

Persuasive Impact Of Fit Between Regulatory Focus And Message Framing On Consumer Responses: Message Strength And Choice For Others

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on message framing has argued that fit between message framing and consumer regulatory focus influences consumer response. That is, positive frames are more persuasive for promotion-focused individuals, while negative frames are more persuasive for prevention-focused individuals. This research aims to expand the scope of previous research on message framing and argues that the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus, an effect established in previous research, is dependent on the strength of the message. This research further argues that the match-up effect patterns between message framing and regulatory focus differ based on whether or not consumers are making a purchase for themselves or for others. Specifically, this research hypothesizes that prevention-focused individuals tend to focus on uncertainty or risks related to choice for others and exhibit low levels of purchase intention regardless of message framing under the condition of making a purchase for others. This research also proposes that promotion-focused individuals tend to focus more on potential positive outcomes rather than negative risks when making a choice for others, resulting in a higher purchase intention regardless of message framing. That is, under the condition of making a purchase for others, the match-up effect of message framing and regulatory focus is rendered void. This research expands the scope of existing research on message framing and provides practical implications for marketing practitioners.

Keywords: Message Framing; Regulatory Focus; Promotion Focus; Prevention Focus; Message Strength; Choice for Others

1. INTRODUCTION

 Companies spend much time, money, and effort on trying to design effective messages to persuade customers to buy their products and increase their profit. Researchers as well have conducted many academic studies on the topic of persuasion, many of which has focused on exploring the match-up effect between message framing and consumer regulatory focus. This previous research addresses the topic of persuasion by dividing consumer messages into two main types—those with positive message (or gain) frames and those with negative message (or loss) frames—and suggests that a message has a stronger persuasive effect when the message frame matches the consumer regulatory focus (e.g. Lee & Aaker, 2004; Kim, 2006; Zhao & Pechmann, 2007 etc.). That is, positive frames are more persuasive for promotion-focused individuals, while negative frames are more persuasive for prevention-focused individuals.

However, this study further proposes that the match-up effect between message framing and consumer regulatory focus can be negated by manipulating certain variables. These key variables are message strength and purchasing context. In real life, it is common for marketers to implement advertising messages that contain little or no credible evidence of their product's superiority over its competitors. Previous research exploring the match-up effect between message framing and consumer regulatory focus does little to address the important variable of message strength. Likewise, previous research on persuasion has been conducted under conditions in which consumers are buying products for their own personal use, leaving the conditions of purchasing for “gift-giving” purposes largely unexplored.

In real life, the buyer of a product may not be its intended user, as there are many cases in which a person must purchase a product on behalf of someone else (i.e. as in buying a gift). When a customer purchases an item for someone else, the persuasive effect of message framing may be different from when a customer purchases a product for personal use. Although consumers purchase products for other people quite often, there are only a handful of studies in the field of marketing that explore the purchasing context—purchasing a product for personal use vs. purchasing a product for someone else—as an important variable. Likewise, research on persuasion has left this aspect of purchasing context largely unstudied. Thus, in addition to message strength, this research further suggests that the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus may depend on the purchasing context.

In light of these considerations, this research proposes that message strength and purchasing context (purchasing a product for personal use vs. purchasing a product for someone else) may influence the degree of the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus and may even negate the match-up effect altogether when the product message is weak or when customer is buying a product for someone else. This research serves to expand the scope of research on the topics of persuasion and message framing and provides practical guidelines for marketing practitioners.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Message Framing

In marketing, advertisers use a variety of different messages—both positive and negative—to persuade consumers to buy their products. For example, a juice manufacturing company may focus on the positive aspects of drinking juice by delivering the message, “If you drink juice, you will be healthy,” or focus instead on the negative aspects of *not* drinking juice by saying, “If you do not drink juice, you will not be healthy,” (Lee & Aaker, 2004). Although these two messages both convey the same basic idea that drinking juice is healthy, consumers respond differently depending on the focus of the message. This concept of using gains and losses to present a basically the same message is known as “message framing” (Zhao & Pechmann, 2007). Although there is much existing research on message framing, research has yet to yield consistent results (Cesario, Corker, & Jelinek, 2013; Lee & Aaker, 2004). That is, some research has found that positive frames are more persuasive, while others have found that negative frames are more persuasive (Lee & Aaker, 2004). These inconsistencies show that there may be other variables that influence the persuasive impact of message framing. As such, there is a great need to explore the moderating variables of message framing, such as situational context or message characteristics instead of focusing solely on message framing itself. In response to this need, this research focuses on how three different variables affect the persuasive impact of message framing. This study explores consumer regulatory focus as a personality trait variable, message strength as a variable related to message characteristics, and purchasing context (buying a product for oneself or for others) as a situational variable.

