Beyond Outcomes:

How Regulatory Focus Motivates Consumer Goal Pursuit Processes

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Abstract

This article reviews the current state of the regulatory focus literature as it relates to consumer behavior, with a special emphasis on the goal pursuit *processes* that naturally align with the promotion and prevention systems. Because most research on such processes has taken place within the framework of regulatory fit theory, we highlight regulatory fit findings. We also suggest practical implications of these goal pursuit processes for marketing and branding. We then shift our attention to the standards that people use to evaluate their goal pursuit processes and examine how these standards and their use might differ with respect to regulatory focus. Finally, we share a new line of work on regulatory focus-specific goal pursuit processes and describe avenues for future research.

Keywords: goals and motivation, self-regulation and self-control, preference and choice

Beyond Outcomes: How Regulatory Focus Motivates Consumer Goal Pursuit Processes

Consumers are goal-oriented beings. When a mother chooses a brand of ice cream to serve at her child's birthday party, a couple considers various makes and models for their new family car, or a middle-aged manager invests in his first life insurance policy, each of these potential purchases is aimed at the satisfaction of a personal goal that can be attained through the consumption experience. Although some of these goals may relate to a desired end-state or outcome that consumption would facilitate (e.g., a successful party; a reliable car; security for one's family in the case of a tragedy), people are not driven solely by desired and undesired outcomes but are also driven to engage in the *process* of goal pursuit in specific ways (see, for example, Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999; Higgins, 2012; Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2018). Importantly, many of these processes are represented within the various stages of consumer decision-making, such as the identification of a problem or desire, the search for information about alternative choice options, the development of a consideration set, and evaluation and choice processes.

In order to understand consumer behavior more completely—and, as marketers, to benefit from such understanding—it is critical to appreciate the motivational systems that fundamentally underlie both the selection and pursuit of goals. One framework that offers such insight is regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998). Since its introduction over 20 years ago, much has been written about regulatory focus theory's contributions to the field's understanding of goal pursuit, judgment, and decision-making both broadly (e.g., Cornwell & Higgins, 2016; Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Higgins, 2018) and specifically in the domain of consumer behavior (e.g., Pham & Chang, 2010; Pham & Higgins, 2005; Werth & Foerster, 2007). The bulk of this work has been concerned with the different end-states that constitute people's goals—both those that relate to individuals' hopes and aspirations (i.e., promotion goals) and to their duties and responsibilities (i.e., prevention goals). However, beyond this work contributing to a better understanding of the implications of these different conceptualizations of *end-states*, advances have also been made in understanding the relation between regulatory focus and the *processes* of goal pursuit. This review will highlight this more recent work on goal pursuit processes as it relates to marketing and consumer behavior.

In this review, we begin with a brief introduction to regulatory focus theory and regulatory fit theory, which often have been used together in marketing and consumer behavior studies (for extensive reviews, see Higgins, 2012; Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). We then shift our focus to work that suggests how brands can facilitate a sense of fit with their consumers' motivational preferences within various stages of the decision-making process. Next, we turn our attention to work that describes the standards by which people evaluate progress within their goal pursuit processes, as this research offers insight into how marketers might increase the effectiveness of their brand messaging and promotional campaigns. Finally, we share a new line of work on regulatory focus-specific goal pursuit processes and describe avenues for future research.

Regulatory Focus Theory

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) posits that people possess two motivational systems that are grounded in distinct sets of fundamental needs. The *promotion* system is rooted in needs for nurturance and growth. As a result, people with a promotion focus are primarily concerned with the presence versus absence of positive end-states (gains versus non-gains). In contrast, the *prevention* system is rooted in needs for safety and security. Consequently, people with a prevention focus are primarily concerned with the absence versus presence of negative end-states (non-losses versus losses). Additionally, these two systems are independent. Although a person may have a predominant regulatory focus (e.g., if he or she is high in prevention and low in promotion, or vice versa), it is also possible for a person to be either strong or weak in both domains. Further, a person's regulatory focus is not necessarily set in stone: While people tend to maintain a chronic regulatory focus as a result of historical or recurring situations (e.g., growing up with a caregiver who has a specific regulatory focus), regulatory focus is also a state that can vary as a function of one's current situation as well as changes across the lifespan. Finally, regulatory focus influences several aspects of goal selection and pursuit, including the desired end-states people decide to pursue and their preferred goal pursuit strategies and tactics.

Desired End-States

Thanks to the unique fundamental needs underlying each of these systems, goals set by people with a strong promotion versus prevention focus will tend to vary with respect to the kinds of end-states that are desired. Promotion goals tend to reflect end-states associated with one's *ideal* self, which may encompass a person's hopes, wishes, and aspirations, whereas prevention goals tend to reflect end-states associated with what a person feels he or she *ought* to be, encompassing a person's duties, responsibilities, and obligations (Higgins, 1997, 1998).

The distinction between promotion and prevention self-regulation has been more recently framed as a "story of 0" that highlights the fundamentally divergent ways in which these systems construe "0" as the status quo state (Higgins, 2014, 2018). People with a strong promotion focus consider the attainment of a "+1" gain state to be a success; as a result, the non-gain resulting from the maintenance of a "0" status quo (or anything below it) is experienced as a failure. In contrast, people with a strong prevention focus consider the maintenance of a satisfactory "0" status quo state (or any non-loss above it) to be a success, whereas a "–1" loss is considered a failure. This distinction reveals an important difference between regulatory focus theory and traditional approach-avoidance theories: Whereas many other theorists have conceived of one's current "0" status quo state as neutral in valence, regulatory focus theory proposes that this "0" state is experienced as an *undesired* end-state among promotion-focused individuals and a *desired* end-state among prevention-focused individuals.

Strategic Preferences

In addition to this regulatory focus distinction in conceptualizing end-states, the strategic means people prefer to use to pursue their goals also vary between those with a promotion or prevention focus (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). Promotion success is rooted in *eagerly* approaching matches to the ideal end-state through advancement, accomplishment, and progress. Prevention success is rooted in *vigilantly* avoiding mismatches from the ought end-state while carefully moving toward (or maintaining) this desired end-state.

An early set of regulatory focus studies revealed the beneficial impact of these preferred goal pursuit strategies on task performance. Shah, Higgins, and Friedman (1998) used a framing manipulation to induce either a promotion focus or a prevention focus in participants before they completed a series of anagrams. In the promotion-framing condition, participants were told that they could gain a dollar (increasing their payment from $4 to $5) by finishing with four or more points. In the prevention-framing condition, participants were told that they could lose a dollar (decreasing their payment from $5 to $4) by failing to finish with four or more points. Results revealed that the strength of participants' promotion-focused ideal self-guides was positively associated with anagram completion performance in the promotion-framing condition, and the strength of participants' prevention-focused ought self-guides was positively associated with strength of participants' performance in the prevention-framing condition. Further, in the second study, the anagrams to be completed were color-coded for the participants; by completing green anagrams, points could be *earned* (promotion-focus means), whereas by completing red anagrams, points could be *not lost* (prevention-focus means). The means selected by participants also reflected task framing and self-guide strength: Performance on green anagrams was positively associated with ideal (i.e., promotion) self-guide strength for participants in the promotion-framing condition, whereas performance on red anagrams was positively associated with ought (i.e., prevention) self-guide strength for participants in the prevention-framing condition. These studies confirmed that promotion- versus prevention-focused people prefer to use different strategic means in their goal pursuits. They also highlight the important role of the situational context: These strategic preferences are stronger in situations that match an individual's chronic regulatory focus (i.e., in cases of regulatory fit).

