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## THE ITALIAN VALIDATION OF THE BRIEF SELF-CONTROL SCALE: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

The Brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS) developed by Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone (2004) is a widely used measure of trait self-control. The present study aimed to validate Italian version of the BSCS. 262 Italian university students completed BSCS along with measures of grit, impulsive behavior, self-esteem, resilience, and psychological distress. 143 of the first sample completed BSCS after three weeks again. Results indicated that the Italian version of the BSCS is one-dimensional as the original BSCS. Good internal consistency and test-retest stability were documented. Convergent and divergent validity of the construct was established with the association between BSCS and measures of grit and impulsive behavior. Furthermore, predictive validity assessment showed that BSCS positively predicted self-esteem and resilience, and negatively predicted psychological distress as expected. In conclusion, findings suggest that the Italian BSCS is a reliable and valid instrument assessing trait self-control in Italian speaking populations.

**Keywords:** Brief Self-Control Scale; Italian Adaptation; Trait Self-Control.

Trait self-control refers to one's capacity to override dominant responses in accordance with personal long-term goals (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Exertion of self-control captures both action and inaction; engaging in goal-consistent behaviors, and also abstaining from goal-inconsistent behaviors and avoiding temptations (Hoyle & Davidson, 2016). For example, someone who has the intention to be more physically active faces impulses and temptations that are incompatible with reaching this goal (e.g., relaxing on the couch). These impulses and temptations have to be overcome by exerting self-control in terms of inhibiting these impulses (inaction) and to exercise nevertheless (action).

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Individual differences in self-control capacity and its relation to important life outcomes have attracted much attention in the literature. High trait self-control has been associated with better academic performance (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; King & Gaerlan, 2014), better psychological adjustment, higher levels of well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem (Bowlin & Baer, 2012; Hoffmann et al., 2014; Tangney et al. 2004) and less impulse control problems (Bergen et al. 2012; Verstuyf et al., 2013). In longitudinal studies (Fergusson et al., 2013; Moffitt et al., 2011), it was reported that while controlling for gender, family socioeconomic status, and intelligence, high trait self-control in childhood was associated with higher educational degree, occupational prestige, income, and savings behaviour. Moreover, it predicted physical and mental health, lack of substance dependence and criminal convictions. On the contrary, low trait self-control in childhood was associated with starting smoking, school dropouts, unplanned pregnancies in teenage years, as well as poor mental and physical health, worse personal finances, and criminal convictions in adulthood. Overall, it is well-documented that trait self-control and major life outcomes across a variety of domains such as school, work, interpersonal functioning, well-being, and adjustment are associated where the higher the trait self-control, the better the life outcomes tend to be (de Ridder et al., 2012).

#### *Measurement of trait self-control*

In the literature, the most widely used measure of trait self-control has been the Brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS; Tangney et al., 2004). The measure was tailored according to the strength model of self-control (Baumeister et al., 1994) capturing thought, emotion, impulse, and performance control. Self-Control Scale (SCS) is a 36-item scale, and the short form of it, the Brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS) consists of 13 of these items. It is a one-dimensional self-report questionnaire, where items are rated on a 5-point scale, from 1 *not at all like me* to 5 *very much like me*. Some items are reverse coded (see Appendix A). One total score is computed for BSCS by summing items responses; higher scores indicate higher levels of trait self-control. The range of BSCS score is from 13 to 65. The psychometric properties of both SCS and BSCS were found satisfactory (Tangney et al., 2004). It was reported that BSCS have adequate internal reliability, alpha values reported were .83 and .85. Test-retest reliability with three-week interval was .87. Concordant with expectations, higher BSCS scores were associated with higher grade point average, less problems of binge eating and alcohol abuse, higher psychological adjustment, self-acceptance and self-esteem, better interpersonal relationships, more guilt feelings, and less shame feelings which were regarded as more beneficial emotional patterns.