2.2. Regulatory Focus Theory

Consumer goal directed behaviors are influenced by two different motivational systems (Higgins et al., 2001). According to Regulatory Focus Theory, these two distinct motivational systems are classified as promotion-focus and prevention-focus (Higgins et al., 2001). Promotion-focused individuals are those who are interested in advancement and achievement focusing on positive outcomes or gains, while prevention-focused individuals are those who care about safety and responsibility, focusing on negative outcomes or losses (Higgins et al., 2001). That is, promotion-focused individuals are more likely to maximize positive outcomes (Jain, Agrawal, & Maheswaran, 2006), and try to reach an ideal state by adopting approach strategic means (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 2001), while prevention-focused individuals try to minimize negative outcomes (Jain et al., 2006) and avoid mismatches to an ideal state to attain their goals by adopting avoidance strategic means (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 2001).

Regulatory focus is dependent on individual psychological traits or situational factors (Higgins et al., 2001), and previous research has shown that disparate motivational systems influence consumer behavior in a variety of marketing contexts. For example, Chernev (2004) found that prevention-focused individuals are more likely than promotion-focused individuals to select inactive options in order to maintain the status quo. Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda (2002) also found that promotion-focused individuals are more likely to be influenced by positive role models that inspire achievement, whereas prevention-focused individuals are more likely to be influenced by so-called

“negative role models” whose negative behaviors/outcomes serve as a warning on the importance of avoiding risks. This is because prevention-focused individuals, by definition, focus heavily on ways to avoid negative outcomes. Other studies in the field have focused on the persuasive impact of message framings it relates to regulatory focus. Through their study of the persuasive impact of anti-smoking ads, Zhao and Pechmann (2007) revealed that positive frames have more a stronger persuasive effect on promotion-focused individuals while negative frames have a stronger persuasive effect on prevention-focused individuals. Zhu and Meyers-levy (2007) suggested that regulatory focus influences the type of cognitive mechanism adopted by an individual. Specifically, this research showed that promotion-focused individuals excel at recalling relationships between specific items or main themes since they adopt relational elaboration, while prevention-focused individuals excel at recalling specific items or details since they adopt item-specific elaboration. Florack, Ineichen, and Bieri (2009) suggested that the persuasive effect of ads including both positive and negative information on a product can differ depending on regulatory focus and revealed that these types of ads are not effective for prevention-focused individuals since they tend to focus heavily on negative information even when positive information is also presented. Kees, Burton, and Tangari (2010) studied the persuasive effect of health-related messages and found that although positive frames are more persuasive for promotion-focused individuals, persuasive impact was more pronounced when there was a greater emphasis on potential positive outcomes derived from health affirming behavior.

As detailed above, previous research supports the theory that fit or match-up between consumer regulatory focus and message framing influences persuasion. This study aims to contribute to existing research on message framing by suggesting that even though positive frames are persuasive for promotion-focused individuals and negative frames are persuasive for prevention-focused individuals, this match-up effect is dependent on message strength.

2.3. Message Strength

Message strength is a term that refers to the power and quality of a message’s content. Message strength has been defined and manipulated differently in a variety of research studies. Updegraff, Sherman, Luyster, and Mann (2007) defined message strength as message concreteness, while Escalas and Luce (2004) viewed message strength as related to message credibility and manipulated message strength by using scientific claims in advertising. Although the exact definition and manipulation of message strength may vary, message credibility is one of the most important components of message strength.

