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Regulatory focus and consumer information processing

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When making a purchase decision, consumers differ with respect to two basic motivational orientations: some consumers attempt to maximize their benefits and to realize their ideals, others are more concerned with avoiding a negative outcome. For example, imagine that you intend to purchase a mobile phone. In thinking about your decision, you may consider whether the mobile phone is equipped with the newest technology and has an appealing design, or you may wonder whether the product falls short of your expectations and the purchase could be a serious mistake. Recent research in social cognition has shown that these different orientations have far-reaching consequences on judgments and information processing.

Higgins (1997; 1998) has offered a broad framework for integrating research in this area with his regulatory focus theory. He postulates two motivational subsystems: the promotion system and the prevention system. The promotion system is concerned with needs of development and self-actualization. The goal of this system is to approach a desired state. In contrast, the prevention system is more concerned with approaching a secure rather than ideal state and avoiding negative outcomes. A similar framework is offered by Carver, Lawrence, and Scheier (1999), who differentiate between motivational systems with a positive or negative point of reference. However, even if the reference points and the goals are different in a promotion and prevention focus, in both cases the goal is a desired end state that increases in relevance as one moves closer to attaining the goal (Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998).

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the impact of regulatory focus on consumer behavior and consumer information processing. We begin with a brief summary of possible variations in regulatory focus and basic findings in research on regulatory focus. We then provide a detailed overview of influences that self-

regulation towards promotion or prevention goals might have on persuasion and product choice. We divided this part of the chapter into different sections. First, we put forward that individuals prefer products which have an outcome value that is related to an activated regulatory goal. Then we discuss the importance of a regulatory focus that is emphasized in an advertising message. In particular, we refer to research that demonstrates the effectiveness of a message focus that matches other elements within an ad and that fits with the regulatory focus of the recipient. Furthermore, we consider effects of the regulatory focus on systematic information processing and the reliance on cues (e.g., a celebrity endorser) in persuasion. Finally, we conclude the chapter with an outlook on implications for advertising and marketing practices.

Sources of Regulatory Focus

Regulatory focus, which is predominant when a consumer makes a decision, can be affected by three different sources: the chronic regulatory focus of the decision-maker, contextual priming during or before the decision task, and the decision task itself. Higgins (1997; 1998) supposed that one of the two foci increasingly dominates across a person's life span as a result of socialization. An important determinant of this chronic regulatory focus is said to be rooted in caretaker-child interactions (Higgins & Silberman, 1998). If the caretaker regulates the behavior of a child predominantly through the presence or absence of positive reinforcement, the child should develop sensitivity towards promotion goals. In contrast, a child should be more likely to develop a chronic prevention focus if it is trained to be alert to potential dangers.

Since the accessibility of ideal self-guides is believed to be associated with a chronic promotion focus, while the accessibility of ought self-guides should

accompany a prevention focus, the time participants need to access ideals or oughts from memory should depend on their chronic regulatory focus. Therefore, chronic regulatory focus can be assessed indirectly with reaction time tasks (e.g., Amodio, Shah, Sigelman, Brazy, & Harmon-Jones, 2004; Förster et al., 1998; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999). A common feature of these methods is that participants are asked to list and then rate attributes that describe either an ideal or ought self. Participants with a chronic promotion focus should be faster at listing ideals than oughts, whereas the reverse should be true for participants in a prevention focus. A more direct way to measure the regulatory focus is the self-assessment of participants. Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda (2002), for instance, developed a questionnaire to measure chronic regulatory goals. In this questionnaire, participants have to indicate the degree to which items relevant to promotion or prevention goals apply to them. Higgins et al. (2001) assessed a different aspect of the regulatory focus. They asked participants to indicate past success in pursuing promotion or prevention goals.

Like other motivational orientations, regulatory focus may vary between individuals not only dispositionally, but also momentarily. Recent or momentary experiences may activate a specific regulatory focus that may be independent of chronic regulatory goals. For a variety of reasons, in one context ideals may be more salient, whereas in another context individuals may be especially aware of their responsibilities and duties. In experiments, this variability of the regulatory focus is used to induce a promotion or prevention focus - e.g., by priming of ideals or oughts (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994) - and to examine the consequences of this induced regulatory focus on information processing and behavior.

Finally, a decision task or a product can also be associated with a certain regulatory focus (Zhou & Pham, in press). For example, the purchase of casualty insurance may evoke a prevention focus and may be less likely to be associated with a promotion focus. In contrast, thoughts of making a speculative investment may evoke a promotion focus more than a prevention focus. Consequently, the purchase of a brand from a product category that is strongly associated with either of the two regulatory foci may evoke the associated self-regulation in the individual. Zhou and Pham impressively demonstrated this effect. They asked participants to make several decisions that involved either individual stocks offered in a trading account (a more speculative investment product), or mutual funds offered in retirement accounts (a more secure investment product). Afterwards, participants had to choose between two brands of grape juice and toothpaste. Importantly, the two choices in grape juice and toothpaste differed in characteristics that were related to promotion (e.g., tooth whitening) or prevention benefits (e.g., cavity prevention). In line with the prediction, making an investment had an effect on the subsequent choice of juice and toothpaste. Participants who made decisions that involved prevention-related investment products were subsequently more likely to prefer brands with prevention characteristics than were participants who made decisions that involved more risky investment products.

Basic Findings of Research on Regulatory Focus

Numerous studies have documented that the importance of regulatory focus for information processing, judgment, and decision making is multifaceted (e.g., Higgins et al., 1997; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992; Förster, Grant, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Förster, Idson Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Shah & Higgins, 1997; 2001). Higgins et al. (1994), for instance, reported that individuals are more

likely to recall information that fits their regulatory focus. In this study, participants were primed with a promotion or a prevention focus and then read about several life episodes. Later, participants were asked to recall the episodes. Participants in a promotion focus were better at recalling life episodes that were related to approach strategies. Participants in a prevention focus were better at recalling life episodes that were concerned with avoidance strategies. Shah, Higgins, and Friedman (1998) found that the performance of individuals in a promotion focus increased when the incentives were framed as gains, whereas the performance of individuals in a prevention focus increased when the incentives were framed as non-losses.

Similarly, Zhou and Pham (in press) propose that individuals are differentially sensitive to gains and losses depending on whether a decision task evokes a promotion or a prevention focus. In their studies, participants were more sensitive towards possible gains when they thought about a risky investment (promotion focus), and more sensitive towards possible losses when they thought about a more secure investment (prevention focus). Furthermore, individuals in a promotion focus are inclined to use more risky and less conservative strategies to pursue a goal compared to participants in a prevention focus. In a simple drawing task, Förster, Higgins, and Taylor Bianco (2003), for instance, observed faster performances, but also more errors, for participants in a promotion focus compared to participants in a prevention focus, who were more careful and made fewer mistakes, but also worked more slowly on the task. Altogether, the results of the research on regulatory focus demonstrate that individuals in a promotion focus are sensitive to different types of information and also apply different strategies to reach their regulatory goals.

There is even evidence for psychophysiological correlates of the different regulatory foci. Amodio et al. (2004) measured the chronic regulatory focus with a

latency-based method (cf. Higgins et al., 1997). In a separate session, the resting EEG was recorded. The analyses revealed that a chronic promotion focus was associated with greater left frontal activity, whereas a prevention focus was associated with greater right frontal activity. These findings are congruent with previous research that demonstrated an asymmetrical activity of the frontal cortex for approach and avoidance processes, with approach motivations or emotions associated with greater left frontal activity, and avoidance motivations or emotions associated with greater right frontal activity (Coan & Allen, 2003).

