“Faster Is Not Always Better: Regulatory Focus and the Interpretation of Download Time”

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In three studies, we show that a short (0-1 s.) download time leads to decreased online persuasion compared to a moderate one (5-10 s.) when consumers are in a prevention focus. Two explanations are: (1) a conservative bias makes these consumers mindlessly apply conversational norms, and (2) a moderate download time provides a better regulatory fit. Consumers in a promotion focus do not exhibit a conservative bias, and a short download time gives them more value from fit. Hence, short (moderate) is better for promotion (prevention)-focused consumers. We examine whether one or both of these explanations account for the data.

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framed messages that focus on the presence of positives. And by contrast, when the purchase occasion is in the distant future, the frame of the message will not affect its persuasiveness. One reason for these effects may be that temporal perspective alters the way in which individuals cognitively construe the purchase situation (Trope and Liberman 2003). We examined this mechanism through tests of moderation where cognitive construal was manipulated and tests of mediation where cognitive construal was measured.

In Study 1, participants imagined themselves in a purchasing situation that was described as distant (one month away) or proximal (2 days away). Participants were then presented with either a promotion-framed message (e.g., “the satisfaction of getting a good deal”) or a prevention-framed message (e.g., “the satisfaction of never paying too much”). As expected, the prevention-framed message was preferred in the temporally constrained conditions, whereas both messages were equally liked in the distant purchase conditions.

Study 2 tested whether consumers in a concrete, detail-oriented mindset (the type of thinking adopted for proximal events) would be more persuaded by prevention-framed messages, while consumers in an abstract mindset (the type of thinking for distant events) would be equally persuaded by prevention- and promotion-framed messages. Participants in this second study evaluated one of four types of advertisements for athletic shoes. The text of each message was altered to manipulate regulatory focus (promotion/prevention) and construal (abstract/concrete). Consistent with a moderating role of construal level in the temporal effect found in Study 1, participants preferred prevention-framed messages when concrete thinking was emphasized but were indifferent between prevention- and promotion-framed messages when abstract thinking was emphasized.

Study 3 tested whether the perceived temporal immediacy of a purchase differentially affected consumers’ motivations to purchase prevention-framed versus promotion-framed products. Participants thought of a product, which they planned to buy in approximately two weeks that would either help bring about a desirable outcome (promotion) or help prevent an undesirable outcome (prevention). Perceptions of temporal proximity were manipulated through small differences in the instructions (e.g., “relatively soon” vs. “later on”), and the participants’ associated thoughts were coded as representing either a high- or low-level of construal. The results showed that prevention-framed products were viewed more favorably than promotion-framed products in the context of proximal purchases, but that they were viewed similarly in the context of distant purchases. One reason for this effect was the evocation of low-construal thoughts when participants considered purchasing a prevention- (vs. promotion-) framed product in the near future.

Taken together, these results suggest ways in which managers might effectively target consumers at different stages in the purchasing process and identify the cognitive processing underlying consumers’ evaluative responses.

“Faster Is Not Always Better: Regulatory Focus and the Interpretation of Download Time”
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We challenge the assumptions among academics and practitioners that the faster the average download time (DT) experienced while surfing, the more positive consumers’ evaluation of a website will be (e.g., McKinney, Yoon, and Zahedi 2002). Drawing on regulatory focus/fit theory (Higgins 1997; Higgins et al. 2003) and the literature on conversational norms (see Moon 1999), we show that moderate DTs (5-10 s.) can lead to more positive website evaluations than short DTs (0-1 s.). While there is empirical evidence suggesting that long DTs (>10 seconds) negatively impact attitudes toward the object with which the delay is associated compared to short DTs (1 second), no research has examined the impact of short DTs compared to more moderate DTs (5-10 s.), on website evaluation. This is important, as companies are investing significant amounts to achieve DTs lower than one or two seconds globally (Pappalardo 2005).