Tactical Flexibility

Regulatory focus also influences the types of tactics that people decide to use within their goal pursuit processes. Compared to prevention-focused individuals, for instance, promotion-focused individuals tend to prioritize speed over accuracy, creative thinking over analytical thinking, and feelings-based over reason-based decision-making (Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). Despite these general tendencies, however, tactical preferences are not set in stone; in practice, they vary based upon the individual's goal and the demands of the dominant regulatory system. For example, consider risk-taking. A promotion focus tends to be associated with a risky bias, whereas a prevention focus tends to be associated with a conservative bias (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). However, the current value state (i.e., "0"; "-1"; "+1") can result in the use of tactics that are not typical for a particular regulatory focus. For instance, in the case of a current "–1" financial loss, when the only investment opportunity that can potentially restore a "0" non-loss is a more risky stock option, prevention-focused individuals are actually *more* likely than promotion-focused individuals to choose the more risky stock option (Scholer, Zou, Fujita, Stroessner, & Higgins, 2010). For prevention-focused individuals, restoring a satisfactory status quo "0" is experienced as a necessity. In contrast, promotion-focused individuals perceive the status quo "0" as a non-gain like the "–1" loss. It takes an option that will allow them to make real progress and advance to "+1" to motivate them to choose the more risky option (Zou, Scholer, & Higgins, 2014). These findings reveal the complex interplay between individuals' motivational concerns, current value state as a reference point, and set of choice options that work together to determine the tactics they will use to pursue their goals (Zou, Scholer, & Higgins, in press).

Regulatory Fit

The work on strategic preferences described above (Shah et al., 1998) was some of the first research revealing the benefits of alignment between a person's motivational orientation and their means of goal pursuit—regulatory fit. Regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2000) posits that in cases of such alignment, the value of the pursued goal will increase, separate from the goal's worth based on expected benefit and cost outcomes (Higgins, 2006). This increase derives from regulatory fit strengthening engagement in the goal pursuit process and making it "feel right" (Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003; Higgins, 2006; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003; Lee & Higgins, 2009), which contributes to downstream effects such as processing fluency and likelihood of elaboration (Cesario, Higgins, & Scholer, 2008; Lee & Aaker, 2004).

Through this work on regulatory fit, scholars began to explore the implications of regulatory focus theory for goal pursuit *processes*, rather than focusing exclusively on outcomes or end-states. As a result, the theories of regulatory focus and regulatory fit offer important insights into consumer behavior (for reviews, see Avnet & Higgins, 2006; Lee & Higgins, 2009; Pham & Higgins, 2005), as the stages of consumer decision-making are, at their core, goal pursuit processes. Given the connections between these findings and consumer behavior, we finish each subsection by highlighting specific implications for marketers derived from the literature reviewed. Additionally, after completing our review on this topic, we conclude with a set of broader practical implications.

Finally, although the majority of the research on regulatory fit has been conducted with promotion versus prevention concerns, fit has been examined with other regulatory concerns, such as regulatory mode concerns (e.g., Avnet & Higgins, 2003), construal level concerns (e.g., Berson & Halevy, 2014), and fun versus importance concerns (e.g., Higgins, Cesario, Hagiwara, Spiegel, & Pittman, 2010). However, given this article's emphasis on regulatory focus theory, we will limit our summary to the evidence relating to fit effects with a promotion versus prevention focus.

Postulates and Supporting Evidence

Regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2000) specifies five postulates that derive from this notion of "value from fit." The first two postulates reflect evidence we have already reviewed. According to Postulate 1, people prefer means of goal pursuit that have higher regulatory fit, a notion supported by Higgins and colleagues' (1994) research on strategic preferences described earlier. Postulate 2 states that motivation during goal pursuit (operationalized as performance) increases as a function of regulatory fit (e.g., Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; see also Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010, and Shah et al., 1998, described earlier).

Postulates 3 and 4 posit that greater regulatory fit intensifies individuals' evaluations of the positivity or negativity of their choices and the outcomes of these choices, both when these choices and outcomes will take place in the future and when they have taken place in the past. In particular, Postulate 3 describes how regulatory fit affects *prospective* evaluations: People imagine that they will feel more positively about successful outcomes when these successes are framed as gains (versus non-losses), because success increases the eagerness that fits promotion but reduces the vigilance that fits prevention. In contrast, people imagine that they will feel more negatively about failure-related outcomes when these failures were framed as losses (versus non-gains), because failure increases the vigilance that fits prevention but reduces the eagerness that fits promotion (Higgins, 2000; Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000, 2004). Postulate 4 makes a similar claim but differs based on its concern with *retrospective* evaluations. It states that people who experienced regulatory fit during a task will remember enjoying the task more, perceive these past pursuits as more successful, and be more willing to repeat the task (all independent of actual task performance outcomes; Freitas & Higgins, 2002). Importantly, both the prospective and retrospective effects described here are posited to derive from increased motivational intensity (i.e., the motivation to engage in the process of approaching or avoiding the outcome) rather than the hedonic pleasure/pain qualities of the outcome. This means that, as a result of regulatory fit, people's promotion or prevention focus affects the evaluations of the choices they could make or have made in the process of goal pursuit.

Finally, regulatory fit theory's Postulate 5 states that people will ascribe increased value to the object of a chosen goal when in a state of high regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000, 2002, 2006). In a series of studies that tested this claim, participants were asked to choose between a desirable university-branded mug and a less desirable disposable pen using different strategies (Higgins et al., 2003). As intended, the great majority of participants chose the mug. These studies were intended to investigate how the degree of regulatory fit between participants' regulatory focus and their decision strategy (eager versus vigilant) affected their subsequent valuations of the objects. Results revealed that in cases of regulatory fit, compared to non-fit, participants assigned greater monetary value to the chosen mug, as measured by both a general assessment of its price and participants' actual offers to buy the mug. Additionally, in cases of regulatory fit, participants *also* assigned greater value to the less-desirable but still positive pen (rather than the pen's value decreasing from being non-chosen).

One reason that value transfer occurs is because people feel right due to regulatory fit (Higgins et al., 2003), and this feeling transfers to the value of the object in question. This would be the *feel-right-from-fit* explanation for their findings. There can also be a *stronger-engagement-from-fit* explanation for their findings, where stronger engagement from fit intensifies the positive reaction to an option (Higgins, 2006). Notably, both proposed mechanisms could be operating in tandem.

Importantly, the kind of value judgment that is affected by regulatory fit is not limited to evaluations of monetary value. The experience of regulatory fit affects different types of evaluations of a wide range of targets relevant to consumer marketing. Regulatory fit impacts the perceived persuasiveness of messages in general (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Koenig, Cesario, Molden, Kosloff, & Higgins, 2009) and advertising messages in particular (Lee & Aaker, 2004). It also intensifies interest in product features (Werth & Foerster, 2007), brand evaluations (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee et al., 2010; Pham & Avnet, 2004), and product attitudes resulting from advertisements and online consumer reviews (Avnet et al., 2013). Even product pricing is affected by a regulatory fit between verbal communications and the sales environment (Conley & Higgins, 2018).

