Special Session Summary  How Regulatory Focus Influences Consumer Evaluations, Judgments and Choices
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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
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“Factors Determining the Persuasiveness of Promotion- and Prevention-focused Appeals”
Ginger L. Pennington, Jennifer L. Aaker, & Neal J. Roese

An increasing amount of empirical evidence points to the important role of consumers’ underlying motivational states in shaping reactions to marketing stimuli. Advertisements and persuasive messages often convey “motivationally loaded” information that may encourage consumers to view a product or service in either approach or avoidance terms. For example, promotion-focused advertisements emphasize the attainment of optimal outcomes (such as getting a great deal), whereas prevention-focused messages emphasize safety from unwanted outcomes (such as paying too much). An important issue for marketers is to understand the conditions under which messages of each type are most likely to result in favorable consumer attitudes. The present research examines two factors that influence the effectiveness of promotion- versus prevention-framed messages: a consumer’s temporal perspective and level of construal (i.e., emphasis on concrete versus abstract ways of thinking).

Recent findings (e.g., Pennington & Roese, in press) suggest that a promotion focus on potential gains tends to predominate when a goal lies in the distant future. As the time to goal realization nears, however, emphasis on promotion declines to a level on par with prevention concerns. The current research examines the implications of this process for consumer evaluation. In the first study, we examined whether the amount of time until a purchase would influence the persuasiveness of promotion and prevention-framed messages. Based on the previously observed temporal pattern of regulatory focus, we hypothesized that consumer attitudes towards persuasive messages would be most positive under conditions of “fit” between regulatory focus and temporal perspective (i.e., emphasis on concrete versus abstract ways of thinking).

In Study 1, participants imagined themselves in a purchasing situation (automobile purchase) that was described as distant (one month away) or proximal (2 days away). Participants were then presented with a promotion- or prevention-framed persuasive message. The promotion-framed message emphasized the presence of positive outcomes (e.g., “the satisfaction of getting a good deal”), whereas the prevention-framed message presented the same information but focused on the absence of negative outcomes (e.g., “the satisfaction of never paying too much”). As expected, the promotion-framed message resulted in higher purchase involvement and more favorable attitudes than the prevention-framed message for participants in the distant condition. When participants anticipated a more immediate purchase, however, the opposite pattern of preferences emerged. These results suggest ways in which managers might effectively target consumers at different stages in the purchasing process.

A factor closely intertwined with temporal perspective is the extent to which individuals construe events on an abstract versus concrete level. Recent work by Liberman, Trope, and others (e.g., Liberman et al., 1999), for example, has shown that increasing temporal distance broadens individuals’ thinking, leading people to focus more on the ultimate meaning of an event as opposed to its concrete details. Given this correspondence between temporal perspective and cognitive construal, we hypothesized that cognitive construal would serve as an important moderating factor in determining the persuasiveness of promotion- and prevention-focused appeals. A second study was designed to test whether consumer attitudes towards advertisements would be most positive under conditions of “fit” between regulatory focus and construal. Study 2 examined the hypothesis that promotion-focused messages would be most persuasive when framed at an abstract level (the type of thinking typically adopted for distant events), whereas prevention-focused messages would be most persuasive at a concrete, detail-oriented level (the type of thinking adopted for proximal events).

In Study 2, participants 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). The predicted interactive effect of regulatory focus and cognitive construal was confirmed for consumers’ attitudes towards the brand, attitudes toward the advertisement, and behavioral intentions. Results indicate that this effect was driven primarily by the preference for low- versus high-level construal in the prevention-focus condition. Consistent with our hypotheses, consumers appear to react most favorably to detail-oriented product appeals when prevention or loss-avoidance goals are emphasized.

The results of this research emphasize the importance of regulatory focus in shaping consumer responses to persuasive messages and identify two key factors that moderate the influence of promotion and prevention-framed messages on consumer attitudes. Our results suggest that marketers should pay careful attention to emphasizing “fit” between regulatory focus, temporal framing, and cognitive construal when designing persuasive appeals.

