Forewarned Is Forearmed: Conserving Self-Control Strength to Resist Social Influence

Loes Janssen, Tilburg University, the Netherlands
Bob Fennis, Utrecht University, the Netherlands
Ad Th. H. Pruyn, University of Twente, the Netherlands

Recent research has shown that resisting persuasion involves active self-regulation. Resisting an influence attempt consumes self-regulatory resources, and in a state of self-regulatory resource depletion, consumers become more susceptible to (unwanted) influence attempts. However, the present studies show that a forewarning of an impending influence attempt prompts depleted individuals to conserve what is left of their regulatory resources. As a result, when these individuals are subsequently confronted with a request, they comply less than their depleted counterparts who were not forewarned and thus did not conserve their resources, and they are as able as non-depleted participants to resist persuasion.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15197/volumes/v37/NA-37

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Forewarned is Forearmed: Conserving Self-Control Strength to Resist Social Influence

Loes Janssen, Tilburg University, The Netherlands
Bob M. Fennis, Utrecht University, The Netherlands
Ad Th. H. Pruyn, University of Twente, The Netherlands

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As consumers, it is often difficult to resist (unsolicited) influence attempts of advertisers, fundraisers, and other compliance professionals. As recent research has shown, resisting persuasion is a costly process involving active self-regulation. Resisting an influence attempt consumes self-regulatory resources, with the inevitable consequence that when these resources are low, one’s attempts at resistance are more likely to fail (Burkley 2008; Fennis, Janssen, and Vohs 2009; Janssen et al. 2008; Wheeler, Brünl, and Hermann 2007). Hence, resisting (unwanted) influence is more successful when self-regulatory resources are high rather than low, but the present research demonstrates that all is not lost for consumers in a state of self-regulatory resource depletion.

According to the limited-resource model of self-control (for a review, Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice 2007) any act of deliberate and regulated responding by the self draws on a limited intrapsychic resource which, akin to energy, becomes depleted with use. Recently, research started to test the notion that resisting persuasion is an activity which also draws on this resource. Indeed, a state of self-regulatory resource depletion weakens resistance to temptations and (unwanted) influence attempts (Baumeister 2002; Burkley 2008; Vohs and Faber 2007; Wheeler et al. 2007). More specifically, Fennis et al. (2009) and Janssen et al. (2008) forwarded resource depletion as an important underlying factor mediating the effectiveness of sequential request social influence techniques, such as a foot-in-the-door (Freedman and Fraser 1966). They showed that actively responding to the initial request of such a technique depleted self-control resources, resulting in increased compliance with a subsequent (charitable) target request, such as freely donating time, effort or money. Importantly, depleted participants were not susceptible to influence by default, but rather because they relied more on compliance-promoting heuristics that were present in the persuasion context, such as authority, reciprocity, or likeability (cf. Cialdini’s [1993] principles of influence).

In sum, and in line with dual-process models of persuasion (Petty and Wegener 1999), a state of self-regulatory resource depletion appears to reduce systematic or central-route processing, and enhances the weight on heuristic processing in consumer judgment and decision making. A key means to encourage more systematic processing could be to increase consumers’ awareness of an upcoming influence attempt in advance. Multiple studies have suggested that forewarning people of an upcoming persuasive communication motivates them to counterargue the message in order to reassert their attitudinal freedom, and thereby inhibit subsequent persuasion (see Wood and Quinn 2003 for a review).

But what if the motivation to counterargue is present, but the ability to engage in counterargumentation is lacking because of previous depletion of regulatory resources? We argue that in these conditions, forewarning motivates people to conserve their remaining resources and mobilize them in the service of this counterargumentation. This presupposes that a depleted state does not reflect a complete exhaustion of resources but merely a temporary deficit, a notion that was recently supported by Muraven, Shmueli, and Burkley (2006). They suggested that individuals are (at either a conscious or an unconscious level) motivated and able to conserve their current regulatory energy when the benefits of using the resource in the future apparently outweigh the benefits of using it right now. We expect that forewarning consumers of an upcoming influence attempt will motivate them to conserve self-control strength in the service of resisting the impending influence attempt. We expect this especially to be the case when there is a clear rationale for doing so, that is when they previously suffered a loss of self-control resources.

A first experiment tested whether forewarning increases resistance to persuasion among depleted individuals, using a 2 (self-regulatory resource depletion condition: depletion vs. no depletion) x 2 (forewarning: forewarning of an influence attempt vs. no forewarning) between-subjects design. Resource depletion was induced with a self-control task adopted from Muraven et al. (2006). Participants retyped a paragraph as quickly as they could, yet participants in the resource depletion condition were instructed to retype the paragraph without using the letter “e” or the space bar. Next, half the participants were forewarned about an upcoming encounter with a representative of the ‘Campus Clean’ student project, who was actively looking for volunteers to clean-up the lecture halls of the campus buildings. After performing a filler task, all participants were asked to indicate how much time they would be willing to volunteer for ‘Campus Clean’. Results indeed show that when initially depleted, forewarned participants complied far less with the request (they were willing to volunteer less time) to clean-up their lecture halls as compared to their not forewarned counterparts, and resisted as much as non-depleted participants.

A second study was performed to uncover the assumed underlying psychological process: is it indeed a matter of conserving self-control strength that drives this effect? To test this notion, we included a validated measure of self-control performance after the depletion and forewarning manipulations, before compliance was measured. For most part, the design and procedure parallel that of study 1. As expected, results show that a forewarning of an impending influence attempt motivates depleted people to conserve their resources; they performed worse than participants in any other condition on the intermediate measure of self-control performance. Conserving resources appeared to be beneficial: as in study 1, when subsequently confronted with a request, initially depleted participants resisted as much as non-depleted participants.

Although the forewarning itself may or may not accompany an influence attempt in commercial settings, advanced awareness of the upcoming persuasion attempt may well be a default mode for consumers when they enter marketing spheres, such as shopping malls, or commercial websites. Indeed, work on the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright 1994) supports the notion that consumers are typically prone to infer the (self-serving) motives of marketers and advertisers, and this knowledge could function as a source of self-generated forewarnings. Hence, as consumers, we should be comforted by the present results which imply that we are still proficient in defending ourselves despite a general increase in susceptibility to influence. Even in these instances we will not always end up with products and services that we do not want or need.

REFERENCES