Types of Regulatory Fit

Incidental Regulatory Fit

Value transfer also affects evaluations of objects unrelated to the fit process—referred to as *incidental* fit because the fit experience is induced independently from the object of evaluation (Cesario et al., 2008). For instance, participants in one study who experienced a regulatory fit (versus non-fit) induction subsequently rated good-natured dogs as looking *more* good-natured (Higgins et al., 2003). These results suggest that value can transfer to an object unrelated to the conditions that led a person to experience regulatory fit. This could happen if feeling right from regulatory fit, or stronger engagement from regulatory fit, lasted beyond the fit induction task and made participants feel right about or intensify their subsequent evaluations.

Importantly, the literature reveals two distinct types of incidental fit effects. Regulatory fit in some cases makes everything more positive, whereas in other cases it makes negative evaluative reactions *more negative* as well as making positive reactions more positive (for a fuller discussion of how this plays out for the regulatory fit feel-right effect, see Avnet et al., 2013, and the discussion below). One important determinant of which type of fit effect arises is attentional focus (Cesario et al., 2004). When people are directed to evaluate the persuasiveness of a message, regulatory fit acts as an intensifier of their evaluations. This intensification results in a spreading effect, such that people with positive thoughts about the message report more *positive* evaluations, and people with negative thoughts about the message report more *negative* evaluations. However, among people directed to evaluate more broadly a policy proposal related to the persuasive message, regulatory fit results in more positive proposal evaluations across the board, regardless of their thoughts about the message itself.

Another mechanism by which incidental regulatory fit affects evaluations is through a person's likelihood of elaborative processing (Koenig et al., 2009). When individuals feel right from incidental regulatory fit, they engage in more superficial processing of the persuasive message and are more reliant on heuristic cues like source expertise. In contrast, when individuals feel *wrong* from incidental regulatory *non*-fit, they are likely to engage in more thorough, high-elaboration processing by evaluating the strength of the message's arguments. However, marketers intrigued by the opportunity of inducing fit and offering easy heuristic processing cues should take note: In the final study of this series, participants who initially experienced regulatory fit were more susceptible to subsequent counterpersuasion than their counterparts who experienced regulatory non-fit. Counterpersuasion may have been more effective in this case because the "feeling right" effect that results from regulatory fit is attributed only to the *first* persuasive message participants encounter, resulting in low elaboration processing of this first message, while subsequent messages may be processed more deeply (Koenig et al., 2009). These results highlight to marketers the importance of considering the various situational factors that moderate these effects.

Integral Regulatory Fit

In contrast to the *incidental* examples of regulatory fit just described, in which the fit experience is unrelated to the object of evaluation, the experience of fit is more typically created through *integral* regulatory fit manipulations (Cesario et al., 2008). In these integral manipulations, regulatory fit arises through the alignment of relevant aspects of the object evaluation or persuasion situation. In the following sections, we outline a range of sources of integral regulatory fit.

Fit with brand messaging. First, brand taglines may naturally reflect a particular regulatory focus. Consider, for example, Johnson & Johnson's Baby Shampoo's "No More Tears" tagline. This line lends the brand a prevention focus, which may reflect parents' desire for a stress-free (i.e., non-loss) bathtime experience with their children. In contrast, Lexus's promotion-focused "Experience Amazing" tagline taps into consumers' desire for a gain state with a high luxury car product.

Such taglines create opportunities for marketers to engender states of regulatory fit within their consumers during the use of the product. For example, consumers exposed to promotion-focused ad content (e.g., about the energizing benefits of grape juice) report more positive brand attitudes when this messaging is complemented by an eager, gain-framed tagline (e.g., "Get Energized!"; Lee & Aaker, 2004). Conversely, consumers exposed to prevention-focused ad content report more positive brand attitudes when it is accompanied by a vigilant, loss-framed tagline. In these studies, the ad content was posited to induce a particular regulatory focus in the consumer. By addressing the induced concerns through the tagline messaging, consumers experienced a sense of fluency in processing the message that was interpreted as a sense of feeling right about the experience and strengthened their engagement in the message processing activity (Cesario et al., 2008). This feeling right and engagement strength then translated to more positive evaluations of the brand and its messaging.

Regulatory focus and regulatory fit can also impact the effectiveness of different persuasion techniques. Early studies on this topic suggested that the accessibility of a person's promotion versus prevention goals predicts the *kinds* of persuasive messaging that are deemed most diagnostic to consumers' brand evaluations (Pham & Avnet, 2004). In these studies, prevention-focused consumers relied more heavily on the substance of the advertisement's messaging. This effect was strongest when the ad's claims were weak (versus strong), which aligns with the prevention system's preference for vigilant strategies. In contrast, promotion-focused consumers relied more heavily on their subjective affective responses to the ad's messaging. This effect was strongest when their affective responses were positive (when an ad was attractive, rather than unattractive) as this information is more compatible with the promotion system's eager bias.

To expand on these findings, follow-up research investigated the promotion system's reliance on affect as an evaluation heuristic; results revealed that promotion-focused individuals give more weight to their affective experiences than to reasons when making product evaluations, whereas the opposite is true for prevention-focused individuals (Pham & Avnet, 2009). Additionally, this feelings-versus-reasons distinction is not specific to the consumer domain; similar preferences are found among promotion- versus prevention-focused individuals when forming impressions of social targets (Pham & Avnet, 2009) and making moral judgments (Cornwell & Higgins, 2016).

More recent research reveals that regulatory fit affects persuasion through two “paths” based on the two distinct ways in which feeling right can be interpreted (Avnet, Laufer, & Higgins, 2013; see also Lee & Higgins, 2009). These two paths also align with the two types of incidental fit effects described earlier: In some cases, regulatory fit produces an overall increase in positive evaluations of a target, whereas in others, regulatory fit acts as an intensifier that produces a spreading effect. The first path to fit involves a transfer of positive affective feelings from the feeling-right experience directly to the target, functioning similarly to the “feelings as information” effect (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), which results in more positive target evaluations. In the second path to fit, the feeling-right experience is interpreted as a high degree of confidence in one’s evaluative judgments. This increase in confidence results in an intensification of these judgments, whereby positive targets are evaluated more positively and negative targets are evaluated more negatively.

Because both of these paths will produce more positive evaluations of a positive target, recent research examined evaluations of negatively-valenced advertisements in order to study potential determinants of which path is chosen (Avnet et al., 2013). These studies revealed that one important predictor of path selection is a person’s *level of involvement* with the evaluation task, described as the degree to which the target is important or relevant to the individual. Participants in the low involvement condition who felt right as a result of regulatory fit tended to evaluate the negative product in the advertisement more positively (i.e., less negatively), in line with the first path. In contrast, participants in the high involvement condition interpreted feeling right as confidence in their judgments, in line with the second path, which resulted in their negative evaluation of the product being intensified (i.e., more negative).

Although this path distinction may be less important to marketers who prefer to highlight the positive benefits of their brand or product in consumer messaging, this distinction is highly relevant in cases when ad messaging is negatively valenced. For instance, consider anti-smoking campaigns that highlight the deleterious outcomes associated with tobacco use, or negative advertising produced by a brand about its competitors, as in political campaigns with negative advertising. If the developers of such campaigns hope to increase the persuasiveness of their messaging via regulatory fit, special care will need to be taken to ensure that consumers feel highly involved with the issue. Otherwise, the campaign may backfire and actually produce more favorable consumer evaluations of the undesired behavior or competitive brand. This is precisely what could happen early on in political campaigns where interest is low. It would be better in this case to produce a feeling-wrong experience from non-fit that would transfer negativity to the opponent.