Regulatory Goals and Product Choice

One of the basic predictions of regulatory focus theory is that a promotion orientation is associated with a sensitivity towards positive outcomes, and a prevention focus is associated with a sensitivity toward negative outcomes. For example, picture yourself lying on the beach of your favorite holiday destination on a warm summer day. In this situation, you might enjoy the sun, hoping to get a good tan. However, you might also be afraid of getting sunburned and damaging your skin. In a web experiment (Florack, Scarabis, & Gosejohann, 2004a), we examined whether – in such a situation – regulatory focus would have an influence on the purchase and evaluation of sun lotions (cf. Lee & Aaker, 2004). We asked participants to evaluate two different brands of sun lotion and to indicate which one they would purchase on their summer holidays at the sea. The two sun lotions were presented by two pictures with an advertising claim for each. For one brand, we used a claim that was concerned with the avoidance of sunburn (“Give sunburn no chance. Avène provides safe protection. Avène - The double protection“), while for the other brand we used a claim that emphasized the enjoyment of the sun and a tan (“Enjoy the warm rays of the sun. Clarins for healthy tan. Clarins – Enjoy the sun.”). In addition, we induced a

promotion or prevention focus with a few questions just before participants evaluated the sun lotions. In the promotion focus condition, we provided participants with a list of positive things that could happen during their holidays (e.g., meeting nice people, fun with sports) and asked them to indicate which of these things they would actively pursue. In the prevention focus condition, we provided participants with a list of negative things that could occur during holidays and asked them to indicate those they would actively try to avoid (e.g., through planning). As predicted, participants in a prevention focus were more likely to choose the sun lotion that stressed protection against sunburn, whereas participants in a promotion focus preferred the sun lotion that focused on a tan and fun. The results suggest that a product may be instrumental for reaching a goal that is linked to the regulatory focus. In our simple experiment, the product (sun lotion) was a means of approaching a positive outcome (getting tanned) or avoiding a negative one (sunburn).

Investment products belong to another product category that could also be supposed to have instrumental value for pursuing a specific regulatory goal. If a person has money to invest, he or she could focus on possible gains or on possible losses from investing the money. Indeed, modern banks and investment firms offer a huge spectrum of investment products that are customized to these different foci. Florack and Hartmann (2003) demonstrated that a manipulation of the regulatory focus does in fact influence the choice of such investment products. In this study, participants first worked on a cognitive task that was used to manipulate the regulatory focus. In the prevention focus condition, the experimenter, at the beginning of the task, allotted a certain number of small chocolate bars to each participant and then told participants that they would have to give back chocolate bars for wrong solutions. In the promotion focus condition, the experimenter did not

allot any chocolate before participants worked on the tasks. But he told participants that they would receive small chocolate bars for correct answers. It is important that after working on the task, all participants received the same feedback and in the end were given the same number of chocolate bars. For participants in the prevention focus condition, this was a moderate prevention success. For participants in the promotion focus condition, this was a moderate success of a promotion strategy.

Afterwards, participants worked on what was supposedly a second experiment. In fact, this 'second experiment' included the dependent measure of the study. In this part of the experiment, participants received some information about different investment funds and then had to decide how much money they would invest in the different funds. It was varied whether or not there was time pressure to make the decision. Our main interest was the amount of money participants invested in the most secure fund, which was described as having low chances of achieving high rates of return, but a great quota of secure annuity funds. Florack and Hartmann (2003) hypothesized that this investment product would be more attractive for participants in a prevention focus than for those in a promotion focus. Since it is reasonable that individuals rely on information that is perceived as most diagnostic, especially under time pressure, they also predicted that this effect of the regulatory focus on the investment decision will be strengthened if the decision time is limited.

The results provided support for these predictions. When the decision time was limited, participants in a prevention focus invested more money in the secure investment product than did participants in a promotion focus. When the decision time was not limited, no difference between participants in a promotion and a prevention focus was found. However, even if time pressure may strengthen a regulatory focus effect, it is not a necessary precondition for the emergence of such

effects. Indeed, Zhou and Pham (in press) obtained results similar to those of Florack and Hartmann (2003) without the induction of time pressure. They found that participants in a promotion focus preferred more speculative financial assets than did those in a prevention focus. But as we have mentioned before, Zhou and Pham point to the fact that making an investment decision can also induce different regulatory foci, depending on the investment product that is being considered.

This finding is particularly interesting if we look at what people do with money that is a return from either a promotion- or prevention-related investment. If an investment product can evoke a specific regulatory focus, this should also apply to the returns from these products. Indeed, this is what Zhou and Pham (in press) found in a further study. Participants in this study preferred higher risks when the money to be invested was a return on a high-risk investment than when it was a return on a low-risk investment.

Investment products and sun lotion can be regarded as means to approaching a positive outcome or avoiding a negative one. In other situations, the product itself is the outcome and choosing or not is the means to achieving a specific regulatory goal. When it comes to the judgment or choice of products with specific regulatory outcome value, regulatory focus theory postulates that consumers prefer products which are superior on dimensions that are relevant to the activated regulatory goal (Higgins, 2002). Indeed, there is some evidence that advertising appeals congruent with the recipients' activated self-concept are more effective than those that are incongruent (Bettman & Sujan, 1987; Higgins, 2002; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Snyder & Debono, 1985). Snyder and Debono (1985, Study 3), for instance, found that participants are more likely to test a product that is superior on a dimension that corresponds to the viewers' level of self-monitoring. Specifically, they carried out a

telephone survey asking people which of two shampoo products they would prefer. One product was described as superior in how it makes the hair look, and the other as superior in how it cleans. In line with the assumption that image aspects are more relevant for high self-monitoring individuals, whereas product utility is more relevant for low self-monitoring individuals, participants high in self-monitoring were more likely to prefer the product that was described as superior in how it makes the hair look, whereas participants low in self-monitoring were likely to prefer the shampoo with the superior cleaning ability.

Bettman and Sujan (1987) examined the effects of a situationally activated decision criterion that is also more closely related to differences in promotion and prevention self-regulation. Having first primed a reliability or creativity orientation, they asked participants to evaluate two products and to choose one. As expected, participants were more likely to prefer an alternative that was superior on the activated decision criterion. Even if reliability is related to a prevention focus and creativity to a promotion focus, the object of the study by Bettman and Sujan was not to examine regulatory focus effects. A study that did examine regulatory focus effects more directly is described by Higgins (2002), who was referring to an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Safer (1998).

In one of the studies carried out by Safer, the task of participants was to choose between products (cars and apartments) that differed with respect to their reliability or luxury. Since luxury is more related to accomplishment and promotion concerns, and reliability reflects more prevention concerns, the author predicted that individuals in a promotion focus would regard the differences between the products in luxury as more important, whereas the reverse should be true for individuals in a prevention focus. The results supported this assumption. Participants with a

predominant promotion focus were more likely to choose alternatives that were more luxurious. Participants with a predominant prevention focus preferred alternatives that were higher in reliability. Thus, participants chose a product that was superior on the dimension that was most relevant to their regulatory focus.

Furthermore, a product might not only be superior on a dimension that is relevant to a specific regulatory focus, e.g., reliability or luxury, but the choice of a product might also come with the risk of making the wrong decision or the chance for a benefit. Since a main goal for individuals in a promotion focus is to attain benefits, and for those in a prevention focus to avoid junk, the regulatory focus should also have an impact on the choice of products that are differentially associated with risk or stability. For example, imagine that you have been using a certain brand for quite some time and might consider buying a new brand in the future. The switch to the new brand could imply a positive outcome for you if it surpasses the old brand, but it could also imply a negative outcome if the new brand is a dud.

