Social Tie Distance’s Effect on Regulatory Focus When Buying For Others
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Existing research often treats self-regulatory focus as a situational variable that can be made temporarily salient by task framing. Our research posits self-regulatory focus as an inherent characteristic of social relationships. Three experiments show that making purchase decisions for a particular social tie elicits a certain self-regulatory focus.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consider two baby showers: Nancy went to recently. One was for a young colleague whom she was acquainted with. The other was for a beloved niece of hers. Nancy got a shiny, colorful toy for the colleague and a bottle sterilizer for the niece. This scenario illustrates how social relationships shape self-regulatory focus, which, in turn, influences purchase decisions. Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997) distinguishes between two categories of desired goals: those that relate to attaining positive outcomes (promoted promotion goals), and those that relate to avoiding negative outcomes such as responsibilities, obligations, and security (promotion prevention goals).

In contrast to the abundance of the paradigm, the Weinstein and Seltzer (1987) study investigated marketing literature (for exception, see Aaker and Lee 2001). Our research intends to show that self-regulatory foci can also be driven by purchase situations, in particular, interpersonal relationships. We frequently make buying decisions for others. The relationship between the decision maker and the receiver varies along a closeness dimension. We argue that a close tie (e.g., immediate family members) makes accessible the interdependent self-view, the view of oneself as intimately defined by others rather than distinguished from others (Singelis 1994). Losing a close tie usually feels like losing part of the self (Aron, Aron, Tudor, and Nelson 1991). A reminder of this high stake heightens a prevention approach that emphasizes security, obligations, and responsibilities. A distant tie, on the other hand, doesn’t elicit such an interdependent self-view. Zhou and Pham (2004) contend that consumers come to see different products as representatives of promotion versus prevention. We argue that consumers’ self-regulatory focus is ultimately manifested in their product choices. Specifically, products that are perceived as representative of prevention would be chosen more when buying for a close tie, relative to when buying for a distant tie (H1). This premise would also manifest in espoused motives. Further, motives characterized by a certain self-regulatory focus would mediate relationship distance and product choices (H2). We conducted three experiments to examine the hypotheses.

Study 1 used baby-related products selection as the context. A respondent chose two products out of the randomly ordered product list for someone very close to him/her (e.g., a family member or a close friend), and two products (can be the same as the other set of choices) for someone not very close (e.g., a coworker or a distant relative). To avoid the order effect, the sequence of these two vignettes was counterbalanced. A paired sample t-test shows that prevention products are selected more often for the close tie than for the distant tie (M close = 3.97, M distant = 3.54; t (157) = 6.47, p < .001). H1 is thus supported.

With a between-subjects design, Study 2 shows a significant effect of tie distance on choice of prevention baby gifts (M close = 1.25, M distant = .73, F (1, 177) = 30.7, p < .001). The mediation hypothesis (H2) was supported by bootstrap analyses. A closer tie produces a stronger prevention motive (B = .85, SE = .13, p < .001), which in turn leads to more prevention products chosen (B = .14, SE = .05, p < .01).

Study 3a seeks to generalize the effect by employing a different choice context: car buying. We also refine the option classification by differentiating hedonic versus utilitarian product features within the promotion category. A closer tie leads to a larger number of selected prevention car features (M close = 3.36, M distant = 2.66, F(1, 303) = 20.22, p < .001), and this increase primarily comes at the expense of hedonic features (M close = 1.45, M distant = 2.10, F (1,303) = 17.81, p < .001). Again, bootstrap estimates indicated that prevention motive mediates tie distance’s effect on the number of chosen prevention features.

Study 3b tested H1 in a new choice context (i.e., apartment) with the three categories of features. To examine the boundary conditions, perceived risk of apartment living was manipulated. The risk x tie distance interaction is significant on desired total spending on prevention features (F(1, 276) = 5.00, p = .026). The desired spending on prevention features for a close tie is larger than that for a distant tie ($235 vs. $198, F (1, 276) = 7.49, p < .01). Particularly, tie distance’s proposed effect fares stronger at baseline ($237 vs. $169) than with risk elevation ($234 vs. $227). The increased spending for a closer tie mainly comes from reduced spending on non-prevention utilitarian features ($160 vs. $200).

In all three choice settings, tie distance’s robust effect dwarfed that of dispositional self-regulatory focus which did not predict any choice. This effect is mediated through prevention motive or inclusion of other in the self, which is in line with the self-view explanation.

REFERENCES