“When Do Consumers Use Conceptual Versus Experiential Processing Heuristics?”
Rui Zhu & Joan Meyers-Levy

Existing literature suggests that there are at least two ways in which consumers may render product judgments when their processing motivation is limited. One means entails relying on common-sense implications associated with a salient conceptual cue. For example, research indicates that relatively unmotivated consumers often focus on conceptual cues consisting of salient consensual data (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991), such as a summary statistic that reflects the general public’s views about the focal issue (e.g., 70% of consumers prefer Coke). In such a case, they generally base their judgments on the perceived favorableness of this conceptual cue (e.g., they simply reason that if 70% of consumers prefer this brand, it must be good). We refer to these sorts of salient logic-based cues that can serve such a heuristic purpose as conceptual heuristic cues.

A second far less investigated means of judgment formation entails relying on individuals’ internal, experiential sensations that they happen to feel at the time of judgment formation (e.g., Meyers-Levy and Malaviya 1999). Here, individuals base their judgments on nonsemantic, subjective body sensations that they may experience upon exposure to some data. This occurs frequently because they (mis)attribute the sensation to the appeal of the focal issue or object. For example, exposure to a product message that contains pictures of highly attractive people may induce the consumer to experience spontaneously a very positive visceral sensation. This
sensation, then, may be misattributed to the actual attributes of the target object, prompting the individual to ascribe a highly favorable judgment to the product. We refer to the data that engenders such experiential sensations as experiential cues.

Using regulatory focus theory as the conceptual framework, the current research explores whether these two mechanisms are indeed distinct and aims to identify moderating factors. A growing stream of empirical studies suggests that people’s regulatory focus influences their strategic inclinations, including their risk preferences. For example, Crowe and Higgins (1997) showed that individuals with a promotion focus apparently experienced a visceral state of eagerness or zeal, which caused them to use relatively risky strategies. In contrast, individuals with a prevention focus appeared to be cool-headed, vigilant and possibly conceptually focused, which prompted them to employ conservative strategies. Yet another instance of support is offered in the research of Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1996). They found that individuals who focused on positive outcomes, responded in a similar manner as did those who by disposition tended to rely on their experiential sensations. By contrast, individuals who focused on negative outcomes, responded in a like manner as did those who by disposition relied on more rational, conceptual material.

The preceding findings suggest the possibility that promotion and prevention focus individuals may be differentially sensitive to experiential data versus conceptual information. Specifically, we hypothesize that under fairly low motivation conditions, individuals who adopt a promotion (prevention) focus will be more sensitive to and base their judgments on the implications of experiential (conceptual) cues versus conceptual (experiential) cues.

To test the proposed thesis, the following study was conducted. First, to limit processing motivation, participants took part in a computer survey in large groups and were informed that they could leave as soon as they finished the study. Next, participants performed an initial task intended to manipulate their adoption of either a promotion or prevention focus. Following this, participants were shown several ads. The target ad touted a new brand of athletic shoes. The target ad displayed a salient headline, a clear picture of the shoes, several claims about the shoes’ features, and pictures of a number of people who presumably used the shoe, each annotated by a quote that extolled a shoe benefit. Both a conceptual and an experiential heuristic cue were represented in the ad, which were otherwise identical. Specifically, these two types of cues varied in favorableness orthogonally such that when the conceptual (experiential) cue was positive, the experiential (conceptual) cue was negative. The ad headline presented the conceptual heuristic cue. In the positive conceptual cue condition, it stated that in tests, 7 out of 10 consumers preferred the target brand of shoe. In the relatively negative conceptual cue condition, this statistic was 5 out of 10. The experiential cue came in the form of the pictures of the presumed users of the shoe. The favorableness of this cue was manipulated by varying the visual attractiveness of the users. Either they looked like the type of attractive people typically displayed in ads (e.g., well groomed and fit) or they appeared more average looking and realistic (e.g., less perfect facial and body appearance). Next, participants were administered judgment as well thought-listing measures. Finally, they completed an individual difference scale on private self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975), which assessed the extent to which one attended to his or her inner feelings or sensations. We anticipated that the aforementioned predictions might only occur for participants who, by disposition, are relatively high versus low in private self-consciousness.

Consistent with our theorizing, findings revealed that promotion focus individuals based their judgments on the favorableness of the experiential cue and judged the target product more favorably when this cue was more favorable (and the conceptual cue was relatively unfavorable), whereas prevention focus individuals based their product evaluations on the favorableness of the conceptual cue, producing more favorable judgments when that cue was more favorable (and the experiential cue was relatively unfavorable). Moreover, such effects only occurred for participants who were chronically high versus low in private self-consciousness.

