The Persuasive Power of Regulatory Nonfit

Lora Harding, Northwestern University, USA
Monika Lisjak, Northwestern University, USA
Angela Lee, Northwestern University, USA

A wealth of research has shown that people are more persuaded by appeals that fit their regulatory focus than those that do not. This research provides the first evidence that nonfit appeals may be more persuasive than fit appeals, but only when people are motivated and able to process nonfit information. Specifically, we find that nonfit appeals are more persuasive under high-involvement conditions, whereas fit appeals are more persuasive under low-involvement conditions (Experiment 1). Further, we find that the nonfit effect on persuasion is the result of heightened processing engagement (Experiments 2 and 3), whereby people are more discerning of argument strength (Experiment 3).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that persuasive appeals that fit (vs. conflict) with a person’s regulatory focus tend to be more persuasive (Lee and Higgins 2009). Because regulatory fit information is consistent with people’s current motivational orientation or way of thinking, it is easier to process and understand than information that is inconsistent with their regulatory orientation and thus tends to be processed more deeply (Lee and Aaker 2004). Recent research suggests that fit information is most persuasive when people allocate few cognitive resources to process information. For example, Wang and Lee (2006) reported that participants were more persuaded by information that fit their regulatory focus, but only under low-involvement conditions.

An important question is: What happens when people are motivated to process persuasive appeals? To the extent that elaboration leads to greater persuasion, our view is that people will be more persuaded by information that mismatches their regulatory focus. To fully comprehend regulatory nonfit information, we expect that highly involved people will engage in more extensive processing due to the fact that nonfit information is inconsistent with their current way of thinking. As a result of more elaborate processing of regulatory nonfit information, highly involved people will be more persuaded by regulatory nonfit appeals. In contrast, people who are less motivated to process information will selectively attend to regulatory fit information because it is easier to process, and thus will be more persuaded by regulatory fit appeals.

We tested this hypothesis in experiment 1, manipulating level of involvement (high vs. low), regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention), and appeal type (promotion vs. prevention) in a between-subjects design, collapsing regulatory focus and appeal type conditions into fit and nonfit cells for analysis. Participants in the promotion-prime condition were asked to list five current hopes or aspirations as well as three attributes they would ideally like to possess, whereas those in the prevention-prime condition were asked to list five current duties and obligations as well as three attributes they ought to possess (Higgins et al. 1994; Higgins, Shah, and Friedman 1997). Next, they were exposed to a high- or low-involvement manipulation (Briley and Aaker 2006). Participants then read one of two advertisements for Welch’s grape juice, one emphasizing its promotion benefits and the other emphasizing its prevention benefits (Aaker and Lee 2001). Finally, they evaluated the target product. As expected, a two-way interaction between involvement and regulatory fit emerged, whereby nonfit (fit) appeals were more persuasive under high- (low-) involvement conditions. These results provide the first evidence that regulatory nonfit appeals may indeed be more persuasive than fit appeals, but only when people are motivated and able to process nonfit information.

Experiment 2 was designed to test the robustness of the nonfit effect under high involvement as well as to provide insight into the underlying process. Specifically, we predicted that nonfit appeals would prompt greater processing engagement, resulting in greater persuasion. In order to test this prediction, all participants were first told that the study was very important and instructed to pay close attention. They were then given a promotion or prevention prime (see experiment 1) and asked to read a promotion- or prevention-oriented Welch’s appeal. Participants then evaluated the product and reported their processing engagement (i.e., how involved and interested they were while processing the appeal). The results revealed a main effect of regulatory fit on persuasion, such that nonfit (vs. fit) appeals elicited more favorable brand attitudes under high-involvement conditions. The results also revealed the predicted main effect of regulatory fit on processing engagement, such that participants were more engaged while reviewing the nonfit (vs. fit) appeal. Finally, we found that heightened processing engagement mediated the positive relationship between nonfit appeals and brand attitudes, thus providing support for the processing engagement mechanism.

Experiment 3 was designed to provide further evidence of the mechanism underlying the regulatory nonfit effect. We reasoned that if highly involved people were more engaged while processing nonfit (vs. fit) information, then those exposed to nonfit (vs. fit) appeals should be more sensitive to differences in argument strength. Therefore, in addition to priming regulatory focus (asked to write an essay about their hopes and aspirations or duties and obligations; Higgins et al. 1994) and giving all participants a high-involvement manipulation (told that the advertised sun protection product, SunSkin, was targeted exclusively to college students and would be launched locally in just a few months; Wang and Lee 2006), we also manipulated the strength of the message arguments. Specifically, participants were exposed to one of four appeals—strong promotion, weak promotion, strong prevention, or weak prevention—followed by a request to evaluate the product. Aside from a main effect of argument strength, whereby strong appeals elicited more favorable attitudes, the results also revealed the expected two-way interaction between argument strength and regulatory fit, such that participants exposed to nonfit appeals were more discerning between strong and weak arguments than those exposed to fit appeals. Thus, these results provide further evidence of the process underlying the regulatory nonfit effect on persuasion by conforming to the premise that if people exposed to nonfit (vs. fit) appeals are indeed more engaged, they should be more sensitive to differences in argument strength.

In summary, the results across the three experiments provide convergent evidence for the hypothesized moderating role of involvement in regulatory focus-based persuasion. Whereas fit appeals are more persuasive under low-involvement conditions, nonfit appeals are more persuasive under high-involvement conditions. Furthermore, we find that the nonfit effect on persuasion is the result of heightened processing engagement, whereby people are more discerning of argument strength. These results provide the first evidence that regulatory nonfit appeals may be more persuasive than fit appeals, but only when people are motivated and able to process nonfit information.

REFERENCES