Fit with the style of message delivery. A different type of regulatory fit experience depends on creating a fit between consumers' motivational orientation and the source's nonverbal message delivery style. In one study, participants watched one of two persuasive videos in which the verbal content was kept constant but the speaker's nonverbal delivery was varied (Cesario & Higgins, 2008). In the eager condition, the speaker leaned forward, spoke and moved quickly, and used animated, open gestures. In the vigilant condition, the speaker leaned backward, spoke and moved slowly, and used gestures that conveyed precision. Participants rated these persuasive messages as more effective when their measured regulatory focus was a fit (versus non-fit) with the style of message delivery; that is, eager nonverbal delivery for promotion recipients and vigilant nonverbal delivery for prevention recipients.

These findings are particularly relevant for brand marketing in two domains. First, spokespeople and other talent featured in video communications (e.g., television commercials; digital video content created for social media platforms) may unwittingly create conditions of non-fit if their delivery is not aligned with consumers' regulatory focus. For example, a spokesperson who delivers a message in an eager, enthusiastic manner may not be a good match for an insurance brand; instead, a speaker with a more sober and serious demeanor is likely a better fit given the prevention-focused concerns of consumers in this space. Second, brands should take care to ensure that employees who interact with consumers are trained to engage in a nonverbal manner that fits the regulatory focus of the brand's target consumer.

Fit with a product. Thus far, our review of regulatory fit has focused on communications *about* a product, both its content and delivery. However, fit effects have also been uncovered in relation to a product itself, with respect to both its features and the experience of using it (Werth & Foerster, 2007). Given that promotion goals relate to a person's hopes, aspirations, and nurturance needs, consumers with a strong promotion focus will tend to be interested in products that offer the opportunity to grow, advance, and approach gains (e.g., high-status, promising, or comfortable products). In contrast, given that prevention goals relate to duties, obligations, and security needs, consumers with a strong prevention focus will tend to be interested in products that offer the opportunity to defend against threats, maintain security, and avoid losses (e.g., reliable and safe products).

Based on these differences, products with very similar functions may vary in their regulatory focus and optimal positioning. For instance, consider perfume versus deodorant. Although the products are quite similar in nature (i.e., the application of a scent to one's body), perfume offers consumers the opportunity to smell especially nice (a promotion-focused goal), whereas deodorant offers consumers the opportunity to avoid smelling bad (a prevention-focused goal). Given these differences, it is no surprise that perfume is often marketed as a high-status product with luxurious, promotion-focused messaging (e.g., beautiful imagery of attractive models in lavish settings), whereas deodorant is marketed as an efficacious, reliable product (e.g., with claims of "clinical strength" or "100% odor protection"). Fittingly, these positioning strategies also align with the promotion system's preference for making decisions based upon feelings, versus the prevention system's preference for making decisions based upon reasons, which we discussed earlier.

Research supports these propositions. Despite high interest in safety-related (i.e., prevention-focused) features among all people, promotion-focused consumers are more interested in promotion-focused product features, and prevention-focused consumers are more interested in prevention-focused product features (Werth & Foerster, 2007). Further, products that fit (versus do not fit) participants' regulatory focus are used more frequently, considered more difficult to do without and more important in their availability, and valued at a higher price. Interestingly, while promotion-focused (versus prevention-focused) participants report greater willingness to pay for a more expensive brand-name (versus a lower priced "no-name") *promotion*-focused product, nearly all participants will pay more for a more expensive brand-name (versus cheaper non-name) *prevention*-focused product, perhaps due to the prevention-focused goal of safety being treated as a necessity (i.e., a minimal goal; Werth & Foerster, 2007). Collectively, these results suggest that marketers can benefit from tailoring their specific product experiences to their target consumers' regulatory focus.

Finally, recent work has suggested that the creation of regulatory fit does not necessarily depend on a match with consumers' *chronic* regulatory focus; simple exposure to a promotion-focused versus prevention-focused product can temporarily induce a given *state* regulatory focus, which then produces regulatory fit effects when it aligns with the focus of the messaging (Borges & Gomez, 2015). These studies revealed that consumers exposed to advertisements featuring a promotion-focused product (e.g., orange juice or yogurt) versus prevention-focused product (e.g., sunscreen or an elliptical trainer) reported more positive brand attitudes and greater purchase intent when the ad messaging fit the product orientation.

Fit with the retail environment. Recent research examining regulatory fit between a product or message and its retail environment highlights the critical nature of situations in creating fit (Conley & Higgins, 2018). Within a field experiment conducted at a gun show (shown to be predominantly a prevention environment), researchers experimentally induced a state of regulatory fit or non-fit with the prevention retail environment, respectively, by asking questions about either the *dis*advantages of *not* converting a gun to fire a specific type of ammunition (prevention) or the advantages of converting (promotion). Then, the researchers asked for the price of a particular gun model. Results revealed that the price quoted in the prevention-induction fit condition was significantly higher than the prices quoted in the promotion-induction non-fit condition or in a control condition.

Subsequent research showed that this effect is not a general effect of all retail environments, but rather is a regulatory fit effect with a *prevention* retail environment. In a follow-up study conducted at a tattoo convention, a *promotion* environment, participants quoted higher prices after a promotion (versus prevention) induction (Conley & Higgins, 2018). These findings demonstrate the effects of regulatory fit between a specific consumer environment and individual motivational concerns that are induced in that environment: In cases of regulatory fit, value is created and the prices that sellers quote are higher.

This research reveals the potential benefits of using language that matches the regulatory focus of a particular situation. Such findings are especially relevant when considering company-owned retail environments, as they represent a unique situation in which the brand maintains full control of the consumer experience. To maximize fit effects in these environments, brands might intentionally adjust all consumer-directed communications in the retail space—from the language greeters use when consumers enter the store to the promotional messaging at-shelf and checkout—to ensure all messaging is consistent in its promotion or prevention focus that fits their retail environment.

Fit with the process of reaching a position. Another source of regulatory fit relies upon a match between consumers' motivational orientation and their process of reaching a position or decision. One important stage of this decision-making process involves the consumer's search for information about alternative options, which is often followed by a stage comprising the formation of a consideration set (Pham & Higgins, 2005). These stages are influenced by promotion and prevention: Consumers' regulatory focus predicts the size and structure of the consideration sets they prefer (Pham & Chang, 2010). In these studies, regulatory focus was manipulated through a scenario-based induction involving an imagined restaurant visit, and then participants were presented with a menu for consideration. Some participants viewed a menu that was organized hierarchically, with categories, subcategories, dish names, and dish descriptions on different pages. Among these participants, promotion-focused people spent more time viewing the higher levels of the menu hierarchy, reflecting a preference for a more global, "big picture" search for alternatives; in contrast, prevention-focused people spent more time viewing the more local, item-specific levels.

Further, promotion-focused (versus prevention-focused) participants who viewed the hierarchical menu indicated that they considered a larger number of items on the menu, rated the food selection more highly, and perceived that a three-course meal at the restaurant would be valued at a higher price (Pham & Chang, 2010). In contrast, among participants who instead viewed a menu structured in a list-based format with a single level, prevention-focused versus promotion-focused people valued the meal at a higher price.

These findings reflect a more general association between regulatory focus and psychological distance: Global, distant goals tend to be associated with promotion concerns, whereas concrete, proximate goals tend to be associated with prevention concerns (Pennington & Roese, 2003). These regulatory focus-specific associations have also been found when examining global versus local information-processing (Förster & Higgins, 2005), abstract versus concrete language use (Semin, Higgins, Gil de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005), and high- versus low-level object and action classification (Lee et al., 2010).