Since a promotion focus is concerned with ensuring hits and avoiding errors of omission, regulatory focus theory would predict that in a promotion focus, the brand change would be more likely than in a prevention focus, which is more concerned with ensuring correct rejections and avoiding errors of false alarm. Indeed, there are some results that point in this direction. For example, Liberman et al. (1999) found that participants with a promotion focus were more willing than participants in a prevention focus to exchange objects they owned for alternative objects. They argue that individuals in a prevention focus feel more obliged to rely on the original alternatives as long as they are satisfactory. In contrast, individuals with a promotion focus are willing to change if they think that the new alternative is an improvement over the original object. However, it is important to stress that promotion-focused

individuals do not change without considering the alternatives. If they do not see a good chance for a benefit from the new alternative, they should be content with a satisfactory item.

However, it is not simply the case that individuals rely more often than not on strategies that are appropriate means for reaching their regulatory goals, they also feel more comfortable when they rely on strategies that fit their regulatory goals. As Higgins (2000; 2002) proposed, several studies have shown that independent of valued outcomes, people experience a regulatory fit when they pursue a goal in a manner that sustains their regulatory focus. This fit increases people's feeling that the strategy used was the right strategy (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004). Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, and Molden (2003) and Avent and Higgins (2003) demonstrated that this "feeling right" can be transferred to monetary evaluations of an object. For example, in one study by Higgins et al. (2003), participants were asked to choose between a coffee mug and an inexpensive pen as reward for participating in an experiment. To produce fit or non-fit with the regulatory focus, participants were asked to think either about what they would gain by choosing the pen or the mug, or, in another condition, what they would lose. Fit was produced when participants in a promotion focus applied the gain strategy, or when participants in a prevention focus applied the lose strategy. In the other focus/strategy combinations there was non-fit. As Higgins and colleagues expected, participants assigned a higher price to the same coffee mug when they had chosen it with a strategy that fit their regulatory focus than with a strategy that did not.

Persuasion and Regulatory Fit within a Message

In advertising, it is less likely, if not impossible, that the marketer could influence which strategy a consumer would use to select a product. However, more

interesting for the advertiser is the question whether regulatory focus theory has implications for the design of ads and marketing campaigns. One point that may be of special interest as regards the design of ads is the compatibility of goals that are highlighted in a persuasive message and the regulatory focus that is made salient in the message. Although any specific goal may be pursued with either a promotion or a prevention focus, some goals are more compatible than others with a particular self-regulatory strategy (Higgins, 2002). For example, as we have stressed before, goals that are concerned with approaching a desired end-state are more compatible with a promotion focus than with a prevention focus, whereas goals that involve the avoidance of an undesirable end-state are more compatible with a prevention focus than with a promotion focus. A few studies have shown that persuasive messages are more persuasive when mentioned goals or means are compatible with the regulatory focus of the message (Lee & Aaker, 2004).

Lee and Aaker (2004, Study 1) presented participants with an ad for grape juice. The content of the ad was either related to promotion concerns (energy boost) or prevention concerns (disease prevention). Additionally, the authors varied whether a gain or a loss frame was used in the ad. For example, in the promotion condition a gain frame was "Get Energized!," whereas a loss frame was "Don't Miss Out on Getting Energized!" In the prevention condition, an example of a gain frame was "Prevent Clogged Arteries!," and a loss frame was "Don't Miss Out on Preventing Clogged Arteries!" Lee and Aaker found that promotion and prevention appeals were differently effective depending on how they were framed. Promotion appeals were more persuasive when presented in a gain rather than in a loss frame, whereas prevention appeals were more persuasive when presented in a loss rather than in a gain frame. The authors propose that a message becomes easier to process when

the frame of the message is consistent with the way in which “individuals naturally think about issues that involve positive or negative outcomes” (Lee & Aaker, 2004, p. 207). Moreover, they argue that individuals transfer the experienced ease to more favorable attitudes towards the ad (cf. Wänke, Bohner, & Jurkowitsch, 1997). Indeed, participants in one of the studies of Lee and Aaker found the messages with regulatory fit easier to understand than the messages lacking fit, and mediational analyses showed that this processing ease does in fact mediate the impact of regulatory fit on attitudes. Altogether, the studies of Lee and Aaker demonstrate that fit between a gain or loss frame and the regulatory goals that are stressed in a message leads to a processing ease that elicits a positive feeling, which in turn affects the perceived persuasiveness of a message.

Another factor that may be of importance as regards the regulatory focus of a message is whether an ad speaks to one’s individual or interdependent self. Aaker and Lee (2001) modified the website of Welch’s Grape Juice in order to activate either an independent or an interdependent self-view. They used a picture of a family or a single person on the website and supported the picture with a suitable text. Aaker and Lee hypothesized that the activation of an interdependent self would fit better with a prevention message emphasizing the health benefits of the juice than it would with a promotion message containing arguments for higher personal effectiveness and energy. The results supported the hypotheses. Participants evaluated the website more positively when the family picture was combined with a prevention message and when the picture of the individual was combined with a promotion message than in the other two combinations. Thus, the study of Aaker and Lee suggests that an advertisement is more effective when the regulatory focus of a

message fits the self-view of the recipient, which can also be influenced, for example by pictures in an advertisement.

Taking into account that such an activated self-view has an impact on the processing of an advertisement, it is reasonable to assume that it is not only the activation of the self-view by an ad that is important, but also differences in self-view that have other sources. Indeed, Aaker and Lee (2001; see also Briley & Wyer, 2002) found differences in the perception of promotion and prevention-related messages between an individualistic (US) and a collectivist culture (Hong Kong). Thus, the fit of the regulatory focus of a message with aspects of the recipient not induced by an advertisement are important. For that reason, we shall take a more detailed look in the next section at the effects that different regulatory foci of consumers have on the way in which a persuasive message is perceived.

Regulatory Fit between Message and Recipient

Cesario et al. (2004) measured the chronic regulatory focus of participants and also induced a promotion or prevention focus experimentally. They found that participants were more likely to be persuaded by a message that stressed eager means to reach a goal when participants were in a promotion focus. A message that emphasized the use of vigilant means was, in contrast, more persuasive when participants were in a prevention focus. Since eager means fit with a promotion focus and vigilant means are typical for a prevention focus, it seems that fit between the content of a message and the regulatory focus of the recipient enhances the persuasive impact of the message. There are several possible explanations for such fit effects.

One explanation is that the fit of a message with a person's regulatory focus leads to enhanced persuasion because individuals evaluate messages more

positively when they are in line with their attitudes, motivations, and needs (e.g., Snyder & DeBono, 1985). The perception of fit may be used in this sense as a heuristic that the message is all right. Similarly, it can be argued that fit or non-fit leads to processing of message arguments in a biased manner. Fit may lead to the generation of more favorable thoughts and non-fit to more unfavorable thoughts (cf., Cacioppo, Petty, & Sidera, 1982; Lavine & Snyder, 1996). Evans and Petty (2003) provided data that points to a further explanation. They suggest that the perception of fit enhances the motivation to process the message, presumably because fit indicates that a message is relevant for the individual. The two authors tested this hypothesis by first measuring the chronic strength of accessible ideal or ought self-guides. Subsequently, they presented participants with a persuasive message that was framed in terms of either ideals or responsibilities and contained either strong or weak arguments. Since ideal self-guides are typical for a promotion focus and ought self-guides are typical for a prevention focus, the self-guide measure can be regarded as a measure of regulatory focus. The authors found that participants with a promotion focus were more likely to consider the arguments of the message when they were framed in terms of ideals and hopes. In contrast, participants with a prevention focus were more likely to consider the arguments of the message when they were framed in terms of responsibilities and duties. In other words, fit led to more positive thoughts when the message arguments were strong, but it led to more negative thoughts when the message arguments were weak. In the non-fit condition, there were no significant differences in thoughts depending on the message arguments. Thus, fit between the concerns of a message and the regulatory focus of a recipient appears to increase message processing.

