Motivational Influences in Consumer Behavior: the Role of Regulatory Focus

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Special Session
Motivational Influences in Consumer Behavior: The Role of Regulatory Focus
Promotion and Prevention in Consumer Decision Making: A Propositional Inventory
Michel Tuan Pham and E. Tory Higgins (Columbia University)

Drawing on existing empirical evidence and new conceptual analyses, the authors offer 38 theoretical propositions about the effects of promotion and prevention on consumer decision making. These propositions are organized along the traditional stages of the decision making process postulated by standard consumer behavior theory (i.e., need recognition, information search, consideration set formation, evaluation, choice, and post-choice processes). While some of these propositions have already received empirical support, most await formal empirical testing. This propositional inventory can thus be viewed as a research agenda for studying the role of regulatory focus in consumer decision making.

Understanding Impulsives’ Unwise Eating Choices
Jaideep Sengupta and Rongrong Zhou (HKUST)
This research examines why some people (eating impulsives) tend to make unwise eating choices. Drawing upon diverse theoretical perspectives on impulsive consumption, goal representation, and regulatory focus, we propose a mechanism whereby eating impulsives (vs. non-impulsives) spontaneously develop a promotion focus upon exposure to a hedonically tempting snack such as chocolate cake; their subsequent decision to consume the snack is guided by this promotion orientation. A set of four experiments provides support for this mechanism and suggests ways of correcting such impulsive eating tendencies. Theoretical and practical implications of our findings are discussed.

The Influence of Hedonic and Regulatory Focus Framing on Message Persuasion
Prashant Malaviya and C. Miguel Brendl (INSEAD)
Two types of message framings have been distinguished, regulatory frames (highlighting a promotion versus prevention outcome), and hedonic frames (highlighting a pleasurable or painful outcome). With regulatory framing two effects have been documented: in the matching effect a message is more persuasive when its regulatory frame matches the regulatory goal orientation of the message recipient; and in the fit effect the message is more persuasive when the regulatory frame is compatible with the means of goal attainment implied in the message. In the present research, we identify conditions when both these effects are reversed. These data support an inhibition-disinhibition model of message processing.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
Motivational Influences in Consumer Behavior: The Role of Regulatory Focus
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SESSION OVERVIEW

The objective of this special session is to present recent theoretical advances and empirical studies investigating the role of promotion and prevention self-regulation in persuasion and decision making. In his regulatory-focus theory, Higgins (1998) proposed two distinct self-regulatory systems. The first, called “promotion,” regulates nurturance needs and those motives related to aspiration and accomplishment. The second, called “prevention,” regulates security needs and those motives related to safety and responsibilities. These two systems are distinct, not only in the kinds of needs and motives that they regulate, but also in the types of strategies and means that these systems invoke to fulfill these needs and motives. To achieve a given desirable end-state, the promotion system relies primarily on approach strategies and means. The prevention system, in contrast, relies primarily on avoidance strategies and means. The chronic and momentary activation of these two systems has a variety of motivational consequences as suggested by the three presentations in this special session.

The first presentation by Michel Pham and Tory Higgins titled “Promotion and Prevention in Consumer Decision Making: A Propositional Inventory” advances altogether 38 theoretical propositions about the effect of regulatory focus on different stages of consumer decision making. From problem recognition and information search to choice and post-choice reactions, each stage in consumer’s decision making is posited to be differentially influenced by promotion vs. prevention self-regulation. For example, in terms of decision rules, promotion focus is suggested to be associated with greater reliance on conjunctive and elimination-by-aspect-type rules, whereas prevention focus is suggested to be associated with greater reliance on conjunctive and elimination-by-aspect-type rules. This presentation sheds light on many interesting areas of future research and serves as research agenda for researchers who are interested in motivational influences in consumer behavior.

Jaideep Sengupta and Rongrong Zhou examine why some people make unwise eating choices with regard to hedonically appealing but unhealthy food options. They propose that exposure to a tempting food triggers a heightened promotion focus (Zhou and Pham 2004) among impulsives. Such a promotion focus involves an emphasis on the potential upsides of consuming the food (e.g., great taste) while potential downsides (e.g., high calories) are suppressed, thus leading impulsives to choose the hedonically appealing but unhealthy food options. They propose that states of promotion focus after a hedonic choice has been made would reduce the overall satisfaction associated with the earlier decision.

