



# Beyond expectations: The effect of regulatory focus on consumer satisfaction <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of regulatory focus on consumer satisfaction. In contrast to the disconfirmation of expectations model of satisfaction, we find that, although regulatory focus does affect consumers' expectations, the effect on satisfaction cannot be explained by differences in those expectations. Instead, our results reveal a direct effect of consumers' regulatory focus on satisfaction that is based on the conservative bias of prevention-focused consumers. Compared to promotion-focused consumers, prevention-focused consumers protect against making errors and demonstrate a conservative bias in their evaluations of satisfaction. The results of two experiments demonstrate this conservative bias, showing that, compared to promotion-focused consumers, prevention-focused consumers are less satisfied with positive outcomes and more satisfied with negative outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Marketers have traditionally described consumer decision making as a series of five progressive stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase processes (e.g., Grewal & Levy, 2010). In recent years, regulatory focus theory has extended our knowledge of consumer decision making by investigating the effect of promotion and prevention orientations on consumer information search (Pham & Chang, 2010), information processing (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Bosmans & Baumgartner, 2005; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007; Pham & Avnet, 2004), and choice (Briley & Wyer, 2002; Wang & Lee, 2006).

In the last twenty-five years, researchers have also learned a great deal about consumer satisfaction. For example, we know that satisfied customers are often of greater value because they tend to spend more money, exhibit higher levels of loyalty, and talk more favorably about a product to others (for a review see Vargo, Nagao, He, & Morgan, 2007). In addition, there has been a great deal of support for the disconfirmation of expectations model of satisfaction, which contends

that consumers' pre-purchase expectations are a key driver of their ultimate satisfaction (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Oliver, 1980, 1997; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994).

However, the literature is noticeably silent on how consumers' regulatory focus affects satisfaction in the post-purchase stage of consumer decision making. The present paper takes a first step towards addressing this issue by examining the impact that promotion and prevention orientations have on consumer satisfaction. In contrast to the disconfirmation of expectations model of satisfaction, we contend that a consumer's regulatory focus can have a direct effect on satisfaction that is independent of expectations. Specifically, based on the conservative bias of prevention-focused consumers, which has been demonstrated in prior research (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 2002), we predict that prevention-focused consumers will be more satisfied with a negative outcome and less satisfied with a positive outcome than promotion-focused consumers. In the following sections, we discuss the theoretical rationale for the impact of regulatory focus on satisfaction and present the method and results of two experimental studies that document this effect. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

## 2. Theory development

Higgins (1987) suggests that there are two fundamental goal classifications that dominate human behavior: ideals and oughts. Ideals refer to people's hopes, wishes and aspirations (e.g., owning a sports car), whereas oughts refer to people's obligations, duties and responsibilities (e.g., taking care of one's family). Ideals and oughts are pursued using different self-regulatory systems. Ideals are pursued with

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the promotion system, while oughts are pursued using the prevention system (Higgins, 1997, 1998). Thus, regulatory focus theory suggests fundamental motivational differences in the goals that each system regulates (Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2002). Promotion-focused consumers are concerned with goals of growth and advancement, while prevention-focused consumers are concerned with goals of security and responsibility.

Promotion and prevention are also distinct in the types of strategies that these systems activate in the pursuit of goals (Higgins, 1997; Pham & Avnet, 2004). Promotion-focused consumers approach gains and avoid non-gains. Their goal pursuit is characterized by eagerness and a desire to approach accomplishments. In contrast, people with a prevention focus approach non-losses and avoid losses. Their goal pursuit is characterized by vigilance and a desire to avoid making mistakes. As a result, those with a prevention focus are more sensitive to losses. Therefore, relative to people who are promotion-focused, individuals with a prevention focus tend to exhibit a *conservative bias* in judgment and decision making (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 2002). This conservative bias was tested in a memory recognition task by Crowe and Higgins (1997) in which participants were presented with an initial list of 20 letter strings (nonsense words). Next participants were presented with a second list of 40 letter strings. Of the 40 letter strings, 20 of the letter strings were in the initial list, and 20 of the letter strings were new. Participants then responded as to whether they had previously seen the letter string. The results revealed that, compared with promotion-focused participants, prevention-focused participants protected against making mistakes, demonstrating a conservative bias by saying “no” (Crowe & Higgins, 1997).