Besides the effect that regulatory fit has on the effort to process a message, it might also affect persuasion through a transfer of feeling onto the perceived persuasiveness of a message. Indeed, one proposition of regulatory focus theory holds that decisions are evaluated more positively when they are made with strategies that fit with the regulatory focus of the decision maker (Higgins, 2000, 2002). The reasoning is that the regulatory fit elicits a feeling of correctness or importance (“feeling right”), which, in turn, is attributed to the decision or the chosen alternative and interpreted as a positive evaluation. As previously mentioned, there is evidence that tasks and decisions are evaluated more positively when individuals experience fit between their regulatory focus and applied strategic means, which elicits a “feeling right” (Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002; Higgins, et al., 2003). If, in a similar vein, the transfer of a feeling has an impact on the efficiency of persuasive messages, two conditions should be fulfilled: First, individuals who experience regulatory fit should evaluate a message as more persuasive than individuals who do not. Second, if the basis for this effect is a misattribution of the unspecific “feeling right”, the persuasive effect of regulatory fit should disappear when individuals’ attention is directed to the source of the feeling (Schwarz & Clore, 1983; 1996). Cesario et al. (2004) tested these predictions and found strong support for the assumed processes. They demonstrated that participants experiencing regulatory fit perceived messages as more persuasive, and that this effect disappeared - or was at least reduced - when participants attended to the correct source of “feeling right” from regulatory fit prior to the message.

However, even if individuals do not correct the “feeling right,” this feeling from regulatory fit does not inevitably lead to a more positive attitude toward the attitude

object. Rather, the “feeling right” enhances the own response towards the message. It means something like feeling right about the own response for the individual. Consequently, Cesario et al. (2004) found in one study that regulatory fit and the associated “feeling right” can also lead to reduced persuasion when the thoughts about the message topic were negative. In this case, presumably, individuals feel right in their response that the message is weak. Thus, regulatory fit increases the effect of generated thoughts by the perception that the thoughts are correct and right.

Regulatory Focus and Systematic Information Processing

So far, we have illuminated three different kinds of impact regulatory focus might have. First, we have shown that the individuals may choose products that are instrumental for their regulatory goals, or products that have specific outcome values compatible with their regulatory focus. Second, we reported evidence that a regulatory fit between different components of a message makes it easier to process a message. Third, we mentioned different effects of the fit between the regulatory focus of a message and a recipient. One point we did not mention so far is that the regulatory focus can also have a direct impact on the processing of information. For example, Friedman and Förster (2001) found that participants in a creativity task relied more on explorative and risky information processing strategies when a promotion focus was primed than when a prevention focus was primed. Thus, there is evidence that the risk-averse strategy of individuals in a prevention focus compared to those in a promotion focus can also be found in information processing itself.

Pham and Avnet (2004) applied these ideas to the area of consumer judgment. Like Friedman and Förster (2001), they postulate that a prevention focus should be accompanied by a less risky information processing strategy. Further, they

argue that regulatory focus affects which information is used to form a judgment. Consequently, consumers should rely on information that leads to a reasonable and less risky decision when a prevention focus vs. a promotion focus is predominant. In the view of Pham and Avnet, affective information is a less reliable source for the decision than information that is more related to the central merits of a product. Therefore, individuals in a prevention focus should rely less on their affective reaction to a product appeal or other peripheral cues than on the central merits that the product is claimed to have. In a series of experiments, Pham and Avnet tested this prediction. After first manipulating the regulatory focus with a priming procedure, they exposed participants to the ad for a dictionary. The attractiveness of the ad was varied along with the persuasive strength of the claims. In line with their expectations, the authors found that the judgment of the dictionary was influenced to a stronger degree by the ad's attractiveness when a promotion focus was primed than when a prevention focus was primed. The claim was more important for participants with a prevention focus than for those with a promotion focus. Altogether, Pham and Avnet have provided evidence that the regulatory focus has an impact on the processing of information in the area of consumer judgment.

Florack, Scarabis, and Gosejohann (2004b) attempted to furnish additional support for the assumption that a promotion focus and a prevention focus are linked to different processing strategies, and to illuminate the conditions under which the differential effects of regulatory focus on consumer behavior occur. In a first experiment, they examined the hypothesis that individuals in promotion focus are more likely than individuals in a prevention focus to rely on their automatic product preferences when forming an impression of a product. The experimenter told participants that they could choose between fruit and chocolate as a reward for their

participation, and that they should indicate their preferences on a few items. To induce a promotion focus in one condition and a prevention focus in the other, the researchers applied a priming procedure before participants indicated their preferences. This priming procedure was adapted from Pham and Avnet (2004). In the promotion focus condition, participants were asked to think about their current and past hopes, aspirations, and dreams, and to list at least two of each. In the prevention focus condition, participants were asked to think about their current and past duties, obligations, and responsibilities, and to list at least two of each. In addition, Florack et al. (2004b) measured automatic product preferences with the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald et al., 1998). In line with their expectations, they found a significant correlation between the automatic preferences and the self-reported preferences only for participants in the promotion priming condition, but not for those in the prevention priming condition. Thus, it seems that individuals in a prevention focus rely on other information than just their automatic preferences when making a choice. Presumably, they do not consider their automatic preference or their affective response as valid information that ensures a good decision, hence they look out for other sources of information. In contrast, the results of Florack et al. (2004b) and those of Pham and Avnet (2004) suggest that individuals in a promotion focus trust their immediate responses. Since for these people the attainment of their individual goals has priority, we suppose that the reliance on their own responses and knowledge structures is very functional.

Regulatory Focus and Cue Relevance in Persuasion

If we regard systematic processing as a way of obtaining security, it seems reasonable to assume that individuals in a prevention focus are motivated to process all relevant information more systematically than individuals in a promotion focus.

Taking into account that studies in persuasion with high reliability found that peripheral cues have increased effects on persuasion when the processing motivation is low, it seems reasonable to assume that individuals in a prevention focus are also less likely to be influenced by peripheral cues than individuals in a promotion focus. Indeed, a core assumption of the classic two-process models in persuasion research (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a; Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989) is that peripheral or heuristic cues have relatively little impact on attitudes under high elaboration conditions.

If we examine these theories in greater detail, it appears that the perceived relevance of cues is the crucial point. For example, Petty and Cacioppo (1986a) proposed that peripheral cues have a reduced impact under high elaboration conditions because highly motivated people do not consider peripheral cues as particularly relevant for making their judgments. Indeed, in a recent analysis of persuasion research, Pierro, Mannetti, Kruglanski, and Sleeth-Keppler (2004) found that in almost all of the studies that tested the two-process models in persuasion, peripheral cues were perceived as less relevant than high-quality message arguments.

However, cues like the source of a message might also be more relevant for a judgment or a decision than message arguments, and may affect attitudes under systematic processing as well as under heuristic or peripheral processing (Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999; Petty & Wegener, 1999). This may be the case especially if the issue is important to a person, but the person is unable to understand the arguments being presented. Consider a consumer who would like to buy a detergent. She or he may have difficulties finding strong arguments for a particular choice when standing in front of a shelf in the supermarket. Even if the ingredients of the detergents are

listed on the packages, the consumer is probably unable to understand them. Furthermore, detailed information about a product is virtually absent in other contexts, such as some print or TV ads. In these cases, consumers who are motivated to engage in effortful information processing do not have the possibility to elaborate on central arguments that are given. Rather, they might think extensively about the relevance of peripheral cues or might attempt to generate arguments (Petty, Wheeler, & Bizer, 1999).