BSCS has been adapted to German (Bertrams & Dickhäuser, 2009), Turkish (Nebioglu et al., 2012), French (Brevers et al., 2017), Russian (Gordeeva et al.,

2017), and SCS to Chinese (Unger et al., 2016) and Polish (Pilarska & Baumeister, 2018) so far. In the German adaptation (Bertrams & Dickhäuser, 2009) it was reported that BSCS proved to be one-dimensional, reliable and valid. In the Turkish adaptation (Nebioglu et al., 2012), BSCS was again reported to be reliable, and validity was supported in relation to measures of impulsiveness, negative body responses, anger management, and social skills. In this study however, two-factor structure was observed. French adaptation study (Brevers et al., 2017) also reported acceptable internal consistency, and showed test-retest stability. Exploratory factor analysis yielded one-factor as the original scale. Validity was supported with the negative association between BSCS and impulsive behaviour measure. Russian adaptation study (Gordeeva et al., 2017) also documented satisfactory reliability and reported that total composite score of the scale was more meaningful, supporting one-dimensional structure, and correlations between BSCS and positive outcome variables of self-esteem, perspective taking, and shame-proneness were reported.

### *The current study*

The main aim of the present study was to validate the Italian version of the BSCS for both research and clinical purposes in Italian-speaking populations. It was aimed to provide a reliable and valid Italian measure on trait self-control in order to conduct research on such as goal-directed behaviors for life success (e.g., academic achievement) or health promotion (e.g., mental health, health behavior) in the Italian population.

We examined internal consistency, temporal stability, validity, and factor structure of the Italian BSCS. Exploratory factor analysis was carried out, Cronbach's alpha was employed for assessing internal consistency, and test-retest reliability with three-week interval was tested. Convergent validity was examined with the association between BSCS and grit consistent with the earlier theorizations and findings (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Oriol et al., 2017), and divergent validity was examined with the association between BSCS and impulsivity as it was consistently documented to be negatively related (Brevers et al., 2017; Nebioglu et al., 2012). Predictive validity was tested with the relationship between BSCS and self-esteem, resilience, and general distress in parallel to the well-documented findings in the aforementioned literature (Bowlin & Baer, 2012; Fergusson et al., 2013; Hoffmann et al., 2014; Tangney et al. 2004).

It was expected to document one-factor structure as the original scale, and to demonstrate good psychometric properties with regard to reliability and validity. For the examination of validity, BSCS scores were expected to be negatively associated with impulsivity and positively associated with grit. Furthermore, BSCS scores were expected to positively predict self-esteem and resilience, and negatively predict psychological distress.

## **Method**

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 262 University of Padova students recruited on voluntary basis. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 31 years ( $M = 22.87$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ), 81.3% were female, 18.3% were male, and .4% were other. Test-retest subgroup of the sample who were enrolled in a psychology course was 143 in size, age range was 21-29 years ( $M = 22.76$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ), and 86% were female and 14% were male.

Participants received an online link in which they were asked to fill out the demographic information form (including questions on age, gender, and academic status), the Italian version of the SCS followed by the standardized measures of impulsivity, general distress, resilience, grit, and self-esteem. A subgroup of participants was asked to fill out the SCS twice after a three-week interval.

The study received formal approval by the Ethics Committee for Psychological Research at University of Padova. This research was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

### *Measures*

*The Italian Version of the Brief Self-Control Scale* was developed following the standard procedures in the psychology literature (Brislin, 1986). Firstly, the original version was translated from English to Italian by three researchers independently, and a common version was agreed upon. Secondly, a bilingual individual with comprehensive knowledge of the discipline of psychology back-translated the common Italian version to English. The back-translated version was nearly identical to the original one; few differences were resolved through discussion, and the final Italian version was adjusted according to the consensus.

