

# The Influence of Regulatory Focus on Consumer Information Processing

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Regulatory-focus theory (Higgins, 1987) considers the different approaches people use to attain goals. This theory posits that there are two distinct regulatory systems for achieving desired end states, one concerned with acquiring nurturance and the other with acquiring security. Individuals who pursue what is termed a promotion regulatory focus concentrate on achieving their hopes, ideals, and nurturance needs by approaching matches to desired end states, whereas those who pursue a so-called prevention regulatory focus concentrate on satisfying their duties, obligations, and security needs by avoiding mismatches to desired end states.

Empirical studies that have examined regulatory focus theory reveal a number of intriguing findings. Of focal interest is the observation that a promotion focus is associated with the use of more risky, creative strategies and both the generation and simultaneous endorsement of multiple hypotheses. By contrast, a prevention focus is associated with more conservative, cautious strategies, such as generating only a few hypotheses or selecting one hypothesis from a set (Lieberman et al. 2001).

The preceding findings suggest the possibility that different self-regulatory foci may be associated more generally with alternative information processing strategies. Specifically, promotion-oriented individuals may be more likely to process all types of information in a broader, inclusive fashion by noticing and attempting to integrate multiple or all elements of a message, including contextual data. Prevention-oriented individuals, however, may be inclined to process data in a narrower fashion by focusing on individual components of a message in isolation of others.

This paper seeks to test the preceding hypotheses and thereby advance regulatory focus theory by shedding light on whether regulatory foci affect the adoption of such alternative information processing strategies. In particular, we apply these notions to an advertising context and hypothesize that if an ad encourages the adoption of a promotion focus, ad recipients are likely to produce more favorable product judgments when the ad displays many non-obviously related pictures that imply a fairly abstract theme as opposed to a simpler, unitary image that relates directly to the advertised product. This follows because the inclusion of such related ad pictures should provide promotion-oriented individuals the opportunity to adopt their preferred information processing strategy, namely, to process and attempt to incorporate in a broad, inclusive fashion many disparate pieces of information. Accordingly, this should induce more favorable product judgments. On the other hand, if an ad encourages the use of a prevention focus, ad recipients should respond more favorably to an advertised product when the ad features a simpler, unitary image that relates quite directly to the product as opposed to many ambiguously related visuals that imply a fairly abstract theme. This should occur because a simpler unitary image should enable prevention-oriented individuals to adopt their preferred information processing strategy, namely, to process information in a relatively narrow, unambiguous manner. Accordingly, such individuals should respond more favorably to the advertised product.

The above-hypothesized two-way interaction of regulatory focus and the complexity of ad visuals seems to require a fair amount of attention and elaboration of the ad in order for people to discern the relationship between those two factors. Thus, such two-way interactions are anticipated on rather specific, memory-based measures, such as judgments of specific product characteristics,

which more forcefully encourage all people to engage in effortful retrieval of specific information included in an ad.

However, other tasks, such as rendering overall affective judgments, can be performed in simple, relatively uneffortful ways that do not require consideration or retrieval of detailed information. For these tasks, individuals' chronic inclination to engage in effortful cognition may determine whether specific information is retrieved from memory and considered. Therefore, we predict that three-way interactions of individuals' Need for Cognition (NFC), regulatory focus and the complexity of ad visuals should emerge on ad recipients' overall affective product judgments. Specifically, an effect of regulatory focus and the complexity of ad visuals should emerge on overall affective product judgments when individuals are high but not low in NFC. High NFC individuals who adopt a promotion focus are expected to report more favorable overall affective product judgments when the ad presents many related pictures that imply an abstract theme rather than a simpler, unitary image that relates directly to the target product. However, high NFC individuals who adopt a prevention focus are expected to report more favorable overall affective judgments when the ad displays a simple, unitary image that relates directly to the target product as opposed to many related pictures that imply an abstract theme.

A study was designed to test these hypotheses as well as several other more specific ones. Four versions of a target ad were developed, with each version varying on two dimensions. One dimension was the complexity of the pictorial images contained in an ad. The ads featured either many related pictures that imply a fairly abstract theme or a simpler, unitary image that relates quite directly to the product. The second manipulated dimension was the regulatory focus encouraged by the ad. Specifically, the ad headline expressed and encouraged either a promotion focus or a prevention focus.

Participants' judgments of specific characteristics of the target product revealed the anticipated two-way interaction of regulatory focus and complexity of ad pictures. Specifically, when participants were encouraged to adopt a promotion focus, they reported more favorable judgments of the target product's specific characteristics when the ad displayed many related pictures that implied a rather abstract theme as opposed to a simpler, unitary picture that pertained directly to the product. However, when participants were encouraged to adopt a prevention focus, they reported more favorable judgments of the target product's specific characteristics when the ad contained a simpler, unitary image as opposed to many related pictures.

Participants' overall affective judgments of the target product, however, revealed a three-way interaction of NFC, regulatory focus, and complexity of ad pictures. Consistent with our theorizing, the interaction of regulatory focus and complexity of ad pictures was significant on the overall affective judgments produced by high but not low NFC individuals. This resulted in the same sort of two-way interaction on high NFC individuals' affective judgments as that which was observed on all respondents' specific product judgments.

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