



## The bigger they come, the harder they fall: The paradoxical effect of regulatory depletion on attitude change



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- People with high attitude certainty expect to resist persuasion.
- Experiencing regulatory resource depletion can increase openness to persuasion.
- Resource depletion can undermine perceived counterargument strength.
- Perceived counterargument performance mediates the depletion–persuasion link.

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### ABSTRACT

The present research explores a new effect of regulatory resource depletion on persuasion by proposing that the experience of depletion can increase or decrease openness to attitude change by undermining perceived counterargument strength. Ironically, this openness is hypothesized to be strongest for individuals holding attitudes with high (versus low) certainty, as individuals should expect high certainty attitudes to be more resistant—an expectation the experience of depletion is hypothesized to violate. Supporting the hypotheses, three studies demonstrate that individuals expect high certainty attitudes to be stable (Study 1), the experience of resource depletion violates this expectancy and increases the openness to counterattack (Study 2), and this openness is driven by decreased perceptions of counterargument strength (Study 3). By augmenting (attenuating) the effect of argument quality for high (low) certainty attitudes, the experience of depletion on perceived counterargument performance offers insight into novel means by which resource depletion can influence persuasion.

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The *strength model of self-control* (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; see Muraven & Baumeister, 2000) has been the dominant perspective by which researchers have studied self-regulation over the past fifteen years. The model contends that people possess a reserve of regulatory resources that are necessary for executive functioning (Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Vohs, 2007; Vohs & Baumeister, 2011). Consistent with the notion that this reserve is limited in resources, expenditures reduce the availability of these resources and consequently the ability to succeed at subsequent self-regulatory behaviors. In support of the model, a wealth of research across a range of domains demonstrates that a limited capacity of regulatory resources impairs subsequent behaviors that require access to this limited reserve of resources (for a review, see Mead, Alquist, & Baumeister, 2010).

Recently, researchers from a variety of domains have explored the effects of this limited capacity of regulatory resources on resistance to persuasion (Burkley, 2008; Burkley, Anderson, & Curtis, 2011; Fennis, Das, & Pruyn, 2004; Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009; Janssen, Fennis, & Pruyn, 2010; Janssen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Vohs, 2008; Wan, Rucker, Tormala, & Clarkson, 2010; Wheeler, Briñol, & Hermann, 2007; see also Clarkson, Hirt, Jia, & Alexander, 2010). Indeed, much of the existing research is focused on a single question—that of the role of regulatory depletion on people's ability to successfully resist counterattacks of varying strength (Burkley, 2008; Clarkson et al., 2010; Wheeler et al., 2007). A common paradigm in this research is to present participants with a depletion or non-depletion task before exposing them to a strong or weak counterattack. The typical finding is that depleted and non-depleted individuals are equally resistant to the weak attack but differentially resistant to the strong attack (Burkley, 2008; Clarkson et al., 2010). In particular, non-depleted individuals are more resistant to the strong attack relative to depleted individuals, as regulatory resources appear necessary to successfully counterargue strong (but not weak) arguments.

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## A new role for regulatory depletion in persuasion

The focus of the present research, however, is to examine a possible, alternative means by which depletion can influence persuasion—and the resistance process in particular. Specifically, we argue that, beyond affecting people's actual ability to counterargue (Clarkson et al., 2010; Fennis et al., 2004, 2009; Wheeler et al., 2007), regulatory depletion can also alter people's *metacognitive* appraisals of the resistance experience. Broadly defined, metacognition refers to people's thoughts about their thoughts (i.e., a secondary cognition based on a primary cognition: see Petty, Briñol, Tormala, & Wegener, 2007), and considerable work shows that individuals exposed to a persuasive message often reflect upon the resistance experience to inform their response (e.g., Petrocelli, Clarkson, Tormala, & Hendrix, 2010; see Tormala, 2008). It is our contention that regulatory depletion can affect this reflective process by altering people's perceptions of specific features of the resistance process—namely, their counterargument performance.

Indeed, people often reflect upon and make inferences about their counterargument performance after facing a persuasive counterattack (e.g., “Were my counterarguments effective enough to protect my attitude?”; Tormala, Clarkson, & Petty, 2006). Additionally, factors beyond *actual counterargument strength* have been shown to affect people's perceptions of these counterarguments—such as feedback about their performance resisting (Hedges, 1974; Tormala et al., 2006). Finally, people's perceptions about the quality of their counterarguments have been shown to predict attitude change (Hedges, 1974) and influence behavioral intentions (Tormala et al., 2006), critical consequences that occurred irrespective of any differences in actual counterargument strength. Thus, people do form perceptions about their counterargument performance, these perceptions can be affected by external factors, and these perceptions can be consequential for subsequent attitude change apart from any differences in peoples' actual counterarguments.

Our intent is to demonstrate that the experience of depletion can impact the formation of these perceptions of counterargument performance. However, we believe any metacognitive influence of regulatory depletion on perceived counterargument strength is dependent on people's pre-existing expectations of their attitude's performance—expectations we believe are embodied in, among other factors, the amount of certainty people have in their attitude.

