‘Fit For Charity’ the Moderating Role of Private Self-Focus in the Persuasiveness of Regulatory Fit

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The present research extends work on the ‘the value from fit’ principle by showing that regulatory fit effects on charitable behavior are stronger for consumers high in private self-focus. Based on previous research showing that individuals high in private self-focus are more affected by external information, we propose that consumers high in private self-focus process charity information that matches (vs. mismatches) knowledge stored in memory more easily, resulting in more positive attitudes and more generous donations. A series of three studies, in which participants were presented with charity information that either matched or mismatched their regulatory (promotion or prevention) focus, showed that private self-focus moderates the relation between regulatory fit and actual charity donations (studies 1a and 1b). Moreover, we provide evidence that processing fluency is the underlying mechanism accounting for the role of private self-focus (study 2).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In a world full of societal problems such as hunger, homelessness, illiteracy, and diseases, the need for charity support cannot be exaggerated. Many individuals already engage in volunteering and donate money to charity (Giving USA foundation 2007), but fundraisers have to keep up and continue advocating for more attention, effort, and donations to support their cause. Previous research on the determinants of charitable behavior has primarily focused on either demographic and individual characteristics of the volunteers and donators (e.g., Matsuba, Hart, Atkins 2007), or on the persuasive techniques that are used by charities to convince people to help (e.g., Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). However, what happens when these two components meet? Is a charity appeal more persuasive when its motives and values are framed in congruence with the (potential) volunteer’s motivating strategies? The present research proposes that the interaction between either individual or situational differences in regulatory focus on the one hand (Higgins 1997) and the framing of a persuasive message on the other, can influence whether and to what extent people are willing to involve in charitable behavior. In addition, it is expected that these regulatory fit effects on charitable behavior are stronger for individuals with a high private self-focus because these individuals are especially affected by external information that is optionally relevant for the self (Hull et al. 2002). It is argued that private self-focus increases the activation of self-knowledge making it easier to process information that fits with this activated self-knowledge (i.e., regulatory focus).

Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins 1997) states that there are two distinct mechanisms to regulate judgments and behavior, labeled promotion and prevention focus. When individuals are concerned with their ideal self, they adopt a promotion focus. This focus involves an eager strategy in the pursuit of hopes, wishes, and aspirations. On the other hand, when individuals are concerned with their ought self, they adopt a prevention focus which entails vigilant strategies to fulfill duties, obligations, and responsibilities. Individuals experience regulatory fit when they use goal pursuit strategies that match their (current) focus orientation, which in turn increases the perceived value of their behavior. Previous research on regulatory fit in the domain of advertising has demonstrated that individuals show more persuasion when an advertisement is framed in line with individuals’ current orientation focus than when an advertisement mismatches with individuals’ regulatory focus (e.g., Aaker and Lee 2006; Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004). In recent studies, the effects of regulatory fit on product evaluations and other types of outcome measures have been explained by the process of ‘processing fluency’: the experienced ease of processing or recalling information (e.g., Labroo and Lee 2006; Lee and Aaker 2004). These studies show that information that fits with one’s regulatory focus is processed more easily than information that does not fit, and is therefore evaluated more positively. Extending on the processing fluency account for regulatory fit effects one could argue that regulatory fit effects are stronger for individuals with a high private self-focus. This is based on work by Hull and colleagues on the relation between private self-focus and information processing (Hull and Levy 1979; Hull et al. 2002). They propose that a state of high private self-focus (i.e., attentiveness to one’s inner state, personal history or any other aspect of oneself) primarily relates to the encoding of information in terms of its self-relevance. They argue that private self-focus has an effect on behavior by enhancing sensitivity and responsivity to aspects of the environment that are (potentially) relevant to the self. High private self-focus is proposed to facilitate processing of external information in self-relevant terms. More specifically, a state of high private self-focus enhances processing of self-relevant stimuli by activating knowledge about the self (Geller and Shaver 1976). We propose that especially information that already fits with stored self-knowledge (i.e., information that fits with current regulatory focus) will be easily related to the self by consumers high in private self-focus. This implies that charity appeals framed in promotion terms are easily perceived as self-relevant to consumers with a promotion focus, and charity appeals framed in prevention terms are easily perceived as self-relevant to consumers with a prevention focus. Hence, we expect that individuals high in private self-focus (as opposed to low in private self-focus) experience greater processing fluency when they accept information that fits with stored or activated self-knowledge. The misattribution of processing fluency is subsequently expected to positively influence attitudes and actual behavior.

In a series of three studies, in which participants were presented with charity information that either matched or mismatched their regulatory (promotion or prevention) focus, we tested our hypothesis that consumers engage in greater charity support when there is fit than when fit is absent. Moreover, we expected that the effects of regulatory fit are stronger for consumers with a high (as opposed to low) private self-focus. As predicted, the results demonstrated that consumers with a promotion focus donate more money to charity (studies 1a en 1b), and have a more positive attitude towards the charity (study 2) when the charity describes its goals in easier terms (aimed at attaining positive outcomes; promotion frame) than when vigilant terms (aimed at preventing negative outcomes; prevention frame) are used. The opposite was found for consumers with a prevention focus. Moreover, we found evidence for the moderating role of private self-focus. The three studies revealed that the aforementioned regulatory fit effects were stronger for individuals with a high (as opposed to low) private self-focus. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that processing fluency is the underlying mechanism accounting for the role of private self-focus (study 2).

Charities could take advantage of this knowledge by framing their message in congruence with receivers’ (current) regulatory mechanism to make consumers experience fit. Moreover, this strategy would be especially fruitful when consumers are focused on their private selves because the present results show that particularly high private self-focused consumers donate more to charity when they experience fit. The focus on oneself may thus result in enhanced motivation to help others rather than -what might be intuitively expected- to merely serve the self. Hence, when advocating for charity it might be advantageous to remind consumers of themselves before asking to support another cause. In this way consumers can relate the charity information more easily to them-
selves, especially when this information is framed in congruence with consumers’ individual regulation strategies.

REFERENCES