If we consider the argument of Petty and Cacioppo (1986b) that “the kind of information that is relevant to evaluating the central merits of a product may vary from situation to situation and from person to person” (p. 17), this may apply especially to individual differences in regulatory focus. As we have suggested, some cues – such as the affective reaction towards a product – may be more relevant for participants in a promotion focus than for those in a prevention focus. Other cues may be more diagnostic for a safe and responsible decision, and may therefore be especially relevant for participants in a prevention focus.

There is some evidence from mood research that is congruent with this proposition. Indeed, there are similarities in the information processing strategies used by individuals in a bad mood and by individuals in a prevention focus. Bless and Schwarz (1999) postulated that mood provides the individual with important information about his or her status. They argued that good mood indicates that everything is all right, while bad mood signals that something is wrong and that the individual has to carefully think about his or her behavior and decisions. Several studies provided broad support for this assumption and documented that individuals in bad mood process information more systematically than individuals in good mood, and that they are less likely to rely on heuristics, stereotypes, or peripheral cues in

persuasion (e.g., Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 1990; Bless, Mackie, & Schwarz, 1992; Bodenhausen, Kramer, & Süsser, 1994; Mackie & Worth, 1989). However, Bohner, Crow, Erb, and Schwarz (1991, Experiment 2) also showed that individuals in a bad mood do not disregard peripheral cues in every case. In one of their experiments, they advised a confederate to collect money for disabled persons. The confederate supported the request either by a strong argument (“Money for the construction of ramps for wheel chairs”) or a weak one (“Money for a separate library for the disabled”). Furthermore, participants were shown a list of contributors that contained as few as two or as many as nineteen names. The results demonstrated that individuals in a negative mood considered not only the message strength, but also the consensus cue. They were more likely to donate money for the disabled when nineteen names were on the list of contributors rather than only two names. This effect was not found for participants in a positive mood. Since consensus information is a cue that may be related to a secure and valid decision, it seems that individuals who are motivated to avoid erroneous decisions – as are those in a bad mood - may rely on cues that signal safeness. Therefore, we assume that individuals in a prevention focus may also rely more heavily on cues than individuals in a promotion focus when these cues are more relevant to them than to individuals in a promotion focus.

In fact, Florack et al. (2004b) found first support for this assumption in an experiment in which they tested whether individuals in a prevention focus are more likely to rely on the preferences of others. In this experiment, the authors again primed a promotion or a prevention focus with the adapted procedure of Pham and Avnet (2004). Participants then saw a comparative ad for a burger that promoted either the Whopper (Burger King) or the Big Mac (McDonalds). In the Whopper-

promotion condition, the ad reported that in a market study, 62 percent of consumers would prefer the Whopper over the Big Mac if they had to make a choice between the two products. In the Big Mac-promotion condition, the opposite percentages were depicted on the ad, with a majority of 62 percent of respondents preferring a Big Mac. After participants saw the ad, they indicated their purchase intention for either a Whopper or a Big Mac on a few items. Furthermore, the automatic product preferences were assessed with an IAT and the chronic regulatory focus with a questionnaire of Lockwood et al. (2002).

A first step examined whether the differences in correlations of the automatic preferences with the choice intention were similar to the results obtained in the previous experiment for automatic preferences and self-reported attitudes. The authors obtained consistent results for the induced regulatory focus as well as for the chronic regulatory focus. For participants who thought about their ideals, they found a significantly higher correlation between the automatic preference and choice intention than for participants who thought about their obligations. Similarly, when they divided the sample by median split on the chronic regulatory focus measure into a group with a prevention focus and a group with a promotion focus, they obtained a higher correlation of the automatic product preference with choice intentions for participants with a chronic promotion focus compared to those with a chronic prevention focus.

Furthermore, the authors analyzed the effects of the experimental conditions and of chronic regulatory focus on choice intentions. They found a main effect for the presented ads. Participants were more likely to report intentions to buy a Big Mac when the ad claimed that most people preferred a Big Mac. However, when the opposite was claimed, this tendency was reduced. Importantly, this main effect was qualified by an interaction between the presented ad and the chronic regulatory

focus. Indeed, participants in a prevention focus were more likely to be influenced by the ad than participants in a promotion focus (Figure 1). For participants with a chronic promotion focus, no significant differences between the two ad presentations were found. Altogether, this experiment demonstrated that individuals in a promotion focus are more likely than individuals in a prevention focus to follow their intuition or automatic preferences. Individuals in a chronic prevention focus seem to rely more on the majority preferences, presumably because the preference of the majority is diagnostic for a safe decision.

Another consequence of a prevention focus is a preference for the status quo over change. We have already referred to the research of Liberman et al. (1999), who demonstrated that individuals in a prevention focus were less willing than individuals in a promotion focus to exchange objects they already possessed for other objects. An explanation for this finding is that change entails the danger of worsening a status that one has already achieved. In a certain sense, the choice between a well-established brand and a newcomer in the market can be seen also as a choice between stability and change. One important argument for choosing a well-established brand is that the buyer knows what he is getting. Indeed, that might be one reason why consumers often accept that well-established brands are much more expensive than comparison brands of comparable quality. In contrast, the choice of a newcomer in the market or a product with an unknown brand label offers the chance for an extra benefit, e.g., new product features or the same quality for a lower price. However, the choice of an unknown brand is also associated with the risk of a mispurchase.

If we take into account that individuals in a prevention focus are less willing than individuals in a promotion focus to accept a risk to improve an acceptable

status, individuals in a prevention focus should prefer well-established brands more so than individuals in a promotion focus. Indeed, a third study of Florack et al. (2004b) provides results that are to some extent congruent with this assumption. In this study, participants saw a print ad for a new mobile phone. However, even if the layout of the ad was the same for all participants, the brand of the mobile phone and the claim of the ad were varied. Half of the participants received an ad for a well-established brand ("Sony Ericsson"), while the other half received an ad for a fictitious brand ("Kiotel"). In one condition, the claim of the ad was related to a prevention goal ("With this mobile phone you always have a reliable partner") or a promotion goal ("With this mobile phone you are always a step ahead").

Furthermore, the authors measured the chronic regulatory focus with a scale of Lockwood et al. (2002), and divided the sample into a group with a predominant promotion focus and another with a predominant prevention focus by median split. When the claim addressed a prevention goal, the statistical analyses revealed the expected interaction between the predominant goal and the brand label. Participants with a predominant prevention focus, but not those with a predominant promotion focus, evaluated the mobile phone more positively when the ad carried a well-known brand label as compared to when it carried an unknown brand label. However, it is important to note that when the claim of the ad addressed a promotion goal, the brand label had no effect on the product evaluation either for participants with a predominant promotion focus, or for those with a predominant prevention focus. Thus, the key finding of this study is that individuals in a prevention focus rely on the brand label, but they do so only when the claim of the ad addresses a goal that corresponds to their regulatory focus.

An explanation for the results of Florack et al. (2004b) is rooted in the research on regulatory fit (Cesario et al., 2004; Higgins, 2000, 2002). As mentioned before, Cesario et al. (2004) argued that a fit between a persuasive message and the regulatory focus of the recipient elicits a “feeling right” that can be transferred to the evaluation of a message. Going one step further, a consumer might also rely on such a “feeling right” when evaluating the validity of heuristic cues like the brand. Following this reasoning, the perceived relevance of a brand should be higher when the claim fits with the predominant focus of the participants. This might explain why participants with a predominant prevention focus relied on the well-known brand when the claim addressed a goal that matched their focus, and why they did not when there was a mismatch. However, this still leaves open the question why fit does not lead to an enhanced brand effect for participants in a promotion focus. If regulatory fit leads to a “feeling right” about the cues, this should also be true for promotion-focused people. It is possible that because of their superficial processing style, participants with a predominant promotion focus did not care about the brand information in any condition (cf. Pham & Avnet, 2004). In making their judgment, they may have relied on their immediate response that was driven by the product appeal, but not by the brand name.