*The Short Grit Scale* (Grit-S; Duckworth et al., 2009; Italian version by Sulla et al., 2018) is a 8-item scale that aims to measure trait level grit with the two subscales of perseverance of effort (e.g., “Setbacks don’t discourage me”) and consistency of interest (e.g. of a reversed item, “I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one”). Participants are asked to rate how much each of the items represents themselves on a 1 = *not like me at all* to 5 = *very much like me* -point scale. Higher scores correspond to higher level of grit. The psychometric properties of the Italian version were good; the subscales and the whole scale demonstrated sufficient to good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha ranged from .60 to .83), two factor model was supported, and predictive validity in relation to career changes and educational attainment while controlling for conscientiousness was evidenced. In the present study, observed internal consistency value for the whole scale was .82, and .70 for the perseverance of effort subscale and .79 for the consistency of interest subscale.

*The Short Form of Impulsive Behavior Scale (S-UPPS-P; Billieux et al., 2012; Italian version by D'Orta et al., 2015)* is a 20-item questionnaire with five subscales; positive urgency (e.g. "When I am really excited, I tend not to think on the consequences of my actions"), negative urgency (e.g. "When I am upset I often act without thinking"), lack of perseverance (e.g. of a reversed item, "I am a productive person who always gets the job done"), lack of premeditation (e.g. of a reversed item, "I usually make up my mind through careful reasoning"), and sensation seeking (e.g., "I sometimes like doing things that are a bit frightening") that evaluates facets of impulsivity. Each item is rated on a 1 = *agree strongly* to 4 = *disagree strongly* -point scale. Higher scores indicate higher impulsive behavior tendency. The Italian version showed good psychometric properties; the subscales demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranged from .73 to .84), five factor model and construct validity was supported. In the present study, the observed internal consistency values for the subscales of positive urgency, negative urgency, lack of perseverance, lack of premeditation, and sensation seeking were .83, .75, .93, .88, and .81 respectively.

*The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Italian version by Bottesi et al., 2015)* is a 21-item measure of general distress consisting of three subscales of depression (e.g., "I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all"), anxiety (e.g., "I was aware of dryness of my month"), and stress (e.g., "I found it hard to wind down"). Participants are asked to rate to what extent each of the items applied to them considering the last week on a 0 = *did not apply to me at all* to 3 = *applied to me very much, or most of the time* - point scale. Higher total scores indicate higher general distress. The Italian version had good psychometric properties. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the three subscales and the whole scale in both community and clinical samples were good to excellent (ranged from .74 to .92), where the alpha values were the highest for the whole scale. Test-retest reliability was good and construct validity was established with large correlations to other measures of anxiety, depression, and stress, and further support was documented with regard to its use as a measure of general distress. The observed internal consistency value in our sample was .95 for the whole scale.

*The Resilience Scale for Adults (RSA; Hjemdal et al., 2001; Italian version by Bonfiglio et al., 2016)* is a 33-item measure of resilience protective factors with six subscales of perception of self (e.g., belief in myself), planned future (e.g., clear future goals), social competence (e.g., enjoy relations with other), structured style (e.g., organize my time), family cohesion (e.g., family do things together), and social resources (e.g., strong bonds with friends). Each item is rated on a 5-point scale anchored with opposing semantic answers. Higher scores indicate higher level of resilience. The Italian version showed good psychometric properties; the subscales demonstrated sufficient to good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranged from

.66 to .87), six factor model was supported, test-retest reliability was adequate, and construct validity was documented with medium-to-large correlation coefficients. In our sample, internal consistency values for the subscales of perception of self, planned future, social competence, structured style, family cohesion, and social resources were .77, .81, .71, .85, .88, and .85 respectively.

*The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965; Italian version by Prezza et al., 1997) is a 10-item (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”) unidimensional measure of global self-esteem. Each item is rated on a 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*-point scale. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. The Italian version of the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ ) and 15-days test-retest reliability ( $r = .76$ ). In our sample, observed internal consistency value was .91.