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997) distinguishes between two strategies that consumers adopt when approaching their goals: a promotion or a prevention focus. This distinction applies to the study of online behavior, given that web-surfing is a goal-directed action (e.g., Alba et al. 1997). Of particular relevance, promotion-focused people adopt eagerness as a strategic inclination (Crowe and Higgins 1997). This inclination should make people prefer a website more, the shorter the average DT, because of a better regulatory fit (Higgins 2003). In contrast, people in a prevention focus adopt vigilance as a strategic inclination, and present a high sensitivity to norms (Crowe and Higgins 1997). For them, a moderate DT (5-10 s.) may generate a more positive website evaluation than a short DT (0-1 s.) for two reasons: first, consumers may have a greater fit experience when DT is moderate rather than short. This regulatory fit has a limit: when DT gets too long (>10 seconds) as the goal approach is disrupted (Nielsen 1993), and hence website evaluation gets adversely affected. A regulatory fit explanation would also predict that web users would find the information they are processing more correct when experiencing fit rather than non-fit (Camacho, Higgins, and Lugur 2003). Also, they should enjoy their web surfing task more when experiencing fit rather than non-fit (Freitas and Higgins 2002).

A second explanation is that because of their conservative bias, consumers in a prevention focus mindlessly apply conversational norms when interacting with a website (i.e., they treat clicking on a link as though they were asking the website a question). A conversational norm which was speculated to extend to human-computer interaction (Moon 1999) is that too fast (too long) an answer is perceived as less credible than an answer provided after a few seconds. We tested whether these explanations were supported in three studies.

In study 1, participants surfed a prevention-framed website for a fictitious sleeping pill. Participants either experienced a short (0-1 s.), a moderate (5-10 s.) or a long (13-18 s.) DT. They then reported their website evaluation. A quadratic contrast showed that the website evaluation was more positive when DT was moderate rather than short/long.

In a second study, we created a website for a home HIV test, and manipulated its content, so that participants would adopt either a promotion (e.g., “the quick and easy FDA Approved home test for everyone, so the eradication of AIDS becomes a reality”) or a prevention focus (e.g., “the FDA Approved home test for detecting the HIV-virus”). Participants either surfed the promotion-framed or the prevention-framed website, and either experienced a short (0-1 s.) or a moderate (5-10 s.) DT. All participants then reported their website evaluation, as well as a source credibility scale and their enjoyment with the task. Results revealed an interaction of regulatory focus and DT, and the analysis of simple effects showed that participants in a promotion (prevention) focus evaluated the website more positively when experiencing a short (moderate) DT. The evaluation of source credibility mediated this effect, and was higher in the fit compared to the non-fit conditions. Also, participants in the fit conditions enjoyed the web surfing task more than participants in the non-fit conditions.
Third study provided a competing test of the regulatory fit and the conversational norm account. All participants surfed the prevention version of the website in Study 1, experiencing either a short or a moderate DT. Subsequently, a third of the participants evaluated the website directly, as in Study 1 (control condition). For those participants, we expected to replicate our findings that a moderate rather than a short DT leads to enhanced website evaluations. A third of participants rated how they felt about their goal pursuit before they evaluated the website. Because their attention was drawn to the source of the experience of fit, we expected the effects in Study 1 to either disappear or be significantly attenuated if regulatory fit was causing the effects observed in Study 1 (Schwarz and Clore 1983). Similarly, a third of participants rated to what extent they felt they applied interpersonal conversational norms to their communication with the website before they evaluated the website. We replicated the effect from Study 1 in the control conditions; the effect disappeared in the fit conditions, but not in the conversational norms conditions. In sum, our data supported the regulatory fit account more than the conversational norm account.

These results show that we can manipulate content to improve the fit between the DT associated with a website and consumers’ regulatory focus. Therefore, DT is not a necessary evil.

“Regulatory Focus and Direct Comparative Ad Framing”
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Which brand do consumers evaluate first in a direct comparative ad (where an advertised brand compares itself with an explicitly-named comparison brand)? How does this temporal sequence of evaluation influence overall persuasion? Importantly, how do consumers evaluate the comparison brand and what are the implications of such evaluations for persuasion? We address these issues by integrating regulatory focus theory with comparative message framing research.

