The Effect of Self-Construal and Regulatory Focus on Persuasion: the Moderating Role of Perceived Risk

Ying-Ching Lin, National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan
Chiu-Chi Angela Chang, Shippensburg University, USA
Yu-Fang Lin, National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan

The present research demonstrates that when perceived risk is low, the persuasiveness of a promotion versus prevention focused message depends on the consumer’s self-construal (independent or interdependent). However, when perceived risk is high, a prevention-focused message is considered to be more persuasive, no matter the type of self-construal.

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threatens our two dimensions solution. To avoid any doubt about this issue, we conducted a model comparison using the chi-square difference tests recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The results argue that a two constructs model solution fits the data better. The increase in chi square is 283.37, which is significant at $p<0.01$. These results support the discriminant validity of the HRFS. Each of the resulting scales exhibits good internal reliability: Cronbach alpha and Joreskog’s $\rho$ were superior to recommended thresholds.

Nomological Studies: Consequences of Health Regulatory Focus on Health Beliefs, Health Behaviors and Subjective Health State

Using the data described earlier ($n=1600$), the goal of the study 2 is to test the ability of the HRFS to predict health beliefs, health behavior and subjective health state. To test our hypothesis, we create an HRF index by subtracting participants’ promotion scores from their prevention scores. We then perform a tertiary split on this index, creating a predominant promotion group and a predominant prevention group (Camacho, Lugger and Higgins, 2003). Concerning health beliefs, based on prior existing research, we expect a relationship between health regulatory focus and health locus of control (Pham and Higgins, 2005) and health risk (Leikas et alii, 2006). Confirming our expectations, the results showed that people with higher prevention score have a stronger external locus of control (doctors and chance). However, no significant relationship is found between internal locus of control and promotion orientation contrary to what we expected. To test the influence of health regulatory focus on health risk assessment, two scenarios manipulating health risk due to a decrease in immune system function were presented to respondents. There was a significant relationship between health risk perception and health regulatory focus. In comparison to promotion oriented respondents, prevention oriented respondents have higher scores of perceived severity and susceptibility. Promotion oriented consumers were also more likely to adopt approach health behaviors (e.g. sport practice, eat 5 fruits and veggies). We have also found that promotion oriented consumers initiate a larger number of health behavior. This result is consistent with the fact that promotion-oriented consumers exhibit a greater need for variety in their self-regulation strategies (Pham and Higgins, 2005). It appears also clearly that promotion-oriented consumer demonstrate greater ability to maintain these health behaviors. It could be explained by the fact that promotion orientation influences positively the motivation to persist on a complex task (Crowe and Higgins, 1997). Finally, consumers who are promotion-oriented have higher score of subjective health state. This result supports the idea that under prevention, consumers are more likely to perceive their current health state as a source of potential problem. Additionally, a significant relationship between promotion orientation and optimism and between prevention orientation and neuroticism provide further evidence of the good validity of the HRFS.

To conclude, health regulatory focus seems to be an important concept to understand consumers’ health motivation and especially how this motivation influence health outcomes. More research is needed to assess the additional contribution of the HRFS versus more domain-general alternative and explore its impact on consumers’ health status and health information processing.

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Extended Abstract
Consider an example regarding marketing nutritional supplements. Advertising for supplements may evoke the importance of good health for oneself or for loved ones. The advertisements may focus on either attaining a positive outcome (e.g., boosting energy) for your health, or preventing a negative outcome (e.g., preventing fatigue). The risk perception of a consumer is often influenced by information presented in the ads (e.g., a significant number of people died from heart diseases every year). Different combinations of self-construal
(independent versus interdependent), regulatory focus (promotion-focused versus prevention-focused), and risk perceptions are likely in any given communication. It begs the question: what kind of combination would be the most persuasive? It is the motivation for the present research to investigate the persuasion effect of the interplay of self-construal, regulatory focus, and perceived risk.