### The influence of attitude certainty

Attitude certainty refers to the subjective sense of confidence, clarity, or correctness about an attitude (Krosnick & Petty, 1995; Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007; Tormala & Rucker, 2007). A wealth of research demonstrates that certainty increases an attitude's resistance to counterattitudinal messages (Bassili, 1996; Kelley & Lamb, 1957; Swann, Pelham, & Chidester, 1988; Tormala & Petty, 2002; Visser & Mirabile, 2004). In other words, the experience of high (as opposed to low) certainty has been repeatedly shown to increase an attitude's resistance to persuasion (for a review, see Rucker, Tormala, Petty, & Briñol, 2014). As noted, however, we propose that individuals hold pre-existing expectancies about how their attitude *should* fare in response to persuasive attack, expectancies we believe are biased by attitude certainty. Consequently, because high certainty attitudes are more likely to increase resistance than low certainty attitudes, we contend that people *expect* their high certainty attitudes to be more resistant than their low certainty attitudes.

Moreover, consistent with reference-point reasoning (Holyoak & Gordon, 1983; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), we believe that these expectancies serve as important reference points for any metacognitive inferences that might occur once attitudes of high and low certainty are exposed to counterattack. Indeed, these expectations should inform the manner in which individuals holding high and low certainty attitudes define difficulty during the resistance process. In particular, we believe that these pre-existing expectancies should interact with

resource depletion to determine the conditions under which individuals unexpectedly expend resources to resist. This unexpected use of resources, in turn, should define the diagnostic value of the resistance experience and thus inform any inferences concerning counterargument strength (see Tormala, 2008).

### An expectancy-violation and misattribution hypothesis

Persuasive interactions can be likened to a competitive event, whereby two or more people defend their opposing positions (Ferrara, 2013; Menegatti & Rubini, 2013; Raubolt, 2006; Smith, 1975). Much like any competitive event, a priori expectations should be diagnostic in evaluating one's performance and overall ability. For instance, expecting to perform well in a swimming meet and finishing last would naturally lead any swimmer to doubt his or her abilities. On the other hand, expecting to perform poorly, yet finishing in the top five, would likely boost one's confidence in his or her abilities. In a similar vein, we contend that people hold a priori expectations about their attitudes that are diagnostic to the evaluation of the viability of the attitude following exposure to a counterattack. Moreover, we posit that individuals hold varying expectations concerning the resistance of attitudes held with high versus low certainty, as high certainty attitudes are consistently more resistant to persuasive counterattacks (see Rucker et al., 2014).

Our interest is in the effect of resource depletion on the evaluation of high and low certainty attitudes following exposure to a counterattack, as the experience of resource depletion has been shown to increase the perceived amount of effort expended resisting a persuasive appeal (Wan et al., 2010). Consequently, we predict that the experience of enhanced effort, due to resource depletion, will interact with attitude certainty and the strength of the persuasive counterattack to alter individuals' evaluation of their perceived performance in defending their attitudes through counterarguments and thereby dictate attitude change. Our conceptual model is outlined in Table 1.

When individuals hold attitudes with high certainty, they should expect to experience relative ease resisting a persuasive counterattack. In addition to being affected by one's expectations, perceptions of his/her counterargument performance should be affected by the strength of the persuasive counterattack. Thus, like the boxer who reevaluates his abilities more *negatively* after needing several more rounds than expected to win the fight (e.g., winning by decision after ten rounds rather than the expected second- or third-round knockout), the feeling of increased effort to resist under high resource depletion should be interpreted as diagnostic of the attitude's ineptitude and in turn be misattributed to the perceived *weakness* of one's performance in defending his/her attitude (e.g., “I expected to hold strong, but it took more than I expected to resist this message—the reasons for my attitude must be weaker than I thought.”) and the result should paradoxically be heightened persuasion. We expect this mind-set to be particularly prevalent when depleted individuals encounter strong arguments than when they encounter weak arguments, and subsequently lead to greater attitude change. When people with high attitude certainty are not depleted of their regulatory resources, there should be no perceived increased effort to resist, perceptions of counterargument performance should not be affected, and the effect of argument quality on attitude change should be comparatively attenuated. In other words, depletion is expected to amplify the effect of argument quality on the degree to which high certainty attitudes change in the persuasive context.

Conversely, when individuals hold attitudes with low certainty, they should expect to experience relative difficulty resisting a persuasive counterattack. Thus, like the boxer who reevaluates his abilities *positively* after enduring the entire ten rounds of a fight against an opponent for whom he expected to fall early (e.g., losing by decision after ten rounds rather than the expected second- or third-round knockout), the feeling of increased effort to resist under high resource depletion should be interpreted as diagnostic of the attitude's durability and in turn be misattributed to the perceived *strength* of one's performance in

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