It is common knowledge that a strong message is more persuasive than a weak message; since this concept is easily understood, the importance of message strength is often overlooked. However, when message strength is researched and combined with other variables that influence persuasion, meaningful implications can be derived. Noted research on persuasion has adopted message strength as an important variable (e.g. Andrews & Shimp, 1990; Escalas & Luce, 2004; Mano, 1997). Andrews and Shimp (1990) also contributed to this field of research in their study reexamining the ELM (Elaboration Likelihood Model) suggested by Petty and Cacioppo (1996). This study showed that highly involved consumers tend to show more positive attitudes toward a product when there is a higher degree of message strength. In addition, other researchers have shown that consumer response—such as trusting an advertising message—is influenced by message strength in a variety of marketing contexts (e.g. Escalas & Luce, 2004; Mano, 1997).

Based on these studies, it should be considered whether message strength may be a determining factor in the relationship between message framing and consumer regulatory focus. Previous studies have focused on exploring the match-up effect between message framing and consumer regulatory focus by investigating the different factors that may lead to a high level of persuasion (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Kim, 2006; Zhao & Pechmann, 2007). However, none of these studies have adopted message strength as a main important variable. Kim (2006) manipulated positive and negative frames in the context of anti-smoking ads, focusing on the positive and negative effects of not smoking and smoking, respectively, and established the presence of a match-up effect between regulatory focus and message framing under the condition of a strong message. Kim’s study (2006) was limited, however, in that its conditions were confined solely to that of a strong message, even though the concept of message strength was not specifically mentioned. Lee and Aaker (2004), on the other hand, manipulated message framing in their advertisements for grape juice by including credible medical information regarding the health benefits of drinking grape juice. Since proven medical information is generally seen as guaranteeing message credibility, it can be concluded that Lee and Aaker

(2004) also confined their research to a strong message condition. Recent research conducted by Malaviya and Brendl (2014) was also confined to experimental manipulations conducted solely under strong message conditions.

By conducting experimental manipulations using both weak and strong message conditions, this research seeks to establish message strength as a moderating variable in the match-up effect between regulatory focus and message framing. More specifically, we argue that when the message is strong, consumers are more likely to be persuaded by the message. We further propose that when a message is weak, the message has little or no persuasive effect, and results in low levels of message adoption. That is, in a strong message condition, we propose that there will be a match-up effect of consumer regulatory focus and message framing, and that promotion-focused individuals will prefer positive frames while prevention-focused individuals will prefer negative frames. This theory is consistent with the results of previous research. However, in our current study, we also expect that in a weak message condition, consumer message adoption will be lower than in a strong message condition, and that the match-up effect between regulatory focus and message framing will be negated since the message framing will not be significantly persuasive to either promotion-or prevention-focused individuals. Based on this logic, the following hypothesis is suggested.

Hypothesis 1: There will be a three-way interaction effect between message strength, message framing, and consumer regulatory focus.

Hypothesis 1-1: Specifically, in the strong message condition, there will be a two-way interaction effect revealing that promotion-focused individuals will exhibit a more favorable evaluation of message claims under the condition of a positive frame than under the condition of a negative frame, while prevention-focused individuals will exhibit a more favorable evaluation of message claims under the condition of a negative frame than under the condition of a positive frame.

Hypothesis 1-2: However, in a weak message condition, there will be no interaction effect of consumer regulatory focus and message framing.

2.4. Purchasing Context

To further understand the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus, this paper sought to investigate whether the existence of a match-up effect may be negated even under strong message condition depending on purchasing context.

Prior to this study, previous research on match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus had been confined to purchasing conditions in which the buyer and the intended user were the same. For example, even though Zhu and Meyers-Levy (2007) and Lee and Aaker (2004) focused on the persuasive impact of message framing, both of these studies were conducted under the assumption that the purchaser of the product advertised was also its intended user. However, in real-life purchasing situations, people frequently view advertising messages in order to make a purchase for someone else (such as in a gift-giving situation).

