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Engaging in Self-Control Intensifies Desires and Feelings

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Engaging in effortful self-regulation leaves the person in a state of diminished self-regulatory capacity afterward, presumably due to reduced self-regulatory resources. Four experiments found this state to be characterized by an intensification of subjective feelings and desires. Moreover, this intensification accounted for subsequent worsening of self-control.

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reveal that the goals activated by food attributes differing in their hedonic versus functional nature evoke very different trajectories of desire and guilt. While both types of claims provide similarly high levels of desire as they are attached to indulgences, the time course of guilt is very different in nature. Specifically, health claims featuring hedonic attributes evoke an immediate ramp up in desire for the food while guilt is at a low level. Notably, there is a gradual increase in guilt over time, suggesting that people are experiencing an ironic rebound of suppressed guilt. This finding runs counter to an ease of justification argument, which would imply reduced guilt over time. In contrast, functional attributes cause a reduced immediate desire towards temptations, suggesting an immediate devaluation of the product, coupled with a rapid ramp-up in guilt.

Together, our findings reveal that seemingly similar health claims may activate very different levels of health goal accessibility, leading to different dynamics of perceived desire and guilt and hence eventually to opposite consumption patterns of the unhealthy food they are attached to. Our findings have broad relevance to the food industry, and suggest that the nature of attributes emphasized in the health claim can have significant effects on consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Following effortful acts of choice or self-control, people enter into a state that has been called ego depletion, which is defined by a reduced capacity to engage in further executive activities. Behavioral conflicts can be analyzed as motivations between impulse and restraint. Viewed as such, ego depletion represents a weakening of restraint. The assumption is that the impulse itself is unchanged by depletion, although this has not been tested.

The present investigation took a new approach to understanding the relations among depletion, impulse, and restraint. The core hypothesis was that ego depletion would intensify the subjective experience of feelings and desires. That is, we questioned the standard assumption that depletion weakens restraints but leaves feelings and desires unaffected. The behavioral changes that ensue during the depleted state may therefore come from not only a weakening of inner controls and restraints but also from an intensification of feelings and desires. Essentially, evaluative reactions would be intensified by depletion.

Experiment 1 tested the hypothesis that depletion would intensify emotional reactions to specific stimuli. Ego depletion was manipulated with the Stroop procedure. Some participants used their self-control to override the automatically activated information of the known meaning of the word in order to give an answer as to the color of the ink in which the word is printed. Other participants were given a nondepleting version of this task in which columns of Xs were shown and their ink color names given. The dependent measure included both positive and negative emotional responses. We presented participants with pictures known to elicit pleasant and unpleasant reactions and asked them to rate how they felt while looking at each one. The prediction was that ego depletion caused by the incongruent Stroop task would intensify both positive and negative feelings. Results supported the hypothesis: after doing the more difficult and depleting Stroop task, participants reported stronger feelings in response to emotionally evocative pictures, as compared to participants who had done the easy version of the Stroop task and not depleted their resources.

Experiment 2's self-regulatory depletion manipulation was to have participants read aloud a relatively dry, boring passage with lively verbal inflection and accompanying hand gestures. Partici-

pants in the nondepletion condition read aloud the text without specific instructions to be emotional. The outcome measure involved evaluations of stimuli for which most participants would have few or no pre-existing associations. Specifically, participants were asked to rate Chinese characters. Because no one in our sample could speak or read Chinese, these figures had no meaning to them. They could therefore only react to the aesthetic impact of the character as if it were something akin to abstract art or a figure to have tattooed on oneself. Classic work by Zajonc showed that viewers can and do have positive and negative emotional feelings about Chinese characters. Our prediction was that these feelings would be stronger in depleted than in non-depleted participants. The results supported this hypothesis, in that depletion caused people to react relatively strongly to Chinese characters. Participants reported how these characters made them feel, how attractive they were, and how much they liked each of the characters. Overall, depleted participants gave more extreme ratings than non-depleted ones.

In experiment 3, the depletion manipulation asked participants to write an essay without using the letters A or N, whereas participants no-depletion condition were asked to write an essay without using the letters X and Z. Our dependent measures were ratings and consumption of cookies in a taste-testing task. To assess the motivation to consume more cookies, participants rated their desire to have another cookie after finishing each cookie. Participants were left alone to eat and rate the cookies. The results showed that, in line with predictions, depleted participants had stronger desire than non-depleted participants to keep eating more cookies. Thus, depletion intensified the desire to eat another cookie. Consistent with previous research, participants in the depletion condition ate more cookies overall than participants in the no-depletion condition. Even more important, analyses indicated that participants' motivation to eat more cookies mediated the effect of depletion condition on number of cookies consumed.

Experiment 4 tracked subjective feelings over time. First, participants watched a videotape that contained irrelevant words onscreen. Participants in the depletion manipulation were told to "avoid looking at or reading any words that may appear on the screen," while those in the control condition were given no instructions regarding the words on the screen. After the depletion manipulation, participants were given a wrapped gift. They were allowed to open it, but were asked to wait. They used a joystick to report their momentary level of desire to open the gift. The results showed that mean desire to open the package was higher for depleted than non-depleted persons. Thus, intensification of the urge was an enduring consequence of depletion, rather than a fleeting or one-time-only experience. The peak level of desire expressed during the entire period by each depleted participant was higher than the peak level of desire reached by nondepleted participants, on average. Depleted participants were also marginally quicker than nondepleted ones to reach their peak level of desire.

In summary, we reported a series of studies that used multiple different methods and measures to test the hypothesis that depletion intensifies feelings. The depletion tasks involved cognition and emotion, attention and behavior, and inhibiting and enhancing responses. The intensified reactions included emotions and attitudes, good and bad feelings, and approach and avoidance behaviors. In short, depletion enhances feelings and evaluations of stimuli, which contributes to its effect on worsening self-regulation subsequently.