A direct comparative ad frames the advertised brand as better (positive frame; e.g., “Brand A is better than B”) or the comparison brand as worse (negative frame; “Brand B is worse than A”). Promotion-focused people focus more on and display greater eagerness for a positive outcome (advertised brand) than away from its absence (comparison brand). Further, because they desire to secure hits and avoid misses (Higgins 1997), a positively framed comparison permits an inclusion of the advertised brand while not necessarily excluding the comparison brand. Hence, the advertised brand being more effective should not have implications for the evaluations of the comparison brand. In contrast, prevention-focused individuals focus more on the presence of a negative outcome (comparison brand) than on its absence. They emphasize identifying correct rejections and avoiding incorrect ‘hits’. A negative frame indicates that while the comparison brand should be rejected, the advertised brand may be a safe hit. In the positive frame, the comparison brand is merely the absence of a positive, a less appealing proposition for prevention-oriented people. Therefore, avoiding the comparison brand in the negative (vs. positive) frame should lead to less favorable attitudes towards the comparison brand.

We are thus able to predict that promotion-focused participants will evaluate the comparison brand equally across both types of frames while prevention-focused participants will evaluate the comparison brand lower under negative (vs. positive) frames. Also, prevention (promotion) focused participants will evaluate the comparison (advertised) brand first. As a result, prevention (promotion) focused participants will recall more comparison (advertised) brand information. Finally, because promotion (prevention)-focused individuals place lower (greater) weight on prior choices in making future decisions, they may have lower (higher) preference for consistency (PFC). Because of this difference in PFC, promotion-focused participants’ inter-brand ratings should be uncorrelated whereas prevention-focused participants’ ratings should be significantly and negatively correlated.

We tested these predictions in two studies. Our first study was a 2 (focus: promotion/prevention) x 2 (comparative frame: positive/negative) between-subjects design featuring home made comparative ads. Following a focus manipulation, participants viewed one of two comparative ads (positive or negative frame), completed the dependent measures (advertised and comparison brand evaluations, counterbalanced), manipulation checks, and the PFC scale.

We observed a significant frame x focus interaction for advertised brand’s evaluations as well as comparison brand’s evaluations. Promotion-focused participants expressed higher advertised brand evaluations under a positive frame while prevention-focused participants did so under a negative frame. Further, prevention focus led to lower evaluations of the comparison brand under a negative frame while promotion focus resulted in equivalent evaluations across frames. Also, prevention-focused participants exhibited a higher PFC than promotion-focused participants. Finally, inter-brand attitudes were negatively correlated under prevention focus and uncorrelated under promotion focus.

A second study was identical to study 1 except that it featured more dependent measures consisting of two counterbalanced brand cognition probes and a recall task. One brand cognition probe asked participants to “evaluate both brands on a scale of one to seven where 1=extremely bad and 7=extremely good. You can evaluate either brand first.” The second question, presented on a separate page, asked the participants: “which brand did you form an opinion of first?” Next, following a distractor task, participants’ recall about each brand was elicited separately.

Mirroring experiment 1, we found that promotion-focused participants evaluated the advertised brand higher in the positive frame while prevention-focused participants did so in the negative frame. Further, prevention focus led to lower comparison brand evaluations in the negative frame while promotion focus led to equivalent evaluations across frames. Prevention-focused participants were more likely to evaluate the comparison brand first (proportion of initial evaluations: advertised brand=.38; comparison brand=.62). The opposite was true for promotion-focused participants (advertised brand=.75; comparison brand=.25). Also, prevention-focused participants were more likely to form an opinion about the comparison brand first (proportion of first opinions: advertised brand=.43; comparison brand=.57). The opposite held for promotion-focused participants (advertised brand=.73; comparison brand=.27). Finally, promotion-focused individuals recalled more advertised brand information while prevention-focused participants recalled more comparison brand information.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The research presented in this session is centered around the important question of how consumers evaluate the quality of their own and others’ purchase decisions. The session features the work of three research groups, each of which has been examining a specific aspect of this general question. The three papers to be presented in this session are highly synergistic in that the implications of each individual piece of work become more significant if considered in conjunction with those of the other two papers.

