Regulatory Fit, Attitudes, and Loyalty: the Interactive Effect of Chronic and Situational Regulatory Focus

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This research proposes that fit between consumers’ chronic and situational regulatory focus enhances their evaluations of and loyalty intentions toward the promoted product. Two experiments were conducted to test the proposed regulatory fit effects in the context of a loyalty program and a favorable restaurant dining experience. Findings from both studies confirm the interactive effect of chronic and situational regulatory focus on attitudes and loyalty intentions of prevention-focused consumers.

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997) posits that individuals differ in how they approach pleasure and avoid pain. These differences are manifested in two distinct regulatory orientations which govern how people pursue goals: promotion focus and prevention focus (Higgins 1997). Both self-regulation systems can be a chronic predisposition of individuals or can be situationally induced (Aaker and Lee 2001; Higgins et al. 2001; Semin et al. 2005). Promotion-focused individuals are sensitive to the presence and absence of positive outcomes (gains and non-gains), are approach motivated, and are oriented to the pursuit of accomplishment, advancement, and growth (Camacho, Higgins, and Lugar 2003; Higgins et al. 1994). On the other hand, prevention-focused people are concerned with the presence and absence of negative outcomes (losses and non-losses), are avoidance motivated, and emphasize protection, safety, and responsibility (Higgins, Shah, and Friedman 1997; Shah, Higgins, and Friedman 1998).

Central to the current research is the notion of regulatory fit. People experience regulatory fit when their strategies for goal pursuit match their regulatory orientation (Higgins 2006; Lee and Higgins 2009). Accordingly, regulatory fit has been shown to make individuals “feel right” about their actions and intensify their motivational strength during goal pursuit (Higgins 2000). In contrast, when people adopt strategies that conflict with their regulatory focus, they exhibit reduced motivation due to the resulting regulatory nonfit state (Hong and Lee 2008). These subjective experiences then transfer to individuals’ subsequent evaluations of attitude objects.

Consistent with Higgins (2000) claim that regulatory fit can be applied to a broad range of orientations and goal pursuit means, extant research offers different conceptualizations and operationalizations of the phenomenon. For instance, promotion-focused consumers are more persuaded when they encounter messages emphasizing eagerness (vs. vigilance) appeals, whereas the reverse occurs for prevention-focused consumers (Keller 2006). Lee and Aaker (2004) found that individuals evaluate promotion-focused information presented in a gain frame and prevention-focused information presented in a loss frame more favorably. Similarly, promotion-focused consumers are willing to pay more for a product when they base their evaluations on feelings (vs. reasons), whereas the reverse is observed for prevention-focused consumers (Avnet and Higgins 2003). Other regulatory fit studies have reported that promotion vs. prevention focus is associated with distant vs. proximal temporal perspective (Mogilner, Aaker, and Pennington 2008), abstract vs. concrete mental representations (Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010) and search strategies (Pham and Chang 2010), and dejection vs. agitation emotions (Lee, Aaker, and Gardner 2000).

Above all, Haws, Dholakia, and Bearden (2010) recently called for further research examining the potential interaction between individuals’ chronic and situational regulatory focus. The present research highlights this relatively less explored perspective of regulatory fit (see Zhao and Pechmann 2007 for an exception). Specifically, we test the hypothesis that fit between consumers’ chronic and situational regulatory focus enhances their evaluations of and loyalty intentions toward the promoted brand. This proposition builds on past literature which indicates that the experience of regulatory fit enhances the perceived value of an object (Higgins et al. 2003) and attitudes toward a brand (Wan, Hong, and Sternthal 2009).
In particular, we posit that chronically promotion-focused consumers who are exposed to promotion-framed (vs. prevention-framed) consumption messages and experiences will express more favorable attitudes and loyalty intentions toward the focal product. Conversely, chronically prevention-focused consumers are expected to sense regulatory fit, and hence develop more favorable attitudes and intentions, when exposed to prevention-framed (vs. promotion-framed) consumption messages. We believe that chronic regulatory focus prompts individuals to selectively pay attention to messages that help them sustain their orientation. Therefore, messages that fit one’s chronic regulatory focus will be perceived as more diagnostic and persuasive, leading to a state of increased satisfaction. This increased satisfaction may be one mechanism underlying the proposed regulatory fit effects.

We tested the present predictions in two studies. Study 1 examined the hypothesized fit effects in the context of a loyalty program. We used a chronic regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention) x situational regulatory focus (promotion-framing vs. prevention-framing) between-subjects design (N = 103). While chronic regulatory focus was measured as an individual difference factor, situational regulatory focus was induced by framing the description of a loyalty program in terms of presence of positive outcomes (promotion-framing) or absence of negative outcomes (prevention-framing). The dependent variables were preference toward the loyalty program and willingness to join the program. Separate ANOVAs revealed a significant chronic regulatory focus x situational regulatory focus interaction [F(1,92) = 4.62, p<0.03; F(1,92) = 4.64, p<0.03]. As predicted, chronically prevention-focused consumers indicated a higher preference toward and an increased willingness to participate in the loyalty program advertised in prevention (vs. promotion) terms.

The purpose of Study 2 was to extend our earlier findings to a different consumption context, while assessing consumers’ loyalty intentions. In this study (N = 247), we induced situational regulatory focus by framing the description of a favorable restaurant dining experience in either promotion or prevention terms. The dependent variables were positive word of mouth and repatronage intentions. Separate ANOVAs confirmed a significant chronic regulatory focus – situational regulatory focus fit effect and provided further support for Study 1 results [F(1,215) = 5.48, p<0.03; F(1,215) = 8.00, p<0.01]. Chronically prevention-focused consumers expressed higher levels of positive word of mouth and repatronage intentions toward the restaurant when their consumption experience emphasized attaining prevention (vs. promotion) goals. An additional ANOVA uncovered that the observed fit effects were accompanied by increased levels of satisfaction with the consumption experience [F(1,215) = 4.23, p<0.05]. Our current efforts are concentrated around studying this potential underlying mechanism in more detail.

Across two experiments, we demonstrated that when consumers detect a fit between their chronic and situational regulatory orientations, they express more favorable attitudes and loyalty intentions toward the advertised product. From a theoretical perspective, the present research offers an additional conceptualization and operationalization of the regulatory fit construct in response to Haws, Dholakia, and Bearden (2010). Consequently, the robustness of the results across two different consumption situations illustrates that the wording of promotional messages constitutes a critical factor for marketers in fostering loyalty among consumers, especially those who are chronically prevention-focused.

REFERENCES


When Brand Symbolism Matters: A Social Identity Perspective

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Previous research has examined the effect of brand symbolism on consumers’ self concept (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967) and consumer identity (Elliott 1998). However, no research has been done on the role of brand cultural symbolism in the cross-border brand acquisition context. Based on recent studies on brand symbolism (e.g. Escalas and Bettman 2003; White and Dahl 2007) and drawing on social identity theory, we propose that consumers experience a sense of loss when a culturally symbolic brand is acquired by a foreign country, which in turn affects their brand evaluation. Further, consumers’ social identity strengthens this relationship.

Brand symbolism refers to the image that a specific brand evokes in the minds of consumers (O’Cass and Frost 2002). Consumers may see a brand as a symbol, with connected meanings which define what consumers value most. Essentially, brand symbolism represents what a brand means to consumers and the emotions or feelings they attach to when purchasing and using it. Consumers may link the symbolic meanings of a brand with their personal identity and social identity, as suggested by social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979). This is