In the third presentation, Prashant Malaviya and Miguel Brendl examine how message framing and the regulatory goal orientation of the message recipient interact to determine the level of persuasion. In particular, they examine message framing along two dimensions: regulatory frames (highlighting a promotion versus prevention outcome), and hedonic frames (highlighting a pleasurable or painful outcome). They conducted experiments by manipulating four message frames (gain, non-gain, loss, or non-loss) and two regulatory goal orientations of the message recipient (promotion versus prevention). Overall the results are consistent with a disinhibition model that they have proposed. That is, a regulatory goal orientation (e.g., promotion focus) activates mental representations that are compatible both on the hedonic dimension and on the regulatory focus dimension (e.g., gains), inhibits mental representations that are compatible only on one of the two dimensions (e.g., non-gains, non-losses), and dis-inhibits representations that are compatible on neither dimensions (e.g., losses), where disinhibition has the equivalent effect as activation. In a message persuasion context, activation and disinhibition result in greater persuasion than inhibition. Their results also suggest that the matching effect and fit effect that have been documented in previous literature can be reversed under certain conditions.

At the conclusion of the presentations, Bob Wyer led the discussion. He highlighted the similarities and differences across papers and provided insights on directions for future research.

“Promotion and Prevention in Consumer Decision Making: A Propositional Inventory”
Michel Tuan Pham, Columbia University
E. Tory Higgins, Columbia University

In a recent chapter (Pham and Higgins 2005), the authors discuss how regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1998) can be drawn upon to explain a variety of consumer decision making phenomena. They clarify some common misconceptions about the theory and draw on existing empirical evidence and new conceptual analyses to advance a series of 38 theoretical propositions about the effects of promotion and prevention on consumer decision making. These propositions are organized along the traditional stages of the decision making process postulated by standard consumer behavior theory (i.e., problem recognition, information search, consideration set formation, etc.). Some of these propositions have already received empirical support, but most await formal empirical testing in consumer research. This propositional inventory can thus be viewed as a research agenda for studying the role of regulatory focus in consumer decision making. The authors hope that this agenda will help revive consumer and marketing scholars’ interest in the motivational analysis of consumer decision making. Examples of theoretical propositions being advanced are provided below.

The authors propose, for example, that states of promotion versus prevention will result in different perceptions of discrepancies between actual and desired states, hence in different experiences of problem recognition. Under promotion consumers will pay relatively more attention to the desired state compared to the actual state, whereas under prevention consumers will pay relatively more attention to the actual state compared to the desired state. In general, promotion-oriented consumers will tend to experience the situation as a “need to be met,” whereas prevention-oriented consumers will tend to experience the same situation as a “problem to be fixed” (Proposition 1.1). With respect to information search, the authors propose that promotion-focused consumers will engage in relatively more internal search than prevention-focused consumers, whereas prevention-focused consumers will
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engage in relatively more external search than promotion-focused consumers (Proposition 2.3). The authors also propose that, under promotion, information will be searched in a more global and “top-down” manner, whereas under prevention information will be searched in a more local and “bottom-level,” serial manner (Proposition 2.7). With respect to consideration set formation, the authors propose that the consideration set of promotion-oriented consumers will generally be larger than the one of prevention-oriented consumers (Proposition 3.1). The authors also propose that, holding the size of the set constant, the consideration set of promotion-oriented consumers will be more heterogeneous than the one of prevention-oriented consumers (Proposition 3.2). The authors further propose that under promotion, consideration sets will tend to be formed through the gradual inclusion of alternatives, whereas under prevention, consideration sets will tend to be formed through the gradual exclusion of alternatives (Proposition 3.3).

With respect to the evaluation of alternatives, the authors propose that under promotion, consumers will tend to rely on more heuristic modes of evaluation; under prevention, consumers will tend to rely on more systematic modes of evaluation (Proposition 4.2). The authors also propose that promotion will foster greater reliance on personal preferences and private attitudes, whereas prevention will foster greater reliance on group preferences and social norms (Proposition 4.3). With respect to choice, the authors propose that under promotion, choice within the consideration set will be guided by a process of selection or acceptance, whereas under prevention, choice within the consideration set will be guided by a process of elimination or rejection (Proposition 5.1). The authors also posit greater reliance on conjunctive and lexicographic rules under promotion and greater reliance conjunctive and elimination-by-aspect-type rules under prevention (Propositions 5.2 and 5.3). The authors further propose that in choices involving a default option, prevention-oriented consumers will be more likely to choose the default than promotion-oriented consumers (Proposition 5.5). The authors additionally propose that promotion and prevention will moderate the well-known context effects in consumer choice. For instance, the authors predict that the “attraction” effect will be stronger among promotion-focused consumers than among prevention-focused consumers (Proposition 5.8). However, the “compromise” effect will be stronger among prevention-focused consumers than among promotion-focused consumers (Proposition 5.9).

Finally, the authors propose that promotion and prevention will have significant influences on post-choice processes. For example, satisfaction from desirable outcomes should be more intense under promotion than under prevention, whereas dissatisfaction from undesirable outcomes should be more intense under prevention than under promotion (Proposition 6.1). In addition, promotion-focused consumers will be more likely to experience post-decisional dissonance and regret about errors of omission, whereas prevention-focused consumers will be more likely to experience post-decisional dissonance and regret about errors of commission (Proposition 6.3). Additional theoretical propositions are offered in the chapter (Pham and Higgins, 2005), along with detailed theoretical and empirical rationales.

