The Influence of Self-Regulatory Focus in the Effectiveness of Emotional Health Campaigns - It Is a Matter of Context Too

Leen Adams, Ghent University, Belgium
Tineke Faseur, Ghent University, Belgium
Maggie Geuens, Ghent University, Belgium

We examined the usefulness of regulatory relevancy for health advertisements by matching their emotional tone to recipients’ self-regulatory focus and showed that a match versus a mismatch is more persuasive, and this equally for both foci despite assumed differences in their reliance on affect. However, in another experiment, we discovered that the context moderates these emotion-congruence effects. Stronger effects emerged when promotion people considered affect to be highly versus little relevant, due to a stronger activated focus. Since prevention people rely less on affect, equivocal results were expected here. Indeed, effects of emotional stimuli only emerged in more divergent contexts.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In health campaigns, fear-relief appeals are often used. This kind of message usually first focuses on the risks of an unhealthy behavior (inducing fear) and next offers a solution (inducing relief) by offering behavioral recommendations (Hale and Dillard 1995). To contribute to the debate which appeals are most effective for which type of audience, we investigated the moderating impact of consumer’s motives on the effectiveness of health communication.

According to the self-regulatory focus theory of Higgins (1997), there are two different motivational systems that regulate our behavior, namely (1) a promotion focus and (2) a prevention focus. These two foci have a significant impact on the type of goals that are pursued, the typical strategies that are used and specific emotional vulnerabilities. Regarding the latter, Higgins, Shah and Friedman (1997) found that promotion people are more prone to dejection-related emotions, such as sadness and cheerfulness, whereas prevention people are more sensitive to agitation-related emotions, such as fear and quiescence.

Studies building further on this theory have found that, in case of a match versus a mismatch between a stimulus and a recipient in terms of their regulatory focus, the stimulus is evaluated as more valuable, a principle referred to as regulatory relevancy (Higgins 2002; Pham and Higgins 2005). However, in consumer settings, compatible stimuli have been developed only in terms of verbal and objective information. Knowing that (a) affective considerations can be influential in consumer decisions in general (Pham 1998), and concerning health behaviors more specifically (Lawton, Conner, and Parker 2007), and that (b) a strong link between self-regulatory focus and specific emotional vulnerabilities exists (Higgins et al. 1997), we examined the validity of the regulatory relevancy principle further by matching the emotional tone of health messages to the chronic focus of the audience.

For this, we set up a between-subjects design in the context of the ‘quit smoking’ theme. Two factors were included, namely the chronic self-regulatory focus of the respondents (promotion vs. prevention) and the type of emotional tone of the antismoking campaigns (fear-relief vs. sadness-joy). Beforehand, a pretest with 28 student smokers showed that our campaigns elicited the intended emotions. The experiment was run via an online survey for university students and as such, data from 256 smokers were collected. We first measured the chronic focus (Lockwood et al., 2002) (after performing a median split on both measures, only predominant promotion and prevention respondents were retained) and initial intention to quit smoking and then randomly assigned respondents to one of the two antismoking ads. Afterwards, dependent variables (ad involvement, attitude towards the ad (Aad), and behavioral intentions) were measured. Finally, socio-demographic data were collected.

We found that, in case of affect-eliciting stimuli, a match versus a mismatch is more persuasive, and this for both foci. Specifically, promotion people rated the sadness-joy campaign as more relevant which led to a more favorable Aad, whereas for prevention people, the typical fear-relief format led to more involvement and a more favorable attitude.

This finding appears to be somewhat in contrast with the conclusions of Pham and Avnet (2004) in that prevention people can rely just as much on affect as promotion people. At the same time, we also used stimuli focusing on prevention-related emotions, which was not the case in their paper. In addition, in our setting, affect was probably highly relevant and served as a valid argument to all smokers, which could explain why here both foci relied on it (Pham 1998). However, this implies the necessity to take into account the role of the context in examining the impact of the chronic self-regulatory focus in processing emotional stimuli.

Considering interaction effects between traits and situational factors is an issue under investigation in different streams of literature (Rusting 1998). Overall, in previous research, the activation of related constructs has produced additive and stronger effects, but unstable results were obtained when activated constructs were opposing each other (Bargh et al. 1986).

Therefore, we examined the role of the chronic self-regulatory focus and of the type of context (in terms of perceived affect relevance (low versus high)) in the effectiveness of different emotional tones (dejection-cheerfulness versus agitation-quiescence) for sun protection campaigns via a between-subjects design. Again, a preceding pretest with 153 female respondents confirmed that the stimuli reflected the intended emotional tone. To run the experiment, we set up an online survey. Via two websites of a large media concern, we obtained data from 1386 women between the age of 24 and 38 years old. We first assessed existing tanning activities and then randomly assigned respondents to one of the health campaigns. A control group was also included. Questions about attitudes and behavioral intentions followed next. Perceived affect relevance was then measured (afterwards, we did a median split). Finally, the chronic self-regulatory focus and socio-demographics were measured as before.

We found that when promotion people considered affect to be more relevant in processing the ad, their chronic focus was more strongly activated and stronger emotion-congruence effects emerged. In particular, promotion people were more persuaded by the sun protection ads with a dejection-cheerfulness tone than by the ones with an agitation-quiescence tone. Prevention people are assumed to rely less on affect (Pham and Avnet 2004) and thus, we only expected the absence of emotion-congruence effects in a context where affect was considered to be little relevant. Although results were not in contrast to this hypothesis, we also did not expect them. Specifically, emotion-incongruence effects on relevancy measures emerged: prevention people evaluated the incongruent dejection-cheerfulness more favorably than the congruent agitation-quiescence appeals. Other types of processing, such as heuristic or motivated processing, could be responsible, but more validation is needed. In case of a highly affective context, we did not find emotion-congruence effects in prevention such as in promotion people. However, in a more ego-involving situation, reflected in a highly frequent use of sun beds, an emotion-congruency trend appeared, indicating that emotional appeals could be used as relevant information by prevention people, but only in situations where affective involvement is highly personal.
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