Prior research has shown that consumers usually prefer choosing for themselves over having others make choices on their behalf because they believe that they can select the best choice option, therefore maximizing outcome satisfaction. That is, consumers assume that their final evaluation of a decision outcome depends solely on the quality of the outcome itself; however, they may fail to consider that the quality of the decision-making process may also influence this evaluation. The research presented by Botti and McGill investigates this hypothesis by showing that consumers’ evaluation of a decision outcome is a function of the relevance of the affective experiences associated with the decision-making process and the extent to which decision makers see themselves as instrumental in having had these experiences. When the goal of the decision-making task is hedonic, consumers like choosing more than not choosing and this preference is reflected in greater satisfaction with the decision outcome for choosers as compared to non-choosers. Conversely, when the goal of the decision-making task is utilitarian, affective considerations matter less than objective evaluative standards; as a result, consumers’ preference for choosing is mitigated, resulting in a lower difference between choosers’ and non-choosers’ outcome satisfaction.

Hence, in some circumstances, consumers’ satisfaction with their own choices may depend on their perception of the quality of the decision process rather than on that of the decision outcome. In fact, the research presented by Häubl, Dellalert, and Usta suggests that outcome satisfaction may or may not have anything to do with the quality of the outcome. This research shows that, although the availability of personalized recommendations (provided, e.g., by a salesperson, a realtor, or a computer-based decision aid) tends to improve the objective quality of consumers’ product choices, it does not necessarily increase consumer’s satisfaction with their decisions (Häubl and Trifts 2000). The reason? Because this type of decision advice tends to omit undesirable alternatives, consumers must select from an exclusively positive choice set. Although advantageous from the standpoint of decision quality, this lack of differentiation between options can have a negative impact on decision satisfaction. First, it becomes more difficult for consumers to identify the subjectively most attractive option, and this reduces consumers’ subjective assessment of, and satisfaction with, their purchase decisions. Second, to the extent that a consumer’s satisfaction with a purchase decision is a function not only of the attractiveness of the chosen alternative but also the attractiveness of the rejected alternatives (Mellers 2000), not being exposed to any unattractive alternatives can diminish the subjective assessment of the decision.

That said, the research presented by Kruger and Burrus suggests that rejected alternatives tend to have far less of an impact on evaluations of decision quality than one might think. When evaluating the quality of a decision, consumers tend to focus on the objective features of the option chosen and underweight the objective features of the option(s) rejected. As a consequence, decisions tend to be deemed wise when the chosen option is positive and foolish when it is negative—occasionally even when the rejected option(s) are just as positive or negative. This is true not only when evaluating the wisdom of one’s own choices, but also (and perhaps especially) when evaluating the decisions of someone else.

Taken together, the research described in this special session is aimed at providing a better understanding of how consumers evaluate the quality of their own (and others’) decisions. This collection of work not only provides significant new theoretical insights, but it also has important practical implications in terms of consumer welfare, and human well-being more generally. Therefore, it fits this year’s conference theme particularly well. The session is likely to be of interest to a wide range of audiences, particularly those interested in the psychology of consumer choice, consumer decision processes, decision assistance for consumers, and customer satisfaction.

We were very fortunate to have a leading expert in the field, Mary Frances Luce of Duke University, to serve as discussion leader. All three presentations are based on work that is in progress and that is expected to be submitted to a major journal shortly after the conference.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Do the Means Justify the End? The Effect of Choice on Evaluation of Hedonic versus Utilitarian Outcomes”