**“Sequent Impulsive Choices Within a Consumption Episode: The Role of Regulatory Focus”**

Utpal M. Dholakia and Richard P. Bagozzi

Trips to the mall or the supermarket are examples of consumption episodes, in which consumers make many purchase or consumption decisions within a short and contiguous window of time (Dhar and Simonson 1999). Sequent choices in such consumption episodes, i.e., choices made soon after one or more prior choices, have generally been studied by researchers using a cognitive lens. For instance, a large body of research on context effects shows that information processed during prior choices influences such aspects of a sequent choice as which attributes are used, how they are weighted, and which alternative is chosen by consumers (e.g., Dhar and Simonson 1999; Simonson and Tversky 1992).

But such choices are also influenced by the consumer’s motivational state. For instance, when many tempting products and offers are encountered by the consumer after the other during a shopping trip, choices to purchase or not may often times be impulsive in that they are made without any prior planning, springing instead from a sudden and intense desire to act (Baumeister 2002; Rook 1987). In this paper, our interest is in studying how sequent impulsive choices are influenced by prior impulsive choices within a consumption episode, from a motivational perspective.

In contrast to research on cognitive contextual influences, we argue that independent of the attributes or strategies of prior choice, the motivational state of the consumer is influenced through the process of engaging in the prior choice within a consumption episode, and this in turn, can influence how sequent choices are made afterward. Specifically, we hypothesize that participating in a prior impulsive choice will mitigate the impulsivity of choice in the sequent task within a consumption episode. We call this the sequent mitigation effect, and argue later on that the basis of its influence is motivational, in that it occurs because the sequent choice task musters a lower level of desire on account of having participated in a previous impulsive choice beforehand. In Experiment One, we provide evidence of this effect by showing that participants responding to an impulsive choice scenario choose significantly less impulsively when it is presented after a prior impulsive choice scenario relative to when it is presented first.

Further, in seeking to understand possible mechanisms underlying this effect, we consider the role of the consumer’s regulatory focus as a moderator. We hypothesize that a promotion focus should maintain the consumer’s desire to choose impulsively in the sequent choice, whereas a prevention focus should reduce the consumer’s desire in the sequent choice. Our emphases in this research is on those aspects of the two regulatory foci that influence the experience of desires. Emerging research shows that under a promotion focus, the individual’s strategic inclination is to approach matches to desired end-states. Such individuals are therefore more eager to avoid errors of omission (i.e., missing an emerging opportunity for accomplishment), resulting in a reflexive inclination to act. In contrast, a prevention focus fosters a tendency to avoid mismatches to undesired end-states, with an orientation toward maintaining the status quo. Such individuals prefer cogni-
tive or behavioral courses that avoid *errors of commission* (i.e., making a mistake from acting rashly). Several studies support these differences (e.g., Crowe and Higgins 1997; Liberman et al. 1999).

These findings all provide support for our reasoning that the orientation of open-mindedness, the preference for change and risk-seeking all fostered by the promotion focus, should be conducive to triggering desire again in the sequent impulsive choice, even after having participated in a prior choice. In contrast, an orientation of risk-aversion, the preference for stability and caution supported by the prevention focus, should lead to a reduced desire in the sequent choice task. As a result, those with a promotion focus should show little or no mitigation of impulsivity, whereas those with a prevention focus should show a marked mitigation, in the sequent choice task.

We consider both, dispositional and situational aspects of regulatory focus, studying its role as a situational variable in Experiment Two, and as a dispositional characteristic in Experiment Three. In Experiment Two, we tested these hypotheses by temporarily increasing the accessibility of regulatory focus among our participants through emphasizing either potential gains or potential losses. In Experiment Three, where participants were shoppers in malls in six US cities, we conducted the study through self-administered computer kiosks used for commercial marketing research. In this case, we measured the participants’ regulatory focus through the elicitation of their chronic sensitivities to positive and negative outcomes.

In all three Experiments, our hypotheses were generally supported. Interestingly, we also found that the first choice of participants responding to both choices did not significantly influence impulsivity of second choice, ruling out a strictly cognitive explanation for our results. We wish to present the results of these three experiments at ACR.