Considerable research has been done on self construal and regulatory focus. The independent self is defined by unique attributes and independence from others. This is a dominant self-view in cultures where independence and achievement are emphasized. In contrast, the interdependent self is defined by others and appreciates fitting in and being harmoniously interdependent with each other. This self-view is predominant in cultures where obligations and responsibilities are emphasized (e.g., Fiske et al. 1998). In addition, according to regulatory focus theory (Higgins 2002), individuals with a promotion focus regulate their attitudes and behaviors to attain advancement, growth, and accomplishment. These individuals are inclined against committing errors of omission and are associated with eagerness and openness to change. In contrast, individuals with a prevention focus regulate their attitudes and behaviors to attain safety and security. They are inclined against making errors of commission and prefer vigilance strategies and stability.

Self-construal and regulatory focus have been found to interact to influence consumer behavior. Lee, Aaker, and Gardner (2000) found that individuals with an accessible independent self perceive promotion-focused information as being more important than prevention-focused information, and that the converse is true for individuals with an accessible interdependent self. Aaker and Lee (2001) further showed that a promotion-focused message is considered more persuasive than a prevention-focused message for individuals with an independent self-view, and that the converse is true for individuals with an interdependent self-view. The present research extends the above mentioned literature by proposing a situational factor, perceived risk, to moderate the aforementioned persuasion effects.

As noted earlier, risk perceptions may be manipulated in a communication in order to attract consumers' attention. It is conceivable that consumers may react differently in a high versus low risk context to promotions (e.g., Bolton et al. 2008). The present research hypothesizes that when perceived risk is high, a prevention- (versus promotion-) focused message is more persuasive, no matter the individual’s self-view. The reason for this is that a risk that is perceived to be high will sensitize consumers to focus on the possible negative outcomes and on vigilance (Lee and Aaker 2004), which is consistent with a prevention focus. Conversely, when perceived risk is low, the findings by Aaker and Lee (2001) should be replicated.

Three studies tested the proposition that perceived risk moderates the interaction effect of self-construal and regulatory focus on persuasion. Study 1 replicated the original findings in Aaker and Lee (2001) and Studies 2 and 3 manipulated the perceived risk in different ways and obtained results that were in agreement with our premise. Specifically, Study 1 asked participants to think about either themselves or their family (i.e., an independent versus interdependent self-construal; self-construal was manipulated this way across the three studies). The advertisement for the target product, cranberry juice, focused on the belief that it enhanced youthfulness and energy or that it could prevent heart disease (i.e., a promotion versus prevention focus). In Study 2 where a yogurt drink was the target product, the promotion-focused message mentioned that the product could benefit and strengthen the immune system as well as the digestive system, while the prevention-focused message mentioned the drink’s ability to prevent digestive system diseases and reduce cholesterol and cancer-causing toxins. To manipulate perceived risk, half of the participants in Study 2 were told that “six people died of colon cancer every day in this country,” while the other half learned that “two thousand people died of colon cancer every year in this country.” This manipulation was based on Chandran and Menon (2004), whose findings showed that risk estimates are higher on a per day versus a per year basis. Finally, Study 3 used another target product, Essence of Golden Clam, which was advertised to either enhance the health of one’s liver and boost energy, or prevent liver disease (promotion versus prevention focus). Perceived risk was manipulated based on the frequency of engaging in risk behavior (Menon, Block, & Ramanathan, 2002). Participants were told by the advertisement that hepatitis B could be contracted either by not bandaging a cut (a frequent risk behavior; high perceived risk) or by getting a tattoo (an infrequent behavior; low perceived risk). Consistent with our proposition, both Studies 2 and 3 found that in a high (versus low) perceived risk situation, a prevention-focused message led to more favorable brand attitudes and purchase intentions for both independent- and interdependent-self construal groups.

In summary, the present research proposes that perceived risk moderates the effect of self-construal and regulatory focus on persuasion. In particular, when perceived risk is high, a prevention-focused message should be considered more persuasive, no matter the type of self-construal. Empirical findings from three studies support our proposition, where perceived risk was manipulated by using a day versus year frame, and by highlighting a frequent versus infrequent risk behavior. The theoretical contribution of this research is that it clarifies the moderating role of perceived risk in the findings of Aaker and Lee (2001). From a practical perspective, advertising strategies targeting consumers who are likely to perceive the message in the advertisement as a high risk issue should utilize a prevention-focused appeal to enhance persuasion, irrespective of the consumers' self-views.

