“Regulatory Focus and Direct Comparative Ad Framing”

Shailendra Pratap Jain, Indiana University, USA
Charles D. Lindsey, State University of New York at Buffalo, USA
Nidhi Agrawal, Northwestern University, USA
Durairaj Maheswaran, New York University, USA

Two studies use regulatory focus theory to examine the effectiveness of comparative advertisements. Negative (vs. positive) comparative frames lead to symmetric attitudes towards the advertised and comparison brands for prevention-focused respondents. These respondents exhibit higher (lower) evaluations for the advertised (comparison) brand. In contrast, for promotion-focused individuals, positive (vs. negative) frames lead to more favorable attitudes toward the advertised brand, with no difference in attitude across frames for the comparison brand. Prevention- and promotion-focused respondents focus on different brands while making comparisons. Prevention-focused individuals evaluate the comparison brand first. Promotion-focused people evaluate the advertised brand first.

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A 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.

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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.

REFERENCES:


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 two other 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, Dellaert, 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”
Simona Botti, Cornell University
Ann L. McGill, University of Chicago

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 goal was utilitarian.

Study 2 replicated these results even when the outcome in the no-choice condition was dictated by fate rather than by an expert, and the decision outcome was not directly experienced but simply imagined. This study was again a 2 x 2 in which participants were asked to imagine receiving a massage in a spa. Participants in the hedonic condition were told that the massage was a way to reward oneself for recent academic success, while those in the utilitarian condition were told that the massage was intended to heal mild back pains and a state of general soreness. After being shown the same list of five different massages, with relative brief descriptions, participants were told that they would use a gift certificate to buy the massage. In the choice condition the certificate allowed for participants to freely choose one of the massages, whereas in the no-choice condition the certificate specified what massage they would receive. Results show that choosers liked the choice-task more than non-choosers and hedonic participants liked the choice task more than utilitarian ones. In addition, choosers were more satisfied with their massage than non-choosers when the decision-making goal was hedonic; however, 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.

References

“The Opposing Effects of Personalized Recommendations on Objective and Subjective Decision Outcomes”

Gerald Häubl, University of Alberta
Benedict G.C. Dellaert, Erasmus University Rotterdam
Murat Usta, University of Alberta

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