The Sprinter Effect: When Involvement and Self-Control Fail to Overcome Ego-Depletion

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This research examines the joint effect of dispositional self-control and situational involvement on ego-depletion and on subsequent performance in consumption related tasks. Contrary to past studies which have shown that separately involvement or self-control facilitate overcoming ego-depletion, this research contends that being both highly involved and with high self-control jeopardizes one's ability to overcome ego-depletion, resulting in poorer performance on subsequent consumption activities. We term this the “sprinter effect.” Three studies in both lab and field settings demonstrate this phenomenon and suggest how to de-bias it.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Recent studies have explored the mechanisms that can help individuals overcome a depleted state. These studies pointed to several mechanisms such as increasing glucose levels in the blood, introducing humor, raising situational involvement, and personality dimensions such as chronic self-control. The current research focuses on exploring what happens when two of the above mechanisms interact together in depleting states. More specifically, we focus on the joint effect of situational involvement and chronic self-control on performance under depleted states. The literature has demonstrated the separate effects of each factor in dealing with ego-depletion. Thus, the separate effect of enhancing situational involvement helped overcome an ego-depleted state and similarly having high dispositional self-control decreased the likelihood of spending money even under depleted states.

However, little attention was given to what happens when the two take place simultaneously, as most often occurs in real life. The current research posits that although self-control and involvement separately may lead to the same pattern of behavior, when joined together they cause a turnover effect resulting in less controlled behavior under depleted states.

Individuals with high self-control and high involvement have a greater need to perform well in an ego-depleting task compared to individuals who have little involvement or low levels of self-control. Consequently, these high self-controlled and high involved consumers allocate extended resources in order to perform well in an ego-depleting task. When faced with a series of such tasks, however, this extended effort may leave them with fewer available resources for subsequent tasks. In other words, these extremely motivated consumers over exhaust their resources up to the point of no recovery. Therefore, when faced with the next self-regulating task, even their high motivation will fail to help them perform well. In contrast, consumers who are less motivated are expected to invest fewer resources in a demanding task, so they suffer less from ego-depletion. As a result, when they encounter a subsequent task, they will be able to perform relatively well because they have not expended all their resources on the former demanding task.

Study 1 tested participants’ performance in an ego-depleting task and then their performance in recognizing “jumbled-up” brand names. Under the depleting condition, high self-controlled, high involved participants performed well in the ego depletion task in comparison to less motivated participants. However, the same high self-controlled, high involved participants had fewer resources available for the following task, and therefore, performed worse in the brand recognizing task. That is, after being depleted, extremely motivated participants recognized fewer brand names compared to those with lower levels of motivation.

Study 2 was conducted in a grocery store with shoppers. Both involvement and ego-depletion were activated before participants entered the store, and the resulting effects on shoppers’ impulsive buying behaviors were measured as they were leaving the store. As hypothesized, under a depleted state, involved shoppers with high self-control were more likely to engage in impulsive buying than other, less involved or less self-controlled shoppers.

It is, however, an over generalization to claim that very involved, very self-controlled consumers are always prone to reach the ego-depletion low-point-of-no-recovery and consequently act less rationally or perform poorly in subsequent tasks. Hence, we postulate that a state of mind metaphorically resembling a “marathon” runner’s mindset will cause the opposite effect. When a runner is about to run a short sprint without being informed in advance that there will be a number of sprints, she may put all her efforts into the first sprint and then will be left with no available resources for the following ones. However, if the same runner was informed that she were running a marathon consisting of a number of runs one after the other, she would probably manage her efforts differently, reserving some strength for the last runs.

Accordingly, in the last study (Study 3) we wish to show that informing consumers about the number of tasks they are expected to perform and giving them a general description of the tasks, (without indicating anything about the need for self-control) will allow them to activate a resources conservation strategy and consequently to avoid the burnout. In this case, when highly involved, high self-controlled consumers know in advance that they are about to conduct multiple consumption tasks, they enter a “marathon” state of mind. They try not to expend all their efforts on the first task; they try not to exhaust themselves so that they ensure they have enough resources to perform well in later tasks as well.

In Study 3, we repeated the procedures used in Study 1 with two exceptions: First, participants were informed about the total number of tasks at the outset. Informing participants about the outline of the tasks was expected to make the difference between a “sprint” mindset and a “marathon” mindset. Second, after the depleting task, participants read a hypothetical consumption scenario and indicated their probability of buying impulsively different grocery products.

As expected, the results of this study altered the results of studies 1 and 2 and show that when planning ahead, the sprinter effect is diminished. In the ego-depleting condition, high involved participants with high self-control were less willing to buy impulsively grocery products than participants with lower motivation levels.