The results of these studies highlight the potential benefits of regulatory fit between consumers' regulatory focus and their preferences in the process of searching for alternative choice options. These findings may have important implications for marketers looking to create regulatory fit scenarios within their digital retail environments. For instance, brands might consider optimizing their website's user experience to reflect their target consumer's regulatory focus. If the target consumer tends to be promotion-focused, the site architecture could be optimized to present information hierarchically (e.g., within a nested menu structure). Additionally, consumers are likely to appreciate the ability to navigate product options in a manner consistent with their regulatory focus. To facilitate such a personalized approach to shopping, brands could offer a toggle switch that allows consumers to either view a full list of all products in a category versus filter products by product type, size, or color.

Beyond alternative search processes, another process-related source of regulatory fit is the strategy used to make a decision. The mug and pen studies described earlier created such a fit experience: Participants' regulatory focus was either manipulated or measured, and fit was created by manipulating the decision strategy to be used (eager versus vigilant; Higgins et al., 2003). Among participants who experienced regulatory fit between their own regulatory focus and their assigned strategy, greater value was attributed to the desirable option. (Similar fit effects have been found when investigating the effects of a regulatory fit between decision strategies and regulatory *mode* on product value; see Avnet & Higgins, 2003.)

Once a person has reached a decision, their preference for repeating that choice in the future also varies with respect to regulatory focus. When people with a promotion (versus prevention) focus make sequential choices, they tend to engage in greater variety seeking (e.g., choosing a wider product assortment; Wu & Kao, 2011). In contrast, a prevention focus has been shown to predict repeated sequential decisions in domains ranging from product choice (Wu & Kao, 2011) to ethical decision-making (Zhang, Cornwell, & Higgins, 2014). This finding may reflect the tendency of people with a prevention focus to view decisions that have been made as a "status quo"; i.e., given the prevention system's concern with status quo maintenance, repetition is a fitting strategy.

Additionally, this prevention-focused tendency to repeat a prior choice is especially likely to be true for decisions seen as reversible (versus irreversible) because reversible decisions are safer decisions that fit a prevention focus, thereby increasing the value of that decision (see Bullens, van Harreveld, Förster, & Higgins, 2014). This finding is relevant to marketers because many consumer decisions *are* reversible, as purchases can often be returned and frequently-purchased items can be swapped for a new brand the next time they are bought.

To capitalize on these findings in their digital retail environments, brands could consider tailoring their product recommendation algorithms and purchasing options to reflect regulatory focus-specific preferences for repeated choices. When conducting a product search, prevention-focused individuals would likely prefer algorithms that feature products they have already purchased, whereas promotion-focused individuals would prefer to receive a set of alternative recommendations for the same search. Additionally, if a brand knows its target consumers tend to be prevention-focused, it might highlight decision reversibility within its retail environment by featuring prominently its straightforward return policy. Finally, when making a purchase, prevention-focused consumers are likely to appreciate the opportunity to buy a product subscription (e.g., as implemented within Amazon's "Subscribe & Save" program) to ensure they never find themselves without their trusted product on-hand.

Broader Practical Implications

Regulatory fit can be derived from a variety of sources, many of which relate to the process of consumer goal pursuit. As a result, marketers may benefit from considering the wide range of consumer touch-points through which regulatory fit might be created, including the product experience, packaging and labels, ad messaging, and the retail environment.

Additionally, marketers can benefit from tailoring these touch-points to their target consumers' own regulatory focus, rather than a focus solely determined by the brand or product. This strategy will be more straightforward for brands that offer products that are a clear fit for a single focus. For example, a high luxury brand like Ritz-Carlton may offer only promotion-focused products and services; in contrast, a sun protection brand like Coppertone may offer only prevention-focused products. For these single-focus brands, the content of advertising can be designed to reflect consumers' promotion- or prevention-specific needs.

Until recently, such a tailored approach may have been difficult for brands with broader product portfolios that vary significantly in their regulatory focus. However, modern campaign-targeting tools may allow such a strategy to be practical, at least in the domain of digital ad messaging. By using consumers' past online behavior to identify their dominant regulatory focus, companies could deliver customized messaging that dynamically creates conditions of regulatory fit based on each consumer's unique preferences. Such an approach has been tested on a small scale using online search advertising (Mowle, Georgia, Doss, & Updegraff, 2014). Although the study's results revealed a main effect of promotion focus, participants were twice as likely to click on a Google search advertisement when its message fit their keyword-defined regulatory focus. However, this effect was stronger for a promotion fit—perhaps due to the nature of the service provided (i.e., a relationship-improvement program). Given that this line of research is quite new, more research is needed.

With this knowledge in mind, in the next section, we turn our attention to how consumers evaluate these goal pursuits, based on standards of self-evaluation.

Regulatory Focus and Standards of Evaluating Goal Pursuit Process

When evaluating their goal pursuit process, the standards by which people evaluate themselves are critically important. First, we review perspectives on the standards that matter when one is evaluating the goal pursuit process, and then we examine how these standards might vary as a function of regulatory focus.

What Count as Standards for Evaluating the Goal Pursuit Process?

The standards people use for self-evaluation can be classified in three broad groups—factual points of reference, acquired guides, and imagined possibilities—and the use of any given standard will depend on its accessibility and goal-relevance (Higgins, Strauman, & Klein, 1986). Factual reference points are defined as a person's beliefs about the performance of oneself (e.g., autobiographical reference points defined by one's past performance) or others (e.g., reference points defined by the performance of others in the immediate social context) to which they compare their present performance. In contrast, acquired guides are defined as "criteria of excellence or acceptability—guides for behavior" (Higgins et al., 1986, p. 30).

The use of these acquired guides is specified more thoroughly within self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), which posits that people have distinct self-concepts related to three different domains. First, the *actual* self reflects the characteristics a person believes he or she actually possesses. Second, the *ideal* self reflects the characteristics a person would ideally hope to possess (i.e., aspirations, wishes). Third, the *ought* self reflects the characteristics this person feels he or she should possess (i.e., duties, obligations). The larger is the discrepancy between one's actual self and his or her self-guide, the more intensely the individual is expected to suffer the kind of discomfort associated with the type of self-guide: Actual-ideal discrepancies are associated with dejection-related emotions, whereas actual-ought discrepancies are associated with anxiety-related emotions.

Importantly, as mentioned briefly in our introduction to regulatory focus theory, the promotion and prevention systems are rooted in these two different types of self-guides (Higgins, 1997). The *promotion* system is more closely attuned to *ideal* end-states like nurturance and growth; as a result, it is sensitive to the presence or absence of *positive* outcomes. Conversely, the *prevention* system is more closely attuned to *ought* end-states like security and responsibilities; as a result, it is sensitive to the presence or absence of *negative* outcomes.

Given the fundamental differences between these systems, it seems reasonable to consider that the reference points used to evaluate goal pursuit in each domain may vary. Within the context of promotion versus prevention goal pursuit, which reference points function as evaluative standards? How is one's current state compared to these standards? To address these questions, we will first quickly review the literature on different reference points used to evaluate the effectiveness of goal pursuit.

Which Reference Points Matter?