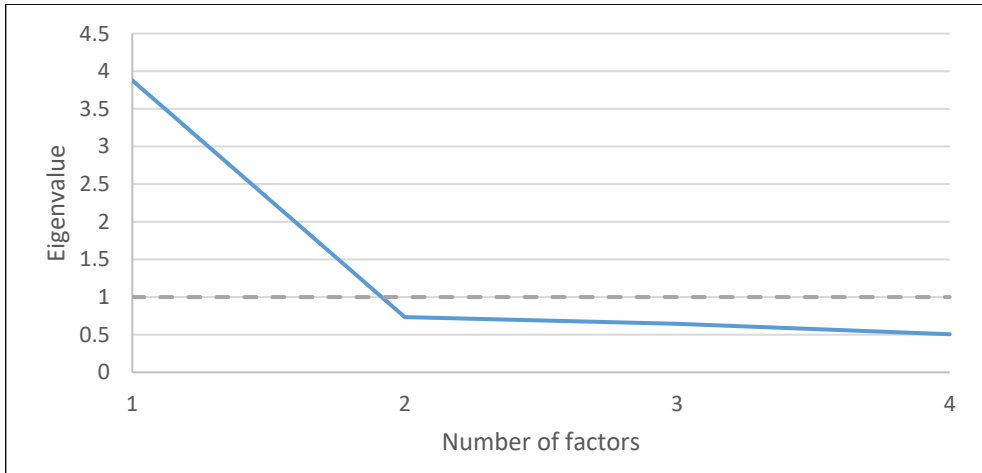
### *Data analysis*

Statistical analyses were performed with the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Exploratory Factor Analysis was performed as one or two-factor structures have been documented earlier (see Lindner, Nagy, & Retelsdorf, 2015), we chose to adopt a more conservative approach and conduct an exploratory rather than confirmatory factor analysis. The number of factors identified was based on an examination of eigenvalues greater than one and on the scree plot. Internal consistency was assessed by Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient computation where  $\alpha \geq .90$  = excellent;  $.90 > \alpha \geq .80$  = good, and  $.80 > \alpha \geq .70$  = acceptable (Cronbach, 1951). Relationship between BSCS and other related measures were examined with Pearson correlation coefficients.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics and factor structure*

Due to missing data in BSCS responses, 3 participants were excluded from the sample. The observed mean score of BSCS in the sample ( $n = 259$ ) was 44.93 with a standard deviation of 7.99, where the range of scores were from 21 to 60. The skewness and kurtosis were calculated for each of the 13 items. The results showed that the skewness ranged from -.86 to .06 and kurtosis from -1.00 to .22. There was no evidence of strong deviation from normality. Results from the PCA indicated one-factor solution (see Figure 1), and this factor explained 29.8% of the variance. Item-loadings ranged from .31 to .67 for Factor 1, which were higher than the factor loading cut-off of .30 (Kline, 2005).



**Figure 1.** Scree plot

#### *Internal consistency and test-retest reliability*

Internal consistency analysis revealed a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of .83 indicating good internal consistency. For the subsample, who was re-administered BSCS after three weeks, Pearson correlation analysis showed a good test-retest reliability ( $r = .84, p < .001$ ).

#### *Associations with demographic variables*

There was no significant difference in BSCS scores ( $t(249) = -1.21, p = .23$ ) between male ( $M = 42.68, SD = 7.92$ ) and female participants ( $M = 45.40, SD = 7.95$ ), and there was not a significant relationship between BSCS and age ( $r = -.09; p = .131$ ).

#### *Validity*

Convergent validity examination revealed that BSCS was positively correlated with total Grit-S ( $r = .73, p < .001$ ), and the two subscales perseverance of effort ( $r = .67, p < .001$ ) and consistency of interest ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ) significantly.

Divergent validity examination showed BSCS was negatively correlated with all S-UPPS-P subscales; positive urgency ( $r = -.35, p < .001$ ), negative urgency ( $r = -.31, p < .001$ ), lack of perseverance ( $r = -.37, p < .001$ ), lack of premeditation ( $r = -.33, p < .001$ ), and sensation seeking ( $r = -.22, p < .001$ ) significantly.

