Regulatory Congruence Effects in Two-Sided Advertising

Erlinde Cornelis, Ghent University, Belgium
Patrick De Pelsmacker, University of Antwerp, Belgium
Veroline Cauberghe, Ghent University, Belgium

Two experiments test regulatory congruence in two-sided messages. Study 1 shows a congruence effect in two-sided messages only for promotion focused individuals, which was mediated by processing fluency. The second experiment clarifies the absence of a congruence effect found for prevention focused individuals, by demonstrating the role of processing depth.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1015104/volumes/v41/NA-41

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Regulatory Congruence Effects in Two-sided Advertising
Erlinde Cornelis, Ghent University, Belgium
Veroline Cauberghe, Ghent University, Belgium
Patrick De Pelsmacker, University of Antwerp, Belgium

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Although consumer attitudes generally support the fair trade concept, consumers also perceive certain disadvantages to fair trade products (e.g., higher price) (De Pelsmacker et al. 2006). Hence, consumers trade-off between the perceived advantages and disadvantages of fair trade products. This study investigates the effectiveness of message framing in two-sided fair trade advertising. Two-sided advertisements offer both sides of an issue or product, but actually still favor one side (Hovland 1951). By incorporating pro and contra arguments into a two-sided message, the advertisement becomes more complex than a conventional one-sided message. Due to its complexity, a two-sided message requires more attention of consumers to process the message content (Crowley and Hoyer 1994; Eisend 2007).

Up to now, the processing of two-sided advertising has mainly been considered to be central (instead of peripheral) (cf. the elaboration likelihood model, Cacioppo and Petty 1984). However, both routes of persuasion can occur for two-sided messages, depending on certain moderating variables (Eisend 2007). Florack et al. (2009) suggest that the processing depth of a two-sided message depends on receivers' self-regulatory focus. Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997) proposes two basic motivational systems: a promotion focus (i.e., hopes, wishes, and the maximization of positive results) and a prevention focus (i.e., responsibilities, duties, and the minimization of negative results). Similarly, an advertisement can be framed as either being more promotion focused (i.e., by emphasizing the achievement of positive results) or more prevention focused (i.e., by emphasizing the avoidance of negative results). When the message frame matches (versus mismatches) the individual's self-regulatory focus, regulatory congruence (versus incongruence) occurs.

Florack et al. (2009) showed that consumers differing in their predominant self-regulatory focus process two-sided messages in different ways. Prevention focused consumers tend to process the content of a two-sided message more thoroughly than promotion focused consumers do (Florack et al. 2009). However, Florack et al. (2009) did not take into account the message frame, so they could not test for regulatory (in)congruence effects in two-sided messages. Previous literature has shown that processing depth impacts regulatory congruence effects: congruence effects only occur when processing depth is rather low (Wang and Lee 2002; Briley and Aaker 2006), or when involvement and motivation to process are low (Aaker and Lee 2006). In the case of more central processing, no regulatory congruence effects have been reported (Wang and Lee 2002; Briley and Aaker 2006).

So, if consumers' self-regulatory focus impacts how a two-sided message is processed (Florack et al. 2009), then will these individual differences in processing depth of two-sided messages also lead to different preferences for regulatory congruence (versus incongruence) in two-sided advertising? We address this research question in two experiments. We investigate whether consumers’ self-regulatory focus impacts regulatory congruence effects in two-sided advertising messages. Furthermore, we address the mechanisms underlying these regulatory congruence effects by means of two explanations: processing fluency (study 1) and processing depth (study 2). Study 1 investigates regulatory congruence effects in two-sided messages. In a 2-level between-subjects factorial experimental design, we manipulated the message’s frame (promotion versus prevention) and measured respondents’ chronic self-regulatory focus (promotion versus prevention). The results of the first experiment show that in two-sided messages, the effect of regulatory congruence depends on consumers’ self-regulatory focus. A congruence effect was only found for promotion focused consumers, not for prevention focused consumers. This congruence effect for promotion focused consumers was mediated by processing fluency.

Study 2 elaborates on the results of the first study by clarifying the absence of a congruence effect in two-sided messages found for prevention focused consumers. More precisely, our second experiment tests whether this non-effect can be explained by the deeper processing of the message content by prevention focused consumers. It is likely that prevention focused consumers’ tendency to process a two-sided message centrally eliminates the need for processing fluency, and hence, eliminates congruence effects in two-sided messages. If limited processing depth is indeed a necessary condition for regulatory congruence effects to occur, then it should be possible to demonstrate a regulatory congruence effect among prevention focused consumers when processing depth is low (i.e., peripheral processing), and conversely, no regulatory congruence effect should occur when processing depth is high (i.e., central processing). We set up a second experiment to test the role of processing depth on the effectiveness of regulatory congruent two-sided messages in prevention focused consumers.

The results of the second study show that processing depth influences regulatory congruence effects in two-sided messages for prevention focused consumers. Under peripheral processing, prevention focused consumers prefer two-sided messages that are congruent with their self-regulatory focus. Under central processing, on the other hand, a regulatory incongruence effect occurs.

The theoretical added value of this research is twofold. (1) We combine the research stream on two-sided messages with literature on regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), in order to fill an important research gap. To date, it remains unclear whether, in two-sided messages, regulatory congruence will be more effective than regulatory incongruence. If two-sided messages are more centrally processed, no regulatory congruence effect is expected. But on the other hand, if a two-sided message is more peripherally processed, a regulatory congruence effect is likely to occur. If, indeed, consumers’ self-regulatory focus plays a role in determining how a two-sided message is processed (prevention focused consumers: centrally; promotion focused consumers: peripherally), then it is theoretically relevant to test the influence of consumers’ self-regulatory focus on the effectiveness of regulatory congruence (versus incongruence) in two-sided messages. (2) Additionally, our study goes beyond prior research in that it clarifies the underlying processes of the regulatory congruence effect by addressing two crucial mediating variables (e.g., processing fluency and processing depth).

Practically, the present study provides useful insights for advertisers to develop fair trade campaigns, but also for public policy makers or nongovernmental or non-profit organizations.
REFERENCES