The reference points that matter for goal pursuit have received substantial attention in the literature, although researchers disagree on the reference points that matter (or even how many there are). For instance, some scholars propose that two reference points—one's *current state* and an *end-state* (i.e., an outcome or goal state)—are used to evaluate one's goal pursuit efforts. For example, according to the value function described within prospect theory (Kahneman &

Tversky, 1979), one's current status quo is a reference point that divides the outcome space into gains and losses. Although not explicitly described as a reference point, each outcome functions as a second reference point in this model. Further, a person's sensitivity to this outcome is posited to be greater in the domain of losses and decreases with its distance from the status quo reference point. Finally, others have suggested that goals themselves function as reference points against which one's status quo is evaluated (Heath, Larrick, & Wu, 1999). In these models, a person's evaluation of their current status depends on the discrepancy between the status quo and an end-state (as well as the domain—gains versus losses).

However, these two reference points may not fully explain how people evaluate their goal pursuits. In addition to the current status quo and end-state, the *initial state* may also function as an important reference point in this process. For instance, people often make inferences about their goal commitment by comparing their current state to their initial state (a "to-date" frame); in contrast, when commitment is high, inferences about one's goal progress are made by comparing one's current state to their desired end-state (a "to-go" frame; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). Other research suggests that the to-date frame is used early in the process of goal pursuit, whereas the to-go frame is used later in the process (Bonezzi, Brendl, & De Angelis, 2011).

Additionally, people often consider an even wider range of reference points within the same situation (Higgins & Liberman, 2018). For instance, a person who is interested in purchasing a new television may consider reference points including the bulky television that she already possesses (current state), her dream television (Samsung's new 98-inch 8K QLED set), a "good enough" television that is no worse than her best friend's TV (a 36" LED set), her state if she purchases either the ideal set or the "good enough" set, her state if she decides to forgo this upgrade for now, and so on. Despite this long list of potential reference points, the two most salient points are the individual's beginning (initial) state and their desired end-state (Higgins &

Liberman, 2018). Given the reference points that are proposed to matter to promotion and prevention, these two salient points are expected to be either a combination of "–1" and "0" (prevention) or "0" and "+1" (promotion), and, importantly, the relation between the two determines one's experience of success or failure.

Despite this clarity on the reference points that are considered relevant by each motivational system, the work reviewed here did not explicitly define whether self-evaluations derived from such reference points are based on the simple existence of a discrepancy versus perceptions of progress (or a lack thereof). It raises the question: Is it progress or a discrepancy that matters most?

Motivation from Progress and Discrepancies

The control model of self-regulation posits that goal-directed behavior is produced through a series of feedback loops (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 2001). These theorized loops relate directly to the self-evaluation processes discussed above: While one loop is focused on identifying discrepancies, the other is focused on determining the rate at which progress has been made. More specifically, the first loop determines the degree of discrepancy between one's current state and a reference value, and then produces an output signal that prompts behavior intended to reduce this discrepancy. At the same time, a second loop provides feedback on one's progress via positive or negative affect, and with the type of affect based on the speed of discrepancy reduction. This affect then impacts the urgency of the discrepancy-reducing behavior that is produced within the first loop, with a higher rate of progress reducing the urgency. Although both discrepancies and progress figure into this model, the self-evaluation within this model uniquely relates to perceptions of *progress*.

However, the positive affective feedback that results from perceptions of progress may not always be conducive to continued goal pursuit. This model predicts that the positive feedback produced by discrepancy reduction that occurs more quickly than expected may prompt “coasting” behavior (Carver & Scheier, 2001).

Similar to this notion of coasting, when goal-directed activity is interpreted as producing sufficient positive progress toward goal attainment, people reduce their efforts aimed at this desired outcome and redirect their internal resources toward other pursuits (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2011). This claim is supported by a series of studies in which perceptions of progress were manipulated in various domains to investigate their impact on subsequent intentions and behavior. In one such study, among dieters whose perceptions of weight-loss progress were manipulated via the use of scales with different end-points, participants in the high-progress condition were more likely to choose a chocolate bar (versus apple) to take home with them (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005).

Further, mental representations of progress appear to function as a self-regulatory mechanism that supports the motivation to continue to engage in goal-directed behavior. The extent to which people report progress varies systematically based on the stage of goal pursuit: People exaggerate the degree to which they have achieved progress early in goal pursuit, and they downplay their progress in late stages of goal pursuit, and these effects are amplified for more highly valued goals (Huang, Zhang, & Broniarczyk, 2012). These alterations in participants’ mental representations of their progress are found to be strategic, as they increase motivation at all stages. In contrast, when participants were explicitly told that it was important to be *accurate* in their progress estimates, they did *not* engage in this strategic manipulation of their mental representations of progress. Notably, this accuracy manipulation was in turn associated with reduced motivation. This research suggests that progress serves unique functions at different stages of goal pursuit: In early goal pursuit, progress signals goal attainability where higher attainability is more motivating, whereas in advanced stages of goal pursuit progress signals a discrepancy to be reduced where higher discrepancy is more motivating.

Regulatory Focus and Evaluation of Goal Pursuit

Given this body of research on reference points, discrepancies, and progress, how do these concepts relate to regulatory focus? Early self-discrepancy research (Strauman & Higgins, 1992; unpublished but referenced in Strauman & Higgins, 1993) attempted to answer this question in a study that examined the motivational significance of patterns of self-belief involving three points of self-reference: the actual self, the past self, and an ideal or ought self-guide end-state. The results of the study suggested that a lack of progress in the present actual self as compared to one's past state is particularly disappointing in the promotion-focused ideal domain. These findings also suggested that the concept of progress is less relevant in the ought domain, as prevention goals (duties and obligations) may be viewed as a standard that *must* be completely met, rather than an aspiration toward which one might continually hope to advance. For example, it is not enough to move from following 6 of the 10 Commandments to 8 of the 10 Commandments; one must simply follow all 10.

This notion that progress may be more relevant to the promotion system (versus the prevention system) is also supported by research on the relation between morality and regulatory focus. A recent proposal suggests that regulatory focus theory offers a novel perspective on moral psychology whereby each system supports a distinct form of moral motivation (Cornwell & Higgins, 2015). Given the prevention system's focus on oughts, its systemic goals relate to approaching what is morally *right*, which typically manifests as a strategic focus on the vigilant maintenance of one's duties. In contrast, given the promotion system's focus on ideals, its systemic goals relate to approaching what is morally *excellent*, which tends to manifest as a strategic focus on eagerly progressing toward virtue. Further, the prevention system may be more strongly associated with moral standards that demand total fulfillment in the present, i.e., *not* progress, whereas the promotion system may be more strongly associated with superordinate moral goals toward which incremental progress over time would be considered a success (Cornwell & Higgins, 2015).

This line of work speaks to a broader truth about what is motivating—and what constitutes success—in the prevention versus promotion systems. If prevention goals are seen as absolute standards that must be upheld, brand messaging that reflects certainty and guaranteed results may be a highly effective strategic approach for prevention-focused products and brands. Similarly, brand messaging that highlights how consumers might make progress toward their goals through product use may be a more effective strategic approach for promotion-focused products and brands.