A main implication of the study by Florack et al. (2004b) is that the relevance of a cue might depend on the context of a judgment or choice. The study we have mentioned showed that a cue that was relevant for participants with a predominant prevention focus in one condition was not relevant for them in another condition. Indeed, this might be even more true for cues other than a brand name. Consider the example of a celebrity endorser. The personality of a celebrity endorser, like that of every individual, consists of many different traits, and he or she might be associated

with a lot of attributes and social categories. A celebrity might fit the expectations of a consumer on one attribute but not on another, and which information about the celebrity is salient will vary a lot between different contexts. All in all, whether or not a consumer perceives a celebrity endorser as trustworthy and relevant might depend on many different things and may vary contextually (Silvera & Laufer, this volume). Since the perception of the celebrity endorser is variable, affective reactions as well as the “feeling right” from regulatory fit may also have an impact on the trustworthiness of a celebrity endorser.

Indeed, Florack et al. (2004b) argue that one of the context variables that might determine whether individuals perceive a cue as valid is the regulatory fit between characteristics of an advertisement and the regulatory focus of the consumer. In particular, they propose that a fit between regulatory goals that are addressed in the claim of an ad and the predominant regulatory focus of the consumer might induce a “feeling right”. Since previous research has shown that such a “feeling right” is to some extent an unspecific feeling that, as we know from research on mood, may be attributed to different causes, consumers may also interpret this feeling as an indicator for the validity and the relevance of the celebrity in the ad. If the regulatory fit elicits a “feeling right,” consumers might think that the celebrity is in the right place on the ad and they might rely on this cue in making their judgment. This implies that a cue like a celebrity endorser can be more relevant for individuals in a prevention focus than for those in a promotion focus when an ad addresses prevention goals, but that the same cue can also be more relevant for participants in a promotion focus than for those in a prevention focus when the claim of the ad addresses promotion goals. In a fourth study, Florack et al. (2004b) tested this assumption.

In this study, the authors again applied Pham and Avnet's (2004) priming procedure for inducing a promotion or a prevention focus. Afterwards, they presented an ad for a mobile phone on the computer screen. Participants then evaluated the product on several items. The presented ads were similar to those in the previous experiment, with the exception that the brand label was the same in all conditions. Instead, in one condition a celebrity endorser appeared in the ad, while in another condition participants only saw an unknown person. The variation of the claims, which either addressed a promotion or a prevention goal, was the same as in the previous experiment. As the authors hypothesized, an ANOVA with the primed regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention), the claims (promotion vs. prevention), and the endorsers (celebrity vs. unknown person) as independent variables and the evaluation of the mobile phone as dependent measure yielded a significant three-way interaction (Figure 2).

Let us first consider the results for the induced promotion focus. When a promotion focus was primed, the celebrity endorser did indeed have a positive effect on the evaluation of the mobile phone, but only when the claim of the ad addressed a promotion goal. Interestingly, the shape of the interaction was different when a prevention focus was primed. For these participants, there were no significant differences in the evaluation of the mobile phone between the conditions with a celebrity or an unknown endorser when the claim addressed a promotion goal. But when the claim addressed a prevention goal, these participants also evaluated the mobile phone more positively when they were exposed to an ad with a celebrity endorser than when they were exposed to an ad with an unknown endorser. Altogether, the results demonstrated that the celebrity endorser had a higher persuasive impact on the evaluation of the mobile phone when the claim addressed a

goal that was compatible with the induced regulatory focus. Thus, the results suggest that a peripheral cue like a celebrity endorser in this experiment might be differentially relevant for participants in a promotion focus and for those in a prevention focus. However, they also suggest that the relevance of the cues may flip when the claim of the message changes.

Even if the results are completely congruent with the regulatory fit explanation, further research is necessary to clarify the underlying process. Since the primary goal of the studies of Florack et al. (2004b) was to identify the phenomena that regulatory focus and regulatory fit have an impact on the relevance of heuristic cues, they did not test whether the obtained cue effects are indeed a consequence of the misattribution of a “feeling right” that has its source in perceived regulatory fit. We have already examined the work of Cesario et al. (2004) and Lee and Aaker (2004), who showed that regulatory fit leads to a “feeling right” and that this feeling right can be misattributed as a positive affective reaction to the issue of the advertisement. However, they did not test cue effects like those that appeared in the studies of Florack et al. (2004b). Thus, the field would benefit if future research were to address the underlying processes of the described phenomena. In fact, the studies discussed above cannot rule out some alternative explanations. Two possible explanations that are important to mention are a) that the claim might prime a different view of the cues, and b) that the claim affects the motivation of the participants.

We discussed earlier that a cue might be perceived in many different ways. A well-known brand may stand for quality, reliability, or even for overpriced products. Similarly, a celebrity may be associated with a lot of different benefits or disadvantages. The message may operate as a prime which activates a certain concept that is applied to the cues. For example, if a message activates the concept

reliability, the cue may be perceived in relationship to reliability. If we apply this to the brand study of Florack et al. (2004b), it is possible that in one condition, but not in the other, participants perceived the well-known brand as warranting reliability. Taking into account that reliability is an important issue for individuals in a prevention focus, it would be reasonable to assume that, in this case, they rely on the well-known brand. Since priming research has shown that a primed concept must be applicable (Higgins, 1996), it may be that the concept of reliability was not applicable to the unknown brand. Thus, the message may prime how the cue is perceived.

Furthermore, it remains an open question whether the effects of regulatory fit are consequences of enhanced motivation. Evans and Petty (2003) already demonstrated that fit between a message and the regulatory goals of a recipient leads to a greater elaboration of the message. At first glance, this seems to contradict the findings that cues may be especially important under conditions of regulatory fit. However, if we consider that the ads presented in the studies of Florack et al. (2004) contained no information other than a simple claim, a picture, and a cue, participants had no chance to further elaborate given information. Perhaps they thought more about the information that was present, including cues like the brand name or the endorser. In particular, it may be possible that, in the brand study, the brand was only noticed by those participants who were motivated to study the advertisement very carefully. As for the study with the celebrity endorser, it may be that highly motivated participants generated thoughts about the celebrity like "He would not make advertisements for an inferior product that would ruin his name." Thus, the findings could also be explained as a consequence of a higher motivation to elaborate on the ads that goes hand in hand with regulatory fit.

Summary: Regulatory focus, information processing, and product choice

The main objective of this chapter has been to illustrate the impact of regulatory focus on consumer information processing and consumer choice. First, we discussed results that were related to the proposition of regulatory focus theory that “decision makers in a promotion orientation will treat promotion-relevant outcomes as more important in their decision than prevention-relevant outcomes, whereas the reverse will be true for decision makers in a prevention orientation” (Higgins, 2002, p.186). Several studies provided support for two implications of this proposal. Primarily, there is evidence that individuals prefer products that are instrumental for pursuing a regulatory goal.

Our sun lotion study (Florack et al., 2004a) was based on the idea that individuals have different goals in mind when buying a sun lotion: the goal to protect the skin and to avoid sunburn, which is associated with a prevention focus; and the goal to get tanned, which is associated with a promotion focus. In agreement with the postulate of the regulatory focus theory, we found that participants in a prevention focus, more so than participants in a promotion focus, preferred a sun lotion with a claim that stressed the importance of skin protection instead of the goal of getting well tanned. However, in this particular example, the outcome related to a promotion or prevention focus is not the product. Rather, the product is the means to attaining a superordinate goal (getting tanned – avoiding sunburn). In other cases, a product or certain attributes of a product have direct outcome values that are differently related to a promotion or prevention focus. For instance, Safer (1998) found that when participants make a choice, they pay more attention to attribute dimensions of a product that are relevant to their regulatory focus than to other dimensions. Thus,

there is evidence that consumers prefer products that provide a means to reach a regulatory goal or have an outcome value relevant to a regulatory goal.