References
**Self-control and the Differential Weighting of the Components of Risk**

Shi Jia, Stanford University, USA  
Ab Litt, Stanford University, USA  
Uzma Khan, Stanford University, USA  
Tatiana Andreyeva, Yale University, USA

Extended Abstract

Harmful consumption decisions like smoking, overeating, and drinking are commonly blamed on self-control problems. Rather than assume that people with low self-control simply fail to rein in their impulses, this work explores whether such people view the fundamental nature of risks differently.

Risk perception is often divided into two distinct components: probability and consequences of negative outcomes. In this work we show systematic differences in the weighting of these basic risk components by individuals varying in self-control. In particular, we find that low-self-control leads to heightened focus on probability, but relative neglect of consequences. This divergent construction of perceived risk may be influenced by motivating factors and defensive mechanisms. When faced with threatening information, people often engage in defensive or motivated reasoning, even if such processes make a person objectively worse off (Kunda 1987, 1990, Sherman, Nelson, and Steele 2000).

By disentangling the individual components of risk from an overall conception of risk, our approach yields deeper insight into self-control and systematic patterns of risk underestimation and relative focus on distinct components during threat assessment.

In consumer behavior research, perceived risk been modeled as a function of uncertainty and consequences dimensions (Bauer 1960, Cunningham, 1967, Cox 1967):

\[
R = v(x)^a \cdot p(x)^b
\]

where \( R \) is the overall perceived risk of \( x \), \( v(x) \) represents the negative consequences of \( x \), \( p(x) \) is the probability of \( x \) occurring, and \( a \) and \( b \) are the relative weights of probability and consequences. We apply a log-linear transformation for regression analyses to obtain

\[
\ln(R) = h \cdot v(x) + b \cdot p(x)
\]

By measuring overall threat, \( R \), the probability of \( x \) occurring, \( p(x) \), and the value of the negative consequence of \( x \), \( v(x) \), we will be able to derive the relative weighting of consequence and probability (\( a \) and \( b \), respectively). One may think of the weighting coefficient as telling us how much one’s overall sense of risk increases with a one unit increase in consequence or probability.

We may add two interaction terms, the interaction between self-control (\( S \)) and consequence and the interaction between self-control and probability, to see how people with different levels of self-control differentially weight the components of risk:

\[
\ln(R) = h \cdot v(x) + b \cdot p(x) + c \ln(v(x) \cdot S) + d \ln(p(x) \cdot S)
\]

**Study 1: Dietary Disinhibition and Overeating-related Risk Perception**

After completing a measure for self-control in eating habits (Karlsson et al., 2000), participants (\( n=76 \)) completed a three-stage rating of perceived risk for heart attack and diabetes due to overeating. Participants rated their perceptions of the consequences, probability, and overall threat for each risk.

In within group analysis using our estimated log-linear model (3), both interaction terms are significant in different directions. For both heart attack and diabetes from overeating, the interaction between consequence and self-control was positive and significant (\( p<0.05 \)), while the interaction between probability and self-control was negative and significant (\( p<0.05 \)). The results show that the negative consequences of diet-related health problems appeared to be a more important component of perceived risk among high-self-control eaters than high-self-control eaters. In contrast, the perceived probability proved relatively more important for low-self-control eaters.

**Study 2: General Perceived Risks and Self-Control**

Study 2 explores whether study 1’s results can be generalized into other domains or risky behavior outside of overeating-related diseases. Subjects (\( n=124 \)) complete the same risk elicitation procedures and perceived risk model as in study 1. However, we now use a general self-control scale that measures Cognitive Restraint (Karlsson et al 2000).

Results indicated a pattern analogous with the results of Study 1—low-self-control leading to relative probability-focus, high-self-control to relative consequences-focus—was observed in non-overeating-related domains characterized by a high self-agency for...