Recent research provides further insights into the relation between regulatory focus and perceived progress within the context of consumer goal pursuit, suggesting that *promotion*-focused people are more attentive to the information about *benefits* that perceived progress conveys, both those benefits already accrued and those expected in the future upon goal attainment (Chan & Ho, 2017). As a result, low progress would be interpreted by promotion-focused consumers as a signal that the majority of the benefits are yet to be attained and thus would increase their motivation to engage in goal-directed behavior. Conversely, high progress would be interpreted by promotion-focused consumers as a signal that ample benefits have already been earned, which would decrease their motivation to engage in goal-directed behavior. A different set of predictions follows in the domain of prevention. *Prevention*-focused people are more attentive to the information about *costs* that perceived progress conveys, both the cost already incurred and those expected in the future until goal attainment. As a result, low progress would be interpreted by prevention-focused consumers as indicating that their future costs will be high, which would decrease motivation to engage in goal-directed behavior. Conversely, high progress would be interpreted by prevention-focused consumers as a signal that future costs are low, which would increase their motivation to engage in goal-directed behavior.

Chan and Ho (2017) tested these hypotheses within a field experiment conducted in a cosmetics store in China. After completing a regulatory focus measure, participants randomly drew a loyalty card to use for the next 60 days that had either been pre-stamped to indicate low progress (four of 15 stamps) or high progress (eight of 15 stamps). Results supported their predictions: *Promotion*-focused consumers spent more money and accrued more stamps when beginning with a loyalty card indicating *low* (versus high) progress, whereas *prevention*-focused consumers spent more money and accrued more stamps when beginning with a loyalty card indicating *high* (versus low) progress. Chan and Ho interpret their findings as an indication that marketers concerned with retaining their consumers should vary their resource allocation based on consumers' regulatory focus and progress level: When progress is low, marketing resources should be invested in retaining prevention-focused consumers, whereas when progress is high, resources should be directed toward the retention of promotion-focused consumers.

Interestingly, these findings can also be considered in terms of our proposal regarding the irrelevance of progress to the prevention system. It is also possible that prevention-focused consumers' motivation increased in the high progress state because success—that is, attainment of a satisfactory status quo at which the loyalty card was fully stamped—was seen as attainable in this condition but unattainable in the low progress condition. Future research needs to examine directly whether the mediating variable is prevention-focused consumers' attentiveness to information about costs or to perceived goal attainability or both. Once the mechanism or mechanisms are more clearly understood, the effectiveness of marketers' loyalty programs can be improved. Although the practicality of such a strategy may be limited for companies lacking insight into their customers' regulatory focus (or lacking the ability to reliably induce a particular regulatory focus), products or brands with a clearly prevention- or promotion-focused positioning might tailor their marketing communications to reflect this relation among regulatory focus, perceived progress, and consumption.

Discussion and Future Directions

Since its formal introduction in 1997, research on regulatory focus theory has uncovered a wealth of insight on the fundamental motivational systems that prompt goal pursuit. In recent years, the literature has expanded its focus from the desired end-states associated with the promotion and prevention systems to the goal pursuit processes that fit these systems, as well as the standards that people use to assess the success of these pursuits. As we have attempted to note throughout this article, this research offers many practical implications for brands. Although many of our suggested solutions require that marketers take a more complex, personalized approach to consumer communications, technological development in the marketing industry allows for such precision targeting. With this said, despite the progress that has been made, many questions remain unanswered. In these concluding sections, we will present a selection of open questions that merit further research.

Regulatory Focus and Truth versus Control Goal Pursuit Processes

In this article, we have primarily fixed our attention on the motivational domain of *value*. This focus was intentional, as researchers often study value motivation through the lens of regulatory focus theory. However, despite the connections we have highlighted between the promotion and prevention systems and goal pursuit *processes*, this value domain most directly relates to the desired and undesired *end-states* of a person's goal pursuits (Higgins, 2012).

Additionally, value is not the only fundamental motive that animates human behavior. People are also motivated to be effective in the domains of *control* (i.e., by managing what happens in their lives) and *truth* (i.e., by establishing what is real and right)—both of which relate even more directly to the process of goal pursuit (Higgins, 2012). Thus, a comprehensive understanding of goal-directed behavior requires understanding of how these three domains work together (e.g., Cornwell, Franks, & Higgins, 2014, 2019; Higgins & Nakkawita, in press).

A separate framework called regulatory mode theory (Higgins, Kruglanski, & Pierro, 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2000) has traditionally been used to study these process motives. Regulatory mode theory proposes that two independent motivational functions work together to produce goal-directed activity. *Locomotion* is the motive to produce an effect in one's life through movement or change, and as a result is fundamentally related to *control* motivation. *Assessment* is the desire to thoroughly compare different options (e.g., goals or means) to choose the right one (and avoid choosing the wrong one), and thus is fundamentally related to *truth* motivation.

A cursory examination of the outcomes associated with locomotion and assessment offers insights into how these control- and truth-specific constructs may relate to prevention versus promotion. For instance, locomotion is positively associated with effort investment and achievement within goal pursuit (Pierro, Kruglanski, & Higgins, 2006). These associations appear to reflect promotion-control concerns, as they capture the desire to act to make progress and move away from one's status quo, and, indeed, locomotion and promotion have been found to be positively associated in every culture that has been studied (Higgins, 2008). However, despite the benefits of such motivation, effective self-control also requires the ability to maintain habitual routines and defend one's plan against temptations or distractions (de Ridder & Gillebaart, 2017)—a description that we believe captures prevention-control.

In support of these conceptualizations of promotion-control and prevention-control, subjects in a recent study were trained on the promotion-prevention distinction and then asked to categorize control-related words as promotion versus prevention. Words consistently categorized as *promotion-control* reflected the initiation of movement away from one's current position, including accelerate, propel, and launch; words consistently categorized as *prevention-control* reflected the defense of one's plans, including restrain, defend, and resist (Nakkawita & Higgins, 2019).

An examination of the domain of truth also reveals a promotion-prevention distinction. For instance, assessment predicts increased perceived stress (Bélanger et al., 2015; Hong, Tan, & Chang, 2004) and distress in decision-making (Chen, Rossignac-Milon, & Higgins, 2018). These associations appear to reflect prevention-truth concerns, as they relate to fear of error in establishing which course of action is the right one. In contrast, consider the motivation to inquisitively approach the growth of knowledge. Such a motive, which we theorize reflects promotion-truth, might be captured by curious behavior, which is supported by recent research indicating that curiosity is positively associated with promotion (Wytykowska & Gabińska, 2015). In line with these conceptualizations of promotion-truth and prevention-truth, subjects in the study described above also categorized truth-related stimuli. Words consistently categorized as *promotion-truth* captured a quest for knowledge, including explore, discover, and seek; words consistently categorized as *prevention-truth* reflected concerns with careful evaluation, including review, scrutinize, and judge (Nakkawita & Higgins, 2019). For a comprehensive visualization of the results of this study, see Figure 1.