However, there is research showing not only the impact of a consumers' regulatory focus on a choice, but also that different products can differently elicit a promotion or prevention self-regulation. Consider the study by Zhou and Pham (in press), who asked participants, first, to make investment decisions, and, then, to choose between unrelated products with either a promotion or a prevention benefit. The authors found that the act of making decisions had an impact on the regulatory focus in subsequent choices unrelated to investment (e.g., choice of a juice). Participants who had just made decisions about risky investment products preferred consumer products with promotion benefits, whereas those who had just made decisions about more secure investment products preferred products with prevention benefits.

Another aspect we have stressed in this chapter is the importance of the regulatory focus as regards the design of advertisements. The studies of Lee and Aaker (2004) illustrate that an advertising claim is more effective when there is a fit between different elements of the message. In particular, they showed that it is easier for participants to understand a claim when a promotion benefit is highlighted in a gain frame, and when a prevention benefit is highlighted in a loss frame. These frame and focus combinations, unlike the reversed ones, also lead to a "feeling right" that, in turn, increases the perceived persuasiveness of an advertising claim. In addition, Aaker and Lee (2001) demonstrated that elements of a message can also induce different self-views, and that an advertisement is evaluated more positively when the activated self-view fits with other regulatory issues of the advertisement. For example, in one study the website for a juice was rated more positively when

pictures and text activated an independent self and when, simultaneously, the ad asserted promotion benefits (e.g., power, energy) rather than prevention benefits (e.g., disease prevention). When an interdependent self-view was activated, a prevention claim had a more positive effect on the evaluation of the website.

The effects of different kinds of fit were also discussed as regards the fit between the regulatory focus of an advertising message and the regulatory focus of the recipient. Evans and Petty (2003) found that fit motivates participants to elaborate on the arguments of a message more extensively. Moreover, Cesario et al. (2004) propose that fit between the regulatory focus of a message elicits a “feeling right” that can be interpreted by individuals as an indicator of the persuasive strength of an advertisement, a claim, or a message. Indeed, they found strong support for their assumption. In their studies, the “feeling right” from regulatory fit influenced the persuasive impact of a message as long as the participants were not directed to the correct source of this feeling. If they were, participants corrected for the influence of the “feeling right.” Cesario et al. suggested as the main mechanism that individuals interpret the “feeling right” as the perceived correctness of their own responses. In support of this assumption, they found that the “feeling right” amplified the effect of message-related thoughts. When the thoughts were primarily positive, the “feeling right” led to more positive evaluations of the attitude object, whereas more negative evaluations resulted when the thoughts were primarily negative. Taking into account the research of both Evans and Petty and of Cesario et al., there is evidence that regulatory fit between a message and a recipient a) signals that the message is relevant and should be elaborated more extensively, and b) evokes a “feeling right” that serves as an indicator of the correctness of own responses towards a message.

In addition, we have also discussed the fact that a consumer's regulatory focus might have a direct impact on information processing strategies. Pham and Avnet (2004) as well as Florack et al. (2004b) assumed that the conservatism and risk aversion that characterized individuals in a prevention focus in contrast to those in a promotion focus is also reflected in information processing strategies. As support for this assumption we referred to a study by Pham and Avnet. In this study, participants were more likely to be influenced by substantive information than by the appeal of a product when a prevention focus vs. a promotion focus was primed. Similarly, Florack et al. (2004b) found that individuals in a prevention focus were less likely than individuals in a promotion focus to rely on their automatic preferences. However, the impact of regulatory focus is not limited to the amount of processing; regulatory focus also affects which information is relevant and diagnostic for the consumer. The research of Florack et al. (2004b) showed that the automatic preference is a relevant cue for people in a promotion focus, but not for those in a prevention focus. In contrast, consensus information was proved to have greater impact on the judgments of participants in a prevention focus than on those of participants in a promotion focus. Thus, it seems that people in a prevention focus, more so than those in a promotion focus, apply information processing strategies that allow for a secure and less risky decision. For instance, individuals in a prevention focus may elaborate on the given information or look out for information that indicates safeness, e.g., consensus information.

Extending this view, we stressed another argument in this chapter: the variability of cue relevance. Some cues may have a meaning that does not vary much over different contexts, but a lot of cues can be associated with several different meanings. There was evidence in the studies of Florack et al. (2004b) that a

celebrity endorser is an informative cue for participants in a promotion focus in one context, and is relevant for participants in a prevention focus in other contexts. Indeed, the same celebrity endorser may be associated with characteristics that are relevant for people in a prevention focus (e.g., reliability) or for people in a promotion focus (e.g., ideals). Depending on the context, different characteristics of the celebrity endorser may be salient. The studies of Florack et al. (2004b) have shown that another variable also has an influence on the relevance of a cue: that variable is, once again, the regulatory fit between the focus of the recipient and the focus of an advertising claim. It was found that a celebrity endorser had a greater impact on the evaluation of a product when the claim matched the regulatory goals of the recipient. We have argued that in this condition, the “feeling right” associated with the regulatory fit also serves as an indicator that the celebrity is trustable or in the right place. However, we also pointed out that, in the fit conditions, participants possibly relied more on the celebrity because he was associated with a claim that was relevant to them. Further research is necessary to evaluate our cue variability proposition more extensively. In particular, it is important to examine directly the supposed mediating role of the “feeling right” as well as the effects of the salience of differential cue characteristics.

Implications for marketing

The impact of a promotion or prevention focus on consumer information processing also has implications for advertising and marketing. One implication that is easy to implement is that advertisers should avoid a mismatch of different elements of an advertisement as regards regulatory focus. Since Lee and Aaker (2004) have shown that loss frames fit better with a prevention claim, and gain frames fit better with a promotion claim, advertisers should use only framing/focus

combinations that fit. Furthermore, advertisers should be aware that a specific self-view or self-regulation could be evoked by elements of an ad (Aaker & Lee, 2001). Regulatory focus theory predicts that ads should be more persuasive when the regulatory focus of the highlighted benefits is congruent with the self-view or self-regulation of the recipient that is evoked by picture or text elements.

More difficult to realize is the design of an advertisement with reference to the regulatory focus of a target group. Even if there are cultural differences relevant to regulatory focus (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001), which may be of special interest for global marketing campaigns, often the target group consists of promotion as well as prevention focused individuals. However, there might be products that are advertised in specific market segments that are strongly related to a specific regulatory focus, such as investment products that are addressed to people who seek a secure retirement arrangement, or family-related products (e.g., a child safety seat). Indeed, products can be strongly associated with a promotion or prevention focus and can induce the associated self-regulation in the individual (Zhou & Pham, in press). In these cases as well, advertisers may avail themselves of the processes of regulatory fit.

To get an idea which products are related to which focus, practitioners could rely on product typologies like the “product color matrix” (PCM; e.g., Spotts, Weinberger, & Parsons, 1997). This matrix categorizes products into one of four categories on the basis of two dimensions: (1) risk of purchase (high vs. low); (2) the consumer’s objective (functional tools vs. expressive toys). One can speculate, for example, that “big toys” (expressive products with a high purchase risk, e.g., sports cars) are more promotion connected, while “little tools” (functional products with a low

risk, e.g., detergents and household cleaners) are more prevention connected, because they mainly serve to preserve or re-establish the status quo.