Given this relative frequency with which consumers buy products for others, it is worth investigating this aspect of purchasing context as it relates to persuasion. Few studies on the persuasion effect have studied purchasing conditions in which the buyer is not the intended user. In the field of marketing, however a handful of studies (Choi, Kim, Choi, & Yi, 2006; Polman, 2010; Polman, 2012a; Polman, 2012b; Polman & Emich, 2011; Zikmund-Fisher, Sarr, Fagerlin, & Ubel, 2006 etc.) have investigated this purchasing context. These studies showed that people tend to put more weight on positive information (Polman, 2012a), exhibit greater variety-seeking tendencies (Polman, 2012a; Choi et al., 2006), and show a higher level of creativity when making a choice for someone else. In addition, people tend to select various options in order to make a good impression in the eyes of others (Ratner & Kahn, 2002). That is, people want others to view them as creative and interesting and seek to project this image by selecting various options. In situations of medical choice, people tend to put more weight on the process of the medical treatment when selecting a treatment for themselves but tend to put greater emphasis on the outcome of the medical treatment when making a choice for someone else (Zikmund-Fisher et al., 2006). Each of these studies argues that people tend to adopt different decision processes when making a choice for others as opposed to making a choice for themselves.

Based on these previous studies, it is expected in our study as well that the persuasive effect of an advertising message

may differ depending on the purchasing context of whether the buyer is also the intended user or if the intended user is someone else. Making a choice for others, such as in a gift-giving situation, may lead to positive responses, such as gratitude from others, but making a choice on behalf of someone else is also related to high levels of uncertainty. Inevitably, it is impossible to perfectly know and predict the preference of others, and an incorrect product choice may lead to rejection or disapproval (Mandel, 2003). Thus, a high level of uncertainty is derived from trying to predict the preferences of others.

Individual consumers may respond differently to uncertainty or risks depending on their psychological traits, including their regulatory focus. Specifically, since prevention-focused individuals focus more heavily on losses (Lee & Aaker, 2004), they are more likely to put more weight on perceived uncertainties derived from their choice for others. Thus, they may exhibit negative responses toward advertising messages regardless of the message framing. However, since promotion-focused individuals focus more heavily on gains rather than losses (Lee & Aaker, 2004) and exhibit a tendency to seek risks (Chernev, 2004), they may overlook uncertainties and focus instead on positive potential outcomes, such as gratitude, derived from their choice for others. Thus, promotion-focused individuals are expected to adopt the same decision processes in making a choice for others as they do for themselves. That is, we expect that promotion-focused individuals will exhibit the same response toward advertising messages even when making a choice for others and will show higher purchase intentions toward positive frames as opposed to negative frames. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: In a strong message condition in which consumers consider making a choice for someone else, promotion-focused individuals will exhibit higher purchase intention in positive frames compared to negative frames. However, prevention-focused individuals will exhibit a low level of purchase intention regardless of message framing.

3. STUDY 1

3.1. Participants

A total of 228 undergraduates in their twenties in Korea participated in this experiment. The average age was 22.5 years old; 47.8% of the respondents were male and 52.2% of the respondents were female.

3.2. Experimental Design

An experiment was conducted to test for the three-way interaction between message strength, message framing, and consumer regulatory focus. Thus, the experiment was conducted using a 2 x 2 between subject design—message framing: positive vs. negative, message strength: strong vs. weak. Regulatory focus was measured as a continuous variable.

3.3. Materials

Researchers created advertisements for vitamins to be used as experimental stimuli. This study referred to the stimuli created by Escalas and Luce (2004). To improve the relevance of stimuli for participants of this particular study, the advertisements used conveyed the message that the vitamins advertised would provide students with the energy needed for a healthy life on campus. In all conditions, the image and contents of the ads were the same except for contents directly related to message framing and message strength. Advertisements with positive message framing conveyed the message that the vitamins would improve the health of the consumer, while advertisements with negative message framing conveyed the message that not taking the vitamins would impair the health of the consumer. In addition to message framing, message strength was also manipulated based on the research of Escalas and Luce (2004) in which message strength was manipulated based on message credibility. In the strong message condition, the ads cited research conducted by the “Harvard University Research Center” that linked taking vitamins to improved immunity and mental activity. In the weak message condition, the ads cited research conducted by a virtual research center called the “New Life Research Center,” which simply mentioned that taking vitamins is related to health. The strong message condition used the name of a renowned research center to suggest credible evidence in support of taking vitamins, while the weak message condition used the name of an unknown research center to suggest vague evidence in support of taking vitamins.