Predictive validity examination yielded that BSCS negatively predicted DASS-21 ( $\beta = -.45, p < .001$ ) significantly whereas it positively predicted all RSA subscales of perception of self ( $\beta = .39, p < .001$ ), planned future ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ), structured style ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ), social competence ( $\beta = .59, p < .001$ ), family

cohesion ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ), and social resources ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ) and RSES ( $\beta = .84, p < .001$ ) significantly.

## **Discussion**

The present study aimed to provide the Italian version of the BSCS, and evaluate its' psychometric properties. With respect to the factor structure of the scale, consistent with the original BSCS, exploratory factor analysis revealed that the best factor solution is one factor model, in accordance with other validation studies (Bertrams & Dickhäuser, 2009; Brevers et al., 2017; Gordeeva et al., 2017). Fewer studies suggested two-factor resolution (e.g. Maloney et al., 2011; Nebioglu et al., 2012). However, it was argued that seemingly two factors were due to the presence of the regular and reverse-coded items (Pilarska & Baumeister, 2018). It was suggested that two-dimensional solution reflected the wording of the items being either positive or negative (Hankins, 2008), not the underlying facets.

The Italian BSCS showed very good reliability. Internal consistency and three-week temporal stability were both good. With regard to convergent validity, the Italian BSCS was positively correlated with grit, and with regard to divergent validity, it was negatively correlated with impulsive behavior as expected (Bergen et al. 2012; Verstuyf et al., 2013). Furthermore, BSCS positively predicted self-esteem and resilience, and negatively predicted psychological distress in line with the expectations (Bowlin & Baer, 2012; Hoffmann et al., 2014; Tangney et al. 2004) supporting predictive validity. These findings also provided support for the relationship between trait self-control and psychological well-being where higher level of trait self-control is associated with better psychological well-being.

Several shortcomings of the present study should be noted. The sample size was relatively small and, therefore, did not allow to test confirmatory factor analysis. Secondly, the sample consisted of university students, and most of the participants were females, which limit the generalizability of the results. Therefore, it is encouraged for future studies to test the Italian BSCS in larger and more representative samples and to conduct a cross-validation of the factor structure using confirmatory factor analysis. Furthermore, predictive validity assessment could be better examined with a longitudinal study design assessing trait self-control at baseline and e.g. psychological well-being, academic achievement or health status at a follow-up measurement.

In conclusion, despite the above-mentioned limitations, present study provides the Italian version of the BSCS demonstrating good reliability and validity. We believe that this tool will be useful for researchers investigating trait self-control in Italian speaking samples and for clinical purposes.



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**Appendix A. The Italian BSCS**

Per favore, utilizzando la scala di risposta fornita indichi quanto ciascuna delle seguenti affermazioni riflette il suo modo di essere generalmente.

	Per nulla simile a me	Moltissimo simile a me
1. Sono bravo/a a resistere alle tentazioni.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 2. Ho difficoltà a interrompere le cattive abitudini.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 3. Sono pigro/a.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 4. Dico cose inappropriate.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 5. Se sono divertenti, faccio alcune cose che sono dannose per me.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
6. Rifiuto le cose che sono negative per me.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 7. Vorrei avere più autodisciplina.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
8. Le persone potrebbero dire che ho un'auto-disciplina di ferro.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 9. Piacere e divertimento qualche volta mi impediscono di portare a termine il lavoro.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 10. Ho problemi a concentrarmi.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
11. Sono capace di lavorare in modo efficace verso obiettivi a lungo termine.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 12. A volte non riesco a evitare di fare una cosa, anche se so che è sbagliata.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	
(R) 13. Spesso agisco senza pensare a tutte le alternative.	1-----2-----3-----4-----5	

Note. (R) refers to reverse coded items