To induce regulatory fit, advertisers may also display specific emotions in an advertising campaign. For example, Higgins (1998) argued that a promotion focus is more connected to cheerfulness-related and dejection-related emotions (e.g., happiness or disappointment) compared to a prevention focus, which is connected rather to quiescence-related or agitation-related emotions (e.g., calmness or tension). These emotional aspects can be used to construct stories that appeal to different groups of consumers. A very simple idea is to target the prevention-oriented consumer by showing a situation that stresses the uneasiness of a person in face of a potential loss. Besides the recommendation to use fitting content, this aspect could help to find the right emotional undertone. Incidentally, with the exception of the “feeling right” effect, the emotional dimension of regulatory focus theory is so far untested in the context of consumer psychology.

Finally, even if products may be associated with a certain regulatory focus, it was shown that the regulatory focus of participants varies depending on the context of a judgment or choice. This variability is not only a *problem* for marketing managers and advertisers, who might be able to utilize this effect to their advantage. For example, a product may be placed in different locations within a store. Consider the sun lotion experiment that we described at the beginning of this chapter. Depending on which focus we made salient, participants preferred a sun lotion with a claim that stressed the protective characteristics of the product, or a sun lotion with a claim that was concerned with getting tanned. Similarly, the context within a supermarket varies. Sun lotion can be placed close to holiday-related products such as color film or sunglasses. However, it can also be placed in a section that is related to health

products. The product claims could be designed to fit with the respective placement to enhance the purchase probability.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reviewed research on the impact of regulatory focus in the area of consumer psychology. In our view the regulatory focus approach is helpful for understanding consumer behavior and also allows us to make predictions that could be beneficial for advertisers and marketers. While regulatory focus is – needless to say - only one of many variables that drive consumer behavior, we have attempted to demonstrate that it is in many contexts an important one. This can be seen from the variety of effects that have been described in this chapter. Nevertheless, the relationship to other constructs need further study. In many respects, regulatory focus theory makes predictions that are similar to mood research. For example, it is assumed that individuals in a bad mood – like individuals in a prevention focus - search for strong arguments and reliable cues to make sure of their decisions or judgment (Bless & Schwarz, 1999). In fact, the regulatory focus manipulations reported in this chapter were shown not to affect mood (e.g., Florack & Hartmann, 2003; Pham & Avnet, 2004). However, there might be a more basic process that underlies both effects. Furthermore, the relationship between a regulatory focus and personality differences in risk aversion or other related constructs (Lopes, 1987) should be further illuminated in future research. The aim should be to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that underlie the effects of regulatory focus in different domains (e.g., persuasion, memory, and decision making). Finally, we would like to propose that regulatory focus theory could make a huge contribution also in the applied context of marketing and advertising. In our

view, practitioners can benefit a lot from considering the mechanisms we have discussed in this chapter.

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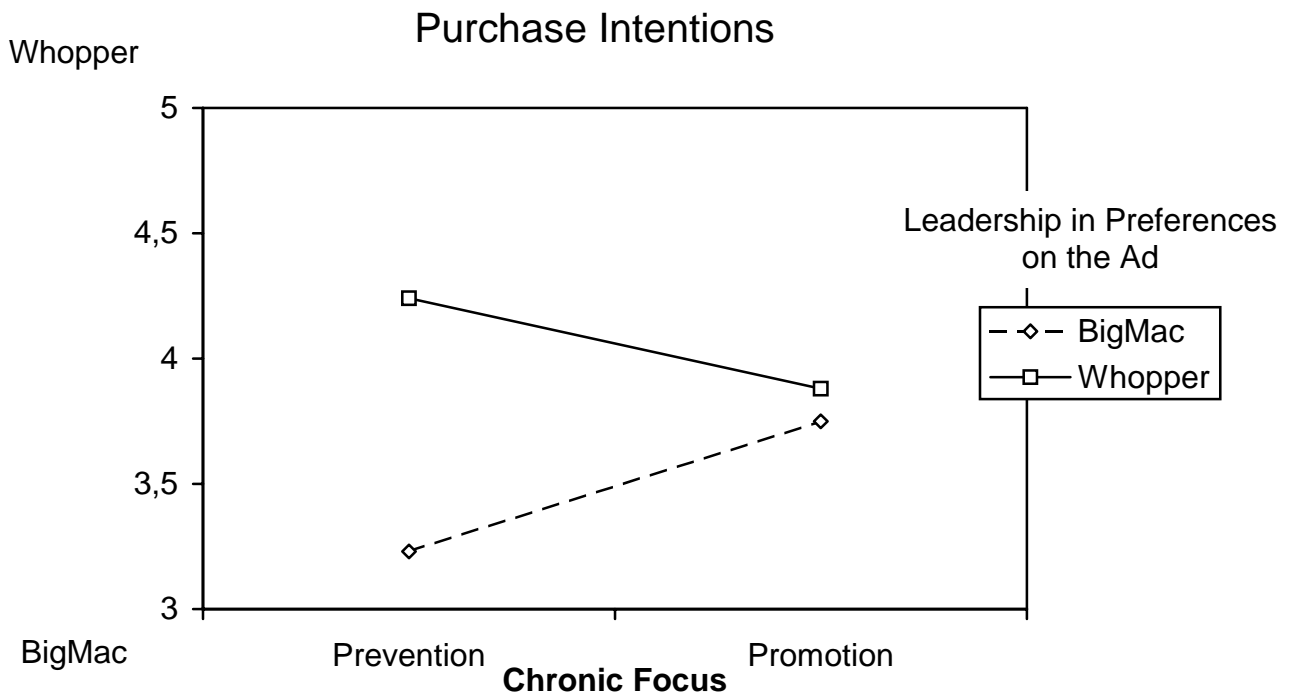
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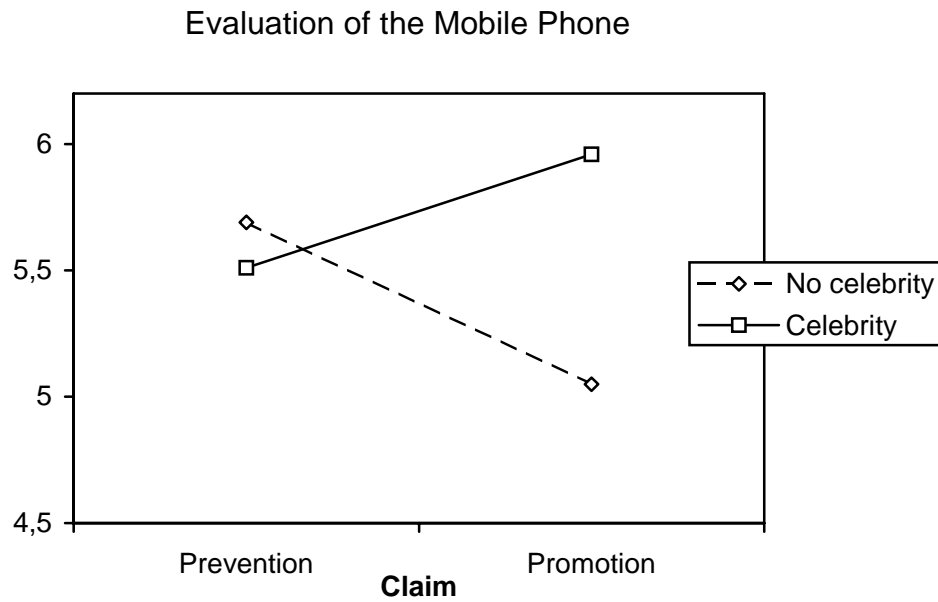
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Purchase intentions as a function of the chronic regulatory focus and consensus information on the ad. High values indicate a preference for a Whopper, low values a preference for the Big Mac. Data from Florack, Scarabis, and Gosejohann (2004b).

Figure 2. Evaluation of the mobile phone as a function of the induced regulatory focus, the focus of the claim, and the endorser. Data from Florack, Scarabis, and Gosejohann (2004b).



a) Promotion Priming Condition



b) Prevention Priming Condition