3.4. Pretest

Sixty-one undergraduate students who did not participate in the main experiment answered a questionnaire designed by the researchers of this study, to check the validity of the experimental stimuli. The students completed the questionnaire after reviewing one of the four different message conditions presented in the main experiment related to message strength (strong vs. weak) and message framing (positive vs. negative). The questionnaire contained items designed to measure message credibility phrased as follows: “How likely would you be to trust the information provided by this research center?”. Respondents marked their answer on a 7-point scale ranging from “very unlikely” to “very likely”. In addition, students’ familiarity with the research centers presented in the main experiment was measured with two items as follows: “How familiar are you with Harvard University?” and “How familiar are you with the New Life Company?”. Respondents answered using a 7-point scale ranging from “very unfamiliar” to “very familiar”. The questionnaire also contained two items designed to check the validity of the message framing used in the main experiment, namely: “This message focuses on the positive aspects of taking vitamins” and “This message focuses on the negative aspects of not taking vitamins”. Student respondents answered on a 7-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

The results of the questionnaire showed that the strong message was perceived as more credible than the weak message ($M=3.40$ vs. 2.73 , $F(1, 57)=6.02$, $p<0.01$). Also, respondents’ familiarity with Harvard University was higher ($M=6.06$, $SD=1.13$) than the New Life company ($M=1.24$, $SD=0.84$). In terms of message framing, the index was calculated by subtracting the scores of the positive aspects items from the scores of the negative aspects items and comparing whether the index was different under positive vs. negative framing conditions. Results showed that the positive framing message was perceived by respondents as focusing more on positive aspects than negative aspects in comparison to the negative framing message ($M=4.40$ vs. -2.22 , $F(1, 57)=93.65$, $p<0.001$). Therefore, it was concluded that the experimental stimuli had sufficient validity for the testing of the hypotheses.

3.5. Procedure of Main Experiment

A research company in Korea was selected and asked to recruit undergraduate students residing in Korea to complete an online experiment developed by the researchers of this study. To recruit participants, the company sent out an email soliciting participation in our online experiment to undergraduate students registered in their research database. The email contained a link to our experiment, so that participants were able to participate in the experiment by clicking on the link. When participants clicked on the link, they were asked to read the instructions and were subsequently exposed to experimental stimuli on the computer screen. In order to help ensure that participants read the experimental stimuli in its entirety, participants were not able to move on to the next page of the experiment until a certain amount of time had lapsed. And then, they were asked to answer several questions. After completion of the experiment, participants received a small number of points from the research company that could be used like cash at online shopping malls.

3.6. Measures

Participants’ evaluation of taking vitamins was the key dependent variable and was measured using three different items (negative-positive, bad-good, and unnecessary-necessary) on a 7-point scale. Product involvement in terms of the vitamins presented was measured using three items: (1) Vitamins are a product of interest to me; (2) Vitamins are important; and, (3) Purchasing vitamins is significant (Zaichkowsky, 1985, $\alpha=0.816$). Regulatory focus was measured using six items for promotion focus ($\alpha=0.864$) and five items for prevention-focus on a 7-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” based on the work of Higgins et al. (2002, $\alpha=0.816$).

For the purpose of analysis, the regulatory index was calculated based on the methodology presented in existing research (Lockwood et al., 2002; Zhao & Pechmann, 2007). Specifically, the averages of promotion-focused items and prevention-focused items were calculated, and the prevention-focus average was subtracted from the promotion-focus average, resulting in the establishment of a regulatory focus index. A regulatory focus index reflects individuals’ dominant regulatory focus. Specifically, high scores reflect a relatively strong promotion-focus, while low scores reflect a relatively strong prevention-focus. For the manipulation check, two items were used to measure how heavily participants focused on the positive and negative aspects of taking vitamins in response to the experimental stimuli presented. All items were measured using a 7-point scale.

3.7. Results

A manipulation check was conducted prior to the testing of the hypotheses. Specifically, an index was calculated by subtracting the average score of negative aspect items from the average score of positive aspect items (index= positive aspect items–negative aspect items). The index was then checked to see whether it differed depending on the framing conditions. The results of the manipulation check showed that participants in the positive frame condition focused more on the positive aspects of taking vitamins than participants in the negative frame condition, while participants in the negative frame condition focused more on the negative aspects of not taking vitamins than participants in the positive frame condition ($M=0.83$ vs. