When Regulatory Fit Does Not ‘Feel Right’: the Inhibiting Effect of Contextually Dominant Decision Strategies

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Regulatory fit theory maintains that when people use decision strategies that sustain versus disrupt their current motivational orientation, they value the decision process more, feel more confident about their reactions, and even offer more money for a chosen option. We proposed that the presence of contextual fit, which results from a strong association between a particular decision context and a particular decision strategy, can inhibit the effects of regulatory fit. In study 1, we used a selection/elimination decision paradigm and found that the effects regulatory fit on task enjoyment and satisfaction with choices disappeared when the choice task had a single right answer. In study 2, we found that participants who previously practiced using a particular decision strategy (attribute-based processing or attitude-based processing) were willing to pay more for a chosen product when the choice was made using a similar decision strategy to the one they practiced, regardless of their motivational orientation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers use a variety of strategies to form judgments and make decisions. For example, when choosing between two alternatives, they may select the most attractive one or reject the most unattractive one (Shafir 1993). When forming preferences among several brands, they may compare them on specific attributes or rely on overall evaluations of each brand (Mantel and Kardes 1999). The strategies that consumers use often depend on their motivational orientations, but they also interact with those orientations to influence the value of decision outcomes. Regulatory fit theory (Higgins 2000) maintains that when people use decision strategies that sustain versus disrupt their current motivational orientation, they feel right about what they are doing. This, in turn, leads them to value the decision process more (Freitas and Higgins 2002) and feel more confident about their subsequent reactions toward the decision outcome, which can increase the extremity of these reactions and even the monetary value of a chosen option (Avnet and Higgins 2006, Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004, Higgins et al. 2003).

We propose that the presence of contextual fit, which results from a strong association between a particular decision context and a particular decision strategy, can inhibit the effects of regulatory fit on the valuation of both the process and the outcome. We presented evidence from two studies in support of our hypothesis. In the first study, we used a selection/elimination decision paradigm and found significant regulatory fit effects (selection is compatible with a promotion focus, whereas elimination is compatible with a prevention focus) on task enjoyment and satisfaction with choices when the task required the expression of a personal judgment. These effects, however, disappeared when the choice task had a single right answer. Past research (Heller et al. 2002, Kim and Goetz 1993), and our own pretest suggest that elimination is a naturally dominant strategy when choosing among options with a single right answer, but not among options requiring personal judgment. We reasoned that using a decision strategy that is inconsistent with the contextually-prescribed strategy may inhibit the feeling right experience usually associated with regulatory fit. When regulatory fit does not lead to feeling right, it can neither increase the process value nor the extremity of postdecisional reactions to a decision outcome.

In the second study, we used a different choice paradigm based on attribute-based versus attitude-based processing. We manipulated contextual fit by having respondents practice using a particular strategy prior to the focal choice task. We also manipulated regulatory fit (attribute-based processing matches a prevention focus, whereas attitude-based processing matches a promotion focus) and tested the moderating influence of contextual fit on the relationship between regulatory fit and the amount of money respondents were willing to pay to acquire their chosen product. We found that regulatory fit increased the monetary value of a decision outcome when the decision context did not evoke the use of a contextually-dominant strategy. In the latter case, however, monetary value was highest when the contextually-dominant strategy was adopted regardless of regulatory focus.

Our findings add to the current knowledge on regulatory fit effects by identifying an important boundary condition. However, the exact mechanisms underlying these findings are still unclear.

Lee and Aaker (2004) suggest that processing fluency may be at the basis of the feeling right experience resulting from regulatory fit. It is possible that a regulatory fitting strategy that is inconsistent with the contextually-dominant strategy loses its processing fluency and thus does not produce a feeling right experience. Clearly, future research needs to test this and other alternative explanations to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the observed effects.

References