“Understanding Impulsives’ Unwise Eating Choices”
Jaideep Sengupta, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
Rongrong Zhou, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Around 1.7 billion people worldwide are overweight. People who are overweight are subject to higher risks of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure etc. In addition, problems created by weight excess have led to huge health care costs. Apart from physical inactivity, unhealthy dietary habit is the primary cause of overweight and obesity. Many people often seem unable to resist temptation when faced with hedonically appealing yet unhealthy food options. This research examines why some people (eating impulsives) tend to make unwise eating choices.

We draw together knowledge from three different areas—impulsive behavior, regulatory focus theory, and goal structure theory—to identify and provide evidence for one possible mechanism underlying the (usually unwise) eating choices of impulsive versus non-impulsive people. We propose that self-regulatory goals known as promotion and prevention (Higgins 1998) guide people’s choices of hedonic but unhealthy food. Specifically, we propose a mechanism whereby eating impulsives (vs. non-impulsives) spontaneously develop a promotion focus upon exposure to a hedonically tempting food. In turn, this leads to an emphasis on the potential upsides of consuming the food (e.g., great taste) while potential downsides (e.g., high calories) are suppressed, thus leading impulsives to choose the hedonically appealing food. Four experiments provided support for this mechanism and suggested ways of correcting such impulsive eating tendencies.

In experiment 1, all participants were exposed to either a hedonic snack or a non-hedonic snack and later filled out a measure of regulatory focus (Higgins et al. 1994). Results from this experiment suggested that mere exposure to a hedonic food induced a different regulatory focus for high versus low impulsives. High impulsives exposed to the hedonic snack manifested a significantly greater promotion focus, as measured by responses on a completely unrelated task (friendship strategies), compared with low impulsives. Of importance, this difference cannot be attributed to a chronic difference in regulatory focus amongst the two groups, since exposure to a non-hedonic snack did not yield any differences on the regulatory focus measure. In other words, the results confirmed that high impulsives are not intrinsically more promotion focused than low impulsives. Rather, it is the exposure to a hedonic food stimulus that triggers the observed difference in regulatory focus.

Experiment 2 was conducted to test the mediating role of a greater promotion focus in impulsives’ eating behavior. Results from this experiment suggested that faced with a choice between a tempting cake and a healthy salad, greater levels of eating impulsivity produced higher intentions to eat the cake. More importantly, mediation analyses suggested that eating impulsives’ greater tendency of choosing the hedonic food (i.e., the cake) was mediated by a concomitant increase in promotion focus.

One objective of this research is also to identify a corrective mechanism for impulsive behavior. If impulsives’ eating behavior is indeed driven by the heightened promotion focus activated upon exposure to a hedonic food, it should be possible to rectify such behavior by inducing a counteracting goal, i.e., a prevention focus, which would sensitize even impulsive people to the negative aspects of consuming hedonic food. We argue, therefore, that the situational induction of a prevention focus will reduce the propensity of impulsives to consume hedonically appealing, but unhealthy food. Experiment 3 was conducted to test this hypothesis. As in previous experiments, participants were asked to choose from a hedonic snack and a healthy snack. Before they made the choice, for half of the participants, a prevention focus was manipulated by two totally unrelated tasks: a word-categorization task and a proof-reading task. Results from this experiment showed that under baseline conditions, replicating our earlier results, high impulsives were more likely to choose the cake as compared to low impulsives. However, when a prevention focus was induced, high impulsives were less likely to choose the hedonic snack. In fact they did not differ from the low impulsives.
We have argued that impulsive people tend to develop a heightened promotion focus when exposed to hedonic food; such promotion focus in turn guides increased choice of the hedonic food by highlighting the potential benefits of consuming such a food. Following this line of reasoning, after a hedonic choice has been made, if impulsive people are asked to evaluate satisfaction with their earlier choice while under the influence of an externally-induced prevention focus, the downsides arising from their earlier decision (e.g., weight gain) should become more salient. This mismatch in regulatory focus between the time of choice and the time of reporting post-choice satisfaction should lower post-choice satisfaction as compared to a situation where impulsive people stay in a promotion focus even after choice. Experiment 4 was conducted to test this possibility. Results showed that even after a hedonic choice is made, inducing a prevention focus post-choice decreased the level of satisfaction with that choice; thus providing a first step towards correcting the impulsive behavior in the future.