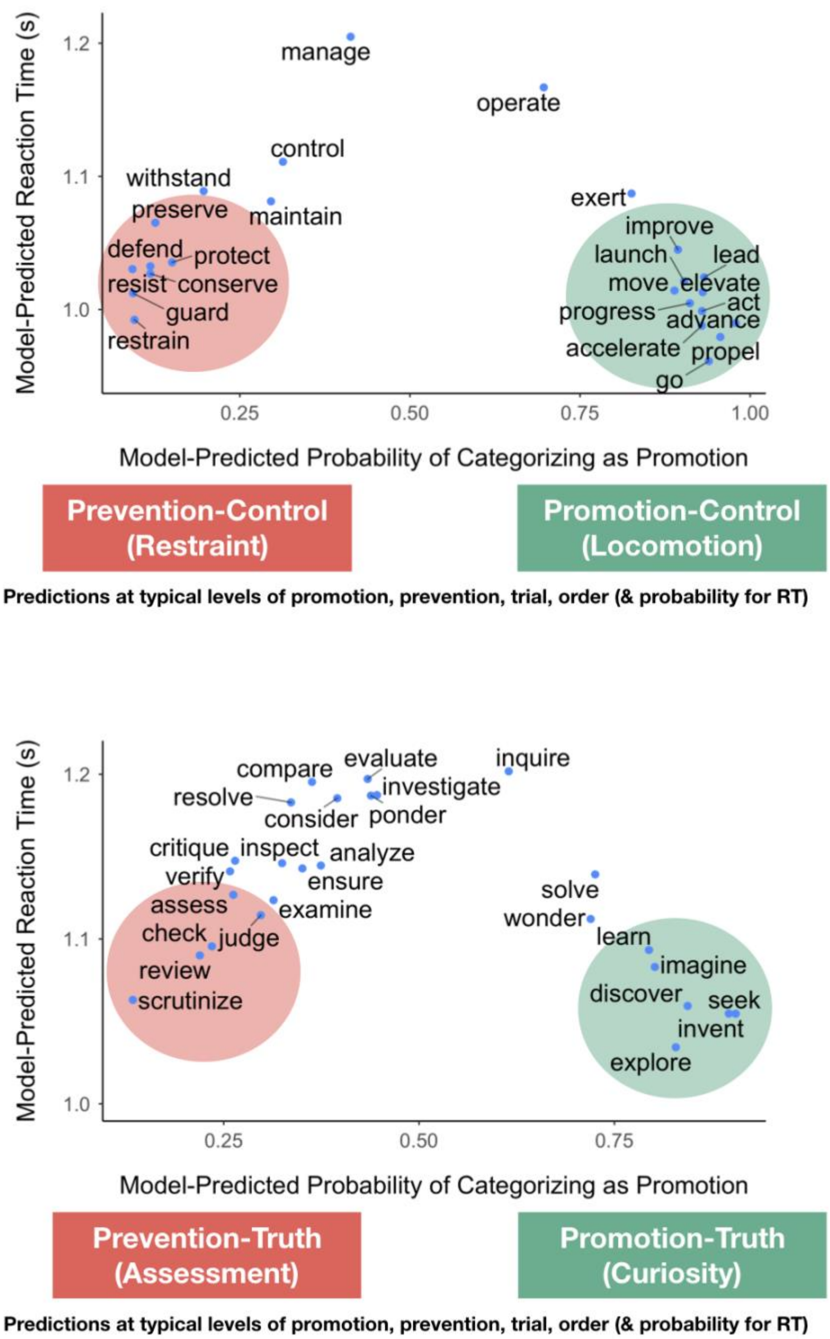

Figure 1: Results of studies in which subjects sorted control and truth terms by regulatory focus (Nakkawita & Higgins, 2019; we also thank Baruch Eitam for the initial insight that spurred this research).

Though preliminary, these results suggest that control and truth goal pursuit processes may vary in fundamentally different ways depending on whether they are aimed at a promotion versus a prevention goal. Further, they raise the intriguing possibility that the regulatory fit effects reviewed here could be even more effective if they are adapted to also fit promotion versus prevention truth and control processes.

Although this line of work is new, support for such a notion can be found in research examining regulatory fit effects based on alignment in the domain of regulatory mode. For example, Avnet and Higgins (2003) examined value-from-fit effects within a consumer decision-making context. In this study, participants completed a written regulatory mode induction and then, in a purportedly unrelated task, were asked to choose among five different traveling book-lights using one of two strategies. The first decision strategy, *full evaluation*, was a regulatory fit with a *truth*-related assessment orientation, as it directed participants to look carefully at all of the brands and evaluate all of their attributes before making a final choice. The second decision strategy, *progressive elimination*, was a regulatory fit with a *control*-related locomotion orientation, as it directed participants to start with an initial pair and through a series of pairwise comparisons, making continued progress by eliminate a brand at each stage of comparison. The study found that participants whose experimentally induced regulatory mode orientation fit their decision strategy offered significantly more money to purchase the book-light.

These results suggest that there are, in fact, decision strategies that relate more closely to the motive domains of truth and control. Further, they offer practical implications for marketers. For example, brands could align the process orientation of the content of their in-store promotional messaging with their merchandising strategies. For instance, at a clothing retailer, an assessment-focused merchandising strategy could be implemented as a single “denim wall” containing all styles, colors, and sizes of blue jeans that the brand offers. In contrast, a locomotion-focused merchandising strategy might be implemented by placing denim on a series of racks that consumers will pass one-by-one while making their way through the store. Some empirical evidence exists for such a strategy: In a recent study, locomotion-oriented consumers perceived products as more valuable when their product search and evaluation processes involved physical movement (Mathmann, Chylinski, Higgins, & de Ruyter, 2017). Combined, these findings raise the intriguing possibility that other types of regulatory fit might be created in these motive domains. For example, consider the motive for truth: Stronger fit effects may be detected if assessment-oriented consumers use full evaluation strategies to purchase truth-oriented products (e.g., a set of encyclopedias).

How Do Perceptions of Reference Points Vary by Regulatory Focus?

As discussed earlier, different sets of reference points are relevant to the promotion versus prevention systems. Although the “story of 0” framework is quite useful, it needs to be clearer in distinguishing among the initial state, the current state, and the end-state for promotion goal pursuit versus prevention goal pursuit. Consider prevention goal pursuit for example.

Although “0” is often described using the phrase “status quo,” which would imply that it is one’s current state, the fact that a person is engaging in goal *pursuit* at all signifies that they have not yet reached their desired goal state. This was a critical feature in self-discrepancy theory because it represented the fact that the “status quo” was *not* satisfactory. This is why the “story of 0” framework about maintaining the “0” status quo in a prevention focus goal pursuit referred to the case of a *satisfactory* status quo. The status quo was not assumed to be satisfactory in self-discrepancy theory. As such, a person still engaged in the active *pursuit* of a prevention goal likely would not perceive themselves as having attained a satisfactory “0” state. If they did, they would be working to maintain it rather than pursue it. Given this, a person who is pursuing a prevention goal would likely experience their current state as falling *below* a satisfactory status quo “0.”.

Future research should explicitly examine the reference points perceived by people pursuing promotion versus prevention goals to uncover how they experience the initial state, the current state, and the end-state. Additionally, this research should more directly probe the time course of moving from “–1” to “0” in the domain of prevention, and “0” to “+1” in the domain of promotion. Such research would offer the opportunity to conceptually and operationally disentangle the notions of *progress* versus the presence and/or size of a *discrepancy* that have often been conflated in the literature. Given our proposal that success and failure are perceived in a more binary sense for prevention goals, and as more of a continuum along which progress can be made for promotion goals, such research may reveal that movement between these reference points may be experienced as more discrete in the former case and more continuous in the latter.

Conclusion

Given that consumer behavior is fundamentally a form of goal-directed behavior, this article reviewed the regulatory focus literature with a special concentration on the goal pursuit processes supported by the promotion and prevention systems, as well as the evaluative mechanisms underlying such processes. These motivated processes influence the unique ways in which people make their way through the stages of consumer decision-making and offer substantial benefits to marketers: When such processes fit with an individual’s motivational orientation, consumer evaluations are strengthened and value is created, seemingly from thin air. This remains an interesting and active area of study, with a range of important questions that remain unanswered. We look forward to the results of such research.

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