an impulse or exercising control. The valence of the behavior was thus not confounded with behavior type because the same behavior was characterized as either acting on impulse or as exercising self-control. This approach afforded the most stringent test of the effect of behavior type and target on authenticity perceptions in self-control conflicts. Results revealed an interaction such that acting on impulse was viewed as more authentic than exercising control, but only for other people and not the self. Thus, without the confound of positivity, impulsive behaviors were deemed more authentic than controlled behaviors for other people.

Given the mixed nature of the results across studies, we conducted an aggregate analysis by applying statistical controls for behavior positivity to the data from all four studies. Independent samples of participants rated the positivity of the behaviors in each scenario, and we combined those ratings to form a positivity index for each behavior in each scenario. Consistent with prior research, the aggregate analysis found that more positive behaviors were perceived as more authentic. When controlling for behavior positivity, an interaction between target (self or other) and behavior type (impulse or control) indicated that impulses were perceived as more authentic than self-control for both the self and others, but the difference was larger for others. This effect appears to be driven by perceptions of impulses, whereby others’ impulses are deemed more authentic than one’s own.

Together, the findings suggest that perceptions of authenticity are shaped by both the tendency to view more positive behaviors as more authentic and the tendency to view impulses as more authentic, particularly for others. We believe this interpretation to be the most accurate
characterization of the present findings because it is consistent with the aggregate results of all four studies that properly accounts for behavior positivity.

To reiterate, when participants responded to scenarios depicting self-control conflicts wherein the self-controlled behavior was the more positive thing to do, self-control was generally perceived as more authentic than acting on impulse, and this difference was larger for the self (Studies 1 and 2). When positivity of the behavior was rendered arguably irrelevant (Study 4) or statistically controlled (aggregate analysis), impulses were perceived as more authentic than controlled actions, especially for other people. These patterns lend support for the competing predictions reviewed in the Introduction and suggests that the answer to the question of whether impulses or controlled actions are more authentic depends both on whose actions are in the spotlight and on the positivity of the actions in question.

**What Shapes Perceptions of Authenticity?**

The current research reveals two different tendencies shaping perceptions of authenticity in self-control conflicts: the tendency to view more positive behaviors as more authentic, and the tendency to view impulses as more authentic than control. The link between positivity and authenticity has been observed in prior research (e.g., Christy et al., 2017; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Lenton et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2014; Strohminger et al., 2017); we found it also in the context of self-control conflicts. Self-control is usually considered more positive or moral than acting on impulse (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Indeed, the scenarios used in Studies 1 and 2 mostly depicted self-controlled actions that were more positive than the impulses they subdued. In those scenarios, self-controlled actions were perceived as more authentic than impulses, and this was especially true for the self compared to others. Whenever self-control is imbued with positivity, self-control may be viewed as more authentic for oneself than others. This pattern
appears to represent a self-enhancement bias insofar as the more positive behavior is viewed as more authentic for the self.

Yet, positivity was not the only factor shaping perceptions of authenticity. Study 4 was designed to test the role of behavior type (impulse versus control) on perceptions of authenticity while bypassing any influence of positivity. With this approach we found that acting on impulse was perceived as more authentic than exercising self-control, but only for others and not the self. This pattern was further corroborated by the mini meta-analysis across studies: When statistically controlling for behavior positivity, acting on impulse was viewed as more authentic than exercising self-control, and this was especially true when perceiving others. The pull to view impulses as authentic maps onto the idea that authentic individuals are “uninhibited” (e.g., Rivera et al., 2022) and to evidence that approach motivation feels more authentic (Kim et al., 2019; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018).

The self-other difference in perceived authenticity of acting on impulse seemingly cannot be explained by a self-enhancement bias, insofar as once behavior positivity was controlled, another person’s impulsive actions were viewed as more authentic than one’s own. To be sure, a self-enhancement perspective would seemingly predict that a bias to view selves as more authentic than others when enacting positive behaviors would drive an overall main effect of viewing selves as more authentic than others, but that is not what we found. Indeed, in the aggregate analyses across studies, we observed a main effect of perceiving others to be more authentic than oneself, which could have been driven by the stronger tendency to see others’ impulses as more authentic than our own.