Consumer research has documented the effects of promotion and prevention in a variety of different domains, including information search (Pham & Chang, 2010), information processing (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Bosmans & Baumgartner, 2005; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007; Pham & Avnet, 2004) and preference formation (Briley & Wyer, 2002; Wang & Lee, 2006). The research presented in this article contributes to this literature by demonstrating that consumers' regulatory focus can also influence their satisfaction with a consumption experience. We contend that the conservative bias among people with a prevention focus, relative to those with a promotion focus, has important implications for consumer satisfaction. Specifically, a prevention focus should lead people to protect against making errors, resulting in more reserved and conservative evaluations. Therefore, we predict that, as compared to promotion-focused consumers, *prevention-focused consumers will be less satisfied by positive outcomes and more satisfied by negative outcomes.*

From the perspective of regulatory focus theory, this prediction is a relatively straightforward implication of the conservative bias that previous research has identified among people who are prevention-focused (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 2002). However, regulatory focus theory suggests a direct effect of regulatory focus on satisfaction that does not rely on the expectations that a consumer has for the consumption experience. This prediction is not easily accounted for by the well-established disconfirmation of expectations model (Oliver, 1980, 1997), which contends that satisfaction and dissatisfaction arise from a cognitive process whereby pre-purchase expectations are compared to the actual consumption experience. The result of this comparison leads to expectancy disconfirmation — positive disconfirmation when the outcome is better than expected and negative disconfirmation when the outcome is worse than expected.

Nevertheless, despite the large body of evidence supporting the disconfirmation of expectations model of satisfaction (e.g., Bolton & Drew, 1991; Oliver, 1980, 1997; Parasuraman et al., 1994), other researchers have argued that, at least in some situations, expectations and satisfaction can operate independently (e.g., Westbrook & Reilly, 1983). In the two experiments that follow, we test our prediction that prevention-oriented consumers are less satisfied than

promotion-focused consumers with positive outcomes and more satisfied with negative outcomes. In contrast to the disconfirmation of expectations model of satisfaction, we find that although regulatory focus does affect consumers' expectations, the effect on satisfaction cannot be explained by differences in those expectations. Instead, our results reveal a direct effect of consumers' regulatory focus on satisfaction, which is consistent with the conservative bias of prevention-focused consumers that has been demonstrated in prior research (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 2002).

### 3. Experiment 1

#### 3.1. Method

##### 3.1.1. Participants and design

A total of 103 participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (consumption experience: positive vs. negative) by 2 (regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) between-subjects design. Participants were selected from the subject pool of a large North American university; participants received partial course credit for their participation.

##### 3.1.2. Procedure

The experiment was administered as two unrelated studies. In the first study, the participants completed a priming task. Following Pham and Avnet (2004), we used a priming procedure to manipulate participants' regulatory focus. In the promotion condition, we used an *ideals* prime that required participants to think about their past hopes, aspirations and dreams and then to list two of them. Following this procedure, they were asked to think about their current hopes, aspirations and dreams and then to list two of them. In the prevention condition, we used an *oughts* prime, which required participants to think about their past duties, obligations and responsibilities and then to list two of them. They were then asked to think about their current duties, obligations and responsibilities and then to list two of them.

In the ostensibly unrelated second study, we measured participants' satisfaction with a camera's performance. All participants were provided with a scenario that asked them to choose between two cameras. The cameras were minor purchases in the scenarios and were not expensive (\$39).

To establish a basis for expectations, participants were given an average consumer rating from an unbiased source. To induce consistent choice across participants, one camera was rated as objectively superior (the dominant choice among study participants), and the other was rated as objectively inferior (the dominated choice). In a pre-test, 100% of the participants selected the dominant camera. In the main study, five participants chose the inferior camera and, as a result, they were eliminated from the analysis. The final sample had a total of 98 participants.

Next, we measured participants' expectations of the performance of the camera that they chose using 3 nine-point items anchored by “Average, like most snapshots” and “Excellent, like a professional print” ( $\alpha = .94$ ) (Spreng & Olshavsky, 1993). The items were (1) “What would be the level of picture quality you would expect from this camera?” (2) “What would be the clarity of picture quality you would expect from this camera?” (3) “What would be the sharpness of picture quality you would expect from this camera?”

The operationalization of positive versus negative product experience was consistent with previous satisfaction research (Spreng, MacKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1996; Voss, Parasuraman, & Grewal, 1998). All subjects viewed the same four pictures; however, the quality of the photos varied between conditions. In the positive product experience condition, the photos were of a consistently higher quality. In the negative product experience condition, clarity and sharpness were manipulated using photo software (Adobe Photoshop 7) to

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