Feeling Fatigued Leads to Feeling Certain: Regulatory Resource Depletion and Attitude Certainty

Echo Wen Wan, The University of Hong Kong, China
Derek Rucker, Northwestern University, USA
Zakary Tormala, Stanford University, USA
Joshua Clarkson, Indiana University, USA

Prior research suggests that regulatory resource depletion affects attitudes by inhibiting consumers’ ability to counterargue and affecting the type of thoughts they generate. We propose that when consumers are sufficiently motivated to overcome depletion, exposure to the same product information will produce similar thought profiles and thus similar attitudes; however, under such circumstances, depletion will enhance the certainty consumers place in their attitudes, which will affect consumer purchase behavior. Results from three experiments support this prediction. We also document that the mechanism underlying this effect is one of perceived elaboration using both mediation and moderation approaches.

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Derek D. Rucker, Northwestern University, USA
Zakary L. Tormala, Stanford University, USA
Joshua J. Clarkson, Indiana University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research examines the impact of regulatory resource depletion on attitude certainty. Regulatory resources have been conceptualized as a pool of resources that people use to override urges or exert controlled behavior (Baumeister et al. 1998). Attitude certainty is the subjective feeling of conviction one has about one’s attitude, or the extent to which one believes one’s attitude is correct (Gross, Holtz and Miller 1995). We focus on studying how regulatory resource depletion affects attitude certainty in the absence of differences in attitudes. We also uncover the mechanism using measured and manipulated approaches and demonstrate that differences in certainty have a meaningful effect on behavior.

Previous research has established attitude certainty as an independent construct from attitudes (Bassili 1996; Rucker and Petty 2004). Attitude certainty is particularly interesting for consumer research because behavior is influenced not solely by one’s attitude but also the certainty placed in that attitude. In particular, attitudes held with high certainty serve as stronger guides for judgment and behavior.

Past research has shown that depletion significantly impacts consumer behavior such as impulse purchases (Vohs and Faber 2007). Recently Wheeler, Briñol, and Hermann (2007) found that depletion leads to poorer resistance against the counterattitudinal message when individuals were allowed to vary the effort exerted to counterargue. Our research focuses on the situation where depleted individuals are sufficiently motivated to exert equal effort on the subsequent task as non-depleted individuals and thus generate similar thought profiles (Muraven and Slessareva 2003). In such situations depleted and non-depleted individuals should have processed the same information to the same degree, which would produce similar attitudes. However, under such circumstances we asked whether depletion might affect attitude certainty.

Intuitively, one might expect that depleted (vs. non-depleted) individuals would perceive messages as more difficult. Based on prior findings that processing ease is associated with attitude certainty (Haddock et al. 1999), depletion might undermine attitude certainty. However, we propose that depletion might actually lead to greater attitude certainty. Research has shown that depleted (vs. non-depleted) individuals perceive themselves as exerting greater effort overestimating the amount of time they spend (Vohs and Schmeichel 2003; Wan and Sternthal 2008) on the same task. Previous studies suggest that people might use the amount of time or effort spent as indicators of the thoroughness of information processing (vonk and van Knippenberg 1995). And the perception of thoroughness of thinking is associated with attitude certainty. For example, Berger and Mitchell (1989) suggest that repeated ad exposures enhanced individuals’ product-related processing and thus their attitude certainty. Furthermore, recent research suggests that perceived elaboration (one’s subjective assessment of how carefully one has processed information) affects attitude certainty even when there are no differences in actual elaboration (Barden and Petty forthcoming).

Drawing on the work linking depletion to perceived elaboration and the work linking perceived elaboration to attitude certainty, we predict that in situations where depleted individuals are motivated and able to process messages extensively, depletion will increase attitude certainty, and this effect is accounted by an enhanced perceived elaboration among depleted individuals.

Three experiments tested and supported these propositions. In all experiments, participants first completed a depletion manipulation, followed by reading an ad message about a consumer product. We strived to hold the actual amount and type of thinking constant across conditions in multiple ways: First, we induced high motivation to process by emphasizing the importance of the task. Second, we held actual ad exposure time constant. Finally, to test the success of our efforts we included measures that prior research has shown to be sensitive to differences in actual information processing.

In experiment 1, participants completed either a depletion manipulation, read an ad about one brand of answering machine, reported their attitude and attitude certainty, and reported their perceived elaboration and processing ease. The results show that depleted and non-depleted participants did not differ in their attitudes or processing ease. However, depleted participants were more certain of their attitudes and perceived their information processing as more thorough than non-depleted ones. Perceived elaboration mediated the effect of depletion on attitude certainty.

Experiment 2 used a different depletion manipulation in a different product category and with a different ad exposure time. In addition, we added two independent variables. One manipulated the naive theories about the relationship between depletion and perceived elaboration. This tested whether varying the relationship between depletion and perceived elaboration affected certainty, and thus provided a moderation approach to testing the role of perceived elaboration. The other varied the argument strength in the message to test whether actual processing between depleted and non-depleted was constant. As another means of testing individuals’ actual processing, we included a thought listing measure. The results showed that attitudes only differed between strong and weak arguments conditions, but depletion had no effect. The naive theory results showed that manipulating the relationship between depletion and perceived elaboration affected attitude certainty, supporting the perceived elaboration mechanism. Moreover, both depleted and non-depleted participants had more favorable thoughts in the strong than weak argument conditions.

Experiment 3 tested the behavioral consequence of our effects following the same procedure as used in the strong argument condition in experiment 2 except that no naive theory was manipulated. At the end participants made a real purchase decision. The results showed that 1) the attitude-purchase correlation was significantly stronger among depleted (vs. non-depleted) participants; 2) among participants holding positive attitudes, depleted (vs. non-depleted) individuals chose to purchase the snack more frequently; and 3) these effects were mediated by difference in attitude certainty. Depletion led participants to be more certain, and thus they became more likely to act based on attitudes.

Our research contributes to literature on regulatory depletion and persuasion by revealing a hidden effect of depletion on attitude certainty. We also enrich the understanding of attitude certainty by showing that a subjective perception of elaboration (vs. objective differences) impacts attitude certainty. Finally, this research finds
evidence that consumer behavior (e.g., actual purchase) can be affected by depletion due to the variation in attitude certainty.

REFERENCES