This research contributes to the impulsive behavior literature by identifying a possible mechanism underlying the eating choices of impulsive versus non-impulsive people. It also offers something of practical interest for those looking to correct impulsive eating behavior. Finally, the implications of this research to goal representation theory and regulatory focus theory was discussed in the presentation.

“The Influence of Hedonic and Regulatory Focus Framing on Message Persuasion”
Prashant Malaviya, INSEAD
C. Miguel Brendl, INSEAD

Research on the regulatory goal framing of persuasive messages can be broadly classified into two effects. In the matching effect, a message is more persuasive when there is correspondence between the regulatory focus frame of the message and the regulatory goal orientation of the message recipient. Thus, this effect predicts that a person in a prevention goal orientation would be more persuaded by a loss or a non-loss frame while a person in a promotion goal orientation would be more persuaded by a gain or non-gain frame.

The second phenomenon called the fit effect (Higgins 2000, 2002) posits that because people derive value from pursuing a goal with means that fit their goal, a message that conveys a means that fits the goal would be more persuasive. Specifically, a message about a promotion oriented goal is more effective when the message conveys a gain as means to approaching the goal rather than avoiding a non-gain, and a message about a prevention oriented goal is more effective when the message conveys avoiding a loss as a means to the goal, as opposed to approaching a non-loss (Higgins 2000, 2002; Lee and Aaker 2004).

Although research has provided support for the matching and fit effects, it has generally focused on one or the other. As Higgins (1997, 2000) observed, message framing based on the regulatory focus dimension is independent of framing on the hedonic dimension, with distinct effects. This suggests that understanding how frames interact with goals would require varying frames on both hedonic and regulatory focus dimensions, and varying the regulatory goal orientation of the person independently.

Research by Brendl, Higgins and Lemm (1995) adopted such an experimental design. These authors found that respondents who had a chronic promotion orientation were sensitive to monetary gains (promotion outcome) and were not sensitive to monetary non-loss (prevention outcome), a result consistent with the matching effect, but were also sensitive to losses and insensitive to non-gains, a finding that is inconsistent with the matching effect. Moreover, the assumption that gains fit a promotion goal better than non-gains also cannot account for these results because this assumption is silent on how well losses fit a promotion goal.

To account for their findings, Brendl et al. proposed an information processing model that assumes inhibitory associations between mental representations that vary along the hedonic dimension and the regulatory focus dimension. The model posits three kinds of compatibilities that an individual in a particular goal orientation could experience when exposed to a message frame. Full compatibility occurs when there is a match between the message frame and the individual’s goal orientation (e.g., goal and message are about gains). Partial compatibility occurs when the goal orientation and message frame match on one motivational dimension, but mismatch on another dimension (e.g., goal is about gains and message is about non-gains). Finally, full incompatibility occurs when the goal orientation and the message frame do not match on both motivational dimensions (e.g., goal is about gains and message is about losses). The model predicts that a goal (e.g., promotion) activates mental representations that are fully compatible (gains), inhibits mental representations that are partially compatible (non-gains, non-losses), and dis-inhibits representations that are fully incompatible (losses), where dis-inhibition has the equivalent effect as activation. Greater activation of a mental representation of a message in turn should lead to greater persuasiveness of the message advocacy.

We formally tested this model by manipulating four message frames (win, not win, lose, or not lose in a tennis match) and two regulatory goal orientations (promotion versus prevention). Respondents read an advertisement for a tennis racket (adapted from Aaker and Lee 2001), where the potential outcome of a tennis match was framed in one of the four ways indicated above. Regulatory orientation was manipulated by describing a person who either plays for him/herself or plays as a member of a team, thus varying respondent’s self-construal: independent versus interdependent. Independent self-construal invokes a promotion orientation, whereas an interdependent self-construal induces a prevention orientation (Lee et al. 2000). The dependent measure was respondent’s evaluation of the target tennis racket.

Consistent with the dis-inhibition model, results showed a matching effect when the message frame has positive hedonic valence (win or not lose), such that respondents in a promotion orientation were more favorable toward the target product when the situation was described in a “win” frame and respondents in a prevention orientation were more persuaded when the situation was presented with a “not lose” frame. In contrast, when the message frame had a negative valence (not win or lose), a mismatch between the regulatory message frame and regulatory goal orientation was more persuasive. Further, when respondents were in a promotion goal orientation, the results are consistent with the fit effect, such that the “win” and the “lose” framed messages were more persuasive. However, for respondents in a prevention goal orientation, the opposite pattern was observed: target evaluations were more favorable for the “not lose” and the “not win” frames. A follow-up replication study provided convergent results. While these evaluation results are consistent with the notion of value from fit, they cannot be accounted for by current assumptions about when fit occurs, but are compatible with the inhibition-disinhibition model. Further, these results help delineate the role of two motivational principles, namely, the hedonic and the regulatory focus principles.

REFERENCES