Why would the perception that impulses are authentic be stronger for others than for the self? One possibility stems from the fact that people have more privileged access to their own
(versus others) inner thoughts and feelings. Self-concepts tend to be richer and more diverse than other (i.e., non-self) concepts. When considering one’s own actions, a person may be aware of competing considerations, including both internal desires and external pressures that precede the exercise of self-control. The considerations afforded to the causes of another’s actions may be less complex (Johnson et al., 1988; Prentice, 1990). Perceivers thus may be more likely to rely on the intuition that impulses are more authentic for other people because impulses provide simple explanations for observable behavior. When others act on impulse, they may seem to be revealing the contents of their inner states. In sum, lay intuitions of authentic individuals as “uninhibited” and “transparent” may contribute to the tendency to view acting on impulse as more authentic than exercising self-control, and this tendency may be stronger when perceiving others because impulsive behavior provides a simple account of the reason why other people act as they do.

The tendency to see impulsive behavior as authentic may contribute to a comforting illusion that we understand and can predict others’ behavior. If I perceive someone else’s impulsive behavior as authentic, then I may feel that I have insight into who they really are and can respond to them accordingly. Self-controlled actions, however, may stem from a variety of differing motivations that an observer is not necessarily privy to. One may wonder whether another person engages in positive self-controlled behaviors because they are a good person, or because they have ulterior motivations for doing the good (right) thing. The impulsive actor may thus seem more trustworthy—and more predictable—for simply doing what they want to do. The self-controlled actor, by contrast, may lead one to question whether their actions reveal what they really want, or if hidden motivations lurk beneath the surface. It may be thus be protective—
palliative and potentially easier to process—to perceive others as more authentic when they act on impulse because they seem less likely to be duplicitous.

**Implications and Future Directions**

These findings have important theoretical implications. First, this research adds to the growing understanding of how and why some behaviors are considered authentic. The state-content significance hypothesis proposes that certain behaviors lend themselves to perceptions of authenticity, such as those that are positive or moral (e.g., Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Christy et al., 2017). Our findings reveal that the impulsive versus controlled nature of behavior also influences perceptions of authenticity, above and beyond positivity, and this is especially true for others. Second, our findings suggest a domain in which perceptions of authenticity are susceptible to an actor-observer asymmetry. When considering themselves, people may have stricter standards for what is perceived as authentic. If I give in to an impulse to speak up to a stranger I disagree with, then I may be doing something relatively inauthentic, especially if I’m choosing the less positive action (relative to saying nothing in an effort to keep the peace). When someone else follows their impulse to speak up instead of saying nothing, however, they may be viewed as more authentic than if they had stayed quiet. The results from the current studies suggest that following impulses may make a person appear more authentic to others, but may not reliably increase the perceived authenticity of the self.

A growing body of evidence on the consequences of using the true self as a guide for decision-making (Kim et al., 2016; 2021; Rivera et al., 2019) suggests that following one’s true self leads to greater decision satisfaction (Schlegel et al., 2013) and more moral decisions (Kim et al., 2018). Research has yet to examine the effects of using the true self as guide in self-control conflicts (c.f., Kokkoris et al., 2019). Insofar as exercising control is perceived as positive (and
subsequently authentic) for oneself, using the true self as guide to decide what to do in a self-control conflict should engender satisfaction with exercising self-control. However, if competing lay intuitions make navigating self-control conflicts difficult, then appeals to follow one’s true self in self-control conflicts may lead to distress. As such, it will be important to elucidate the nuanced beliefs at play in self-control conflicts as well in understanding which behaviors may be promoted by appeals to authenticity.

The current results also suggest implications for interpersonal evaluations and interactions. If others are perceived as more authentic when acting impulsively, then this could have downstream consequences for person perception, liking, and trust (e.g., Lui & Perrewé, 2006). Other people may be more likable when they follow their impulse versus exercise self-control. Indeed, growing evidence on the potential social costs of frame switching (e.g., adapting oneself in accordance with the salient cultural context; Hong & Khei, 2014) suggests that bicultural individuals who frame switch are perceived as inauthentic by majority group members and subsequently less likable, trustworthy, warm, and competent (West et al., 2018; 2020). When majority Americans are assured that this frame switching is an authentic expression of the target’s identity, this social cost is partially alleviated (West et al., 2020). Because frame switching can occur non-consciously or consciously (Doucerain et al., 2013), it is possible that perceptions of whether frame switching is controlled or impulsive may further impact authenticity judgements, with impulsive switches being viewed as more authentic. Investigating actor-observer asymmetry in perceptions of authenticity may thus be relevant when considering cross-cultural interactions.