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Prior research indicates that consumers prefer making their own choices rather than having others choose on their behalf and that they are more satisfied with self-chosen as opposed to externally-dictated outcomes (Brehm 1966; Langer 1975). These results have been recently challenged by findings demonstrating that, although people generally prefer choosing, choosers are not always more satisfied than non-choosers. This more recent research builds on the idea that consumers’ utility derives both from the decision process and the decision outcome (Thaler 1985) to suggest that the evaluation of an outcome is a function not only of its objective worth but also of the manner in which it is obtained. For example, choosers’ satisfaction with a desirable outcome is greater than that of non-choosers because they enjoy contemplating a greater number of pleasant thoughts during the decision task; conversely, choosers’ dissatisfaction with an undesirable outcome is exacerbated relative to that of non-choosers by the greater number of task-related unpleasant thoughts (Botti and Iyengar 2004). This enhancing effect of the choice-based affect on outcome evaluation has however been found only when choosing is perceived as instrumental in determining the quality of the outcome. In this case, relative to non-choosers, choosers’ satisfaction for a desirable outcome is augmented by self-credit whereas their dissatisfaction is exacerbated by self-blame. On the contrary, when the quality of the outcome is perceived as being virtually independent from the choosers’ actions, the act of choice does not seem to add any value to the worth of the selected item (Botti and McGill 2006).
These prior studies have nevertheless investigated choice only in relation to hedonic consumption. It is possible therefore that the enhancing effects of choice on outcome satisfaction may be restricted to such hedonic contexts. Hedonic tasks are inherently self-rewarding whereas utilitarian tasks are undertaken to pursue higher-end goals. Further, affective considerations are usually more important in the former than in the latter case (Pham 1998). Hence, choice-based affect may influence satisfaction more in hedonic domains than in utilitarian ones. That is, how one comes to an experience may affect satisfaction more for hedonic than utilitarian outcomes, which are established mostly on objective, external standards. The present research tests this assertion.

Specifically, we hypothesize that in the positive domains studied in the present research, perception of oneself as being instrumental in the experience of a hedonic outcome augments the pleasure derived from it. Consequently, choosers will be more satisfied than non-choosers because they can credit themselves for the fun and excitement associated with the hedonic outcome. Conversely, utilitarian decision outcomes’ evaluation will depend more on its objective value than on the affective value associated with the decision process. Hence, as long as utilitarian outcomes are perceived as meeting specific objective standards, choosers’ satisfaction with those outcomes will be more similar to that of non-choosers.

We test these predictions in two studies in which the hedonic versus utilitarian nature of the decision task was determined only by the goals assigned to participants. The first study was a 2 x 2 in which participants engaged in a computer-simulated visit to a photography museum. The hedonic goal was manipulated by asking participants to pretend being tourists visiting the museum just for fun; the utilitarian goal was instead manipulated by asking them to pretend being art students visiting the museum to collect material for their bachelor’s thesis. Choosers allegedly selected the format of their visit among four options, whereas non-choosers were informed that the museum’s curators had chosen the format for them. Unbeknownst to participants, however, they all eventually experienced the same virtual visit. As predicted, participants’ perceived value of the decision-making task was moderated by the goal of the visit: Participants liked choosing more, and were consistently less willing to give away the choice opportunity, in the hedonic as compared to the utilitarian condition. In addition, choosers liked their visit more than non-choosers when the goal of the visit was hedonic, but there was no difference between choosers and non-choosers’ satisfaction when the decision-making goal was utilitarian.

This research contributes to prior studies challenging the assertion that choice is always beneficial by showing that choosers were more satisfied than non-choosers only when the goal of consumption was hedonic but not when the goal was utilitarian. When the goal is hedonic, the value of the alternative is inherently subjective and is experienced more positively as a consequence of how it was obtained. This research supports the view that pleasant tastes, smells, touches feel different, better, depending on how one came to experience them. By contrast, when the objective is utilitarian, then the means by which the outcome was obtained does not affect its value.

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Many important consumer purchase decisions in domains with heterogeneous preferences are made in the presence of some form of personalized recommendations that are based on an understanding of a consumer’s subjective preference. Such decision assistance may be provided either by a human advisor (e.g., a salesperson or a realtor) or by a computer-based decision aid (e.g., an electronic recommendation agent). It has been shown that the availability of personalized recommendations tends to improve the objective quality of consumers’ product choices, and that the magnitude of these effects can be substantial (Häubl and Trifts 2000). However, this prior research also revealed that, despite these significant increases in objective decision quality, consumers tend not to feel any more satisfied with their choices when these choices are made in the presence of personalized recommendations.

The objective of the present paper is to explain these paradoxical findings. Our central thesis is that the availability of personalized recommendations has separate, opposing effects on objective and subjective decision outcomes, and that these effects are driven by the particular representation that these recommendations take on.

The first effect is based on the fact that the provision of personalized recommendations typically involves the pre-screening of a large set of available alternatives by an agent external to the consumer and the sorting of alternatives in terms of their likely attractiveness to the consumer. Consequently, the availability of