Limitations
One limitation in the present work is that participants rated the authenticity of the actions in the scenarios using single items and without receiving a common definition of authenticity. Although the single-item authenticity measure presumably had high face validity, those items relied on participants’ potentially idiosyncratic concepts of what it means to be authentic. Indeed, work by Kovács (2019) suggested that although people most commonly associate words such as honest, real, genuine, and kind with the authenticity of persons, most people have complex conceptualizations of authenticity that involve multiple dissimilar concepts. In some ways the use of single items was practical – filling out the same multi-item scale multiple times could induce participant fatigue or frustration. We also considered that providing a specific definition could lead participants to view certain actions as more authentic given the language inherent in the definition. For example, if we had provided a definition of authenticity as “knowing and living in accordance with one’s true self, free from external influences” (e.g., Wood et al., 2008), then this definition may have emphasized a lack of external influences that swayed participants toward viewing impulses as authentic. We were particularly interested in investigating the extent to which working lay-conceptions of authenticity differentiated between impulsive and controlled actions in a measurable way, distinct from what we already know about the role of positivity on authenticity judgments. However, the use of single items and reliance on participants’ idiosyncratic understandings of authenticity are a limitation of the current work that could be addressed in future research.

The present work was limited by testing samples of predominantly white, female undergraduate students; future research with more diverse representation is important for generalizability. In particular, it is possible that perceptions of authenticity in self-control contexts vary across cultures, particularly in cultural contexts wherein views of the self entail
more flexible perceptions across contexts (e.g., Suh, 2002) or cultures that are higher in interdependence (e.g., Kashima et al., 2004; Slabu et al., 2014). Individuals from cultures higher in interdependence may place similar cultural value on authenticity as those from more independent cultures (e.g., Kim et al, 2022; Ito et al., 2009), yet vary in conceptualizations of authenticity as true to self-in-context rather than true to a decontextualized self. This difference in self-conceptualizations could perhaps lessen or eliminate the tendency to see acting on impulse as more authentic than self-control, because interdependent contexts may be less likely to encourage individuals to cultivate and act in accordance with internal attributes and personal preferences and be more likely to view resisting the temptation to act on desires as normative and positive across contexts (see Savani et al., 2008). Future work that considers the role of cultural variability in conceptions of true selves would expand understanding of the perceived authenticity of the different behavioral options in self-control contexts.

Further, our work was limited by the use of hypothetical vignettes and hypothetical others as our targets. We made an effort to describe conflicts that seem relatively common for our samples of undergraduate students, but future work should replicate these effects in real-life self-control conflicts, for instance by using experience sampling methods, to test perceptions of authenticity in vivo.

Last, some of the individual studies may have been underpowered. For instance, both Studies 1a and 2 observed effects smaller than our a priori power analysis estimated that we could detect. This is yet another reason to believe the aggregate analysis across all studies provides the most accurate estimate of the reported effects.

**Conclusions**
We view these findings as an initial foray into a compelling research area worthy of continued exploration, both in light of the ubiquity of self-control conflicts and the potential consequences of perceived authenticity for both self and others. This work speaks to the complexity of beliefs about authenticity in self-control conflicts in Western samples and sparks an array of questions for future research. Self-control conflicts entail competing possibilities, and each possibility could be construed as an authentic course of action. We found two tendencies in perceptions of authenticity: 1) the tendency to view more positive behaviors as more authentic, and 2) the tendency to view impulses as more authentic, especially for others. In light of these patterns we outlined avenues for future research to investigate boundary conditions and to trace the downstream consequences that may be illuminated through deeper understanding of perceived authenticity in self-control contexts.
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Data accessibility statement:

The data and analysis code for these studies will be made available online upon acceptance for publication: https://osf.io/a3qj2/?view_only=8174985951a648f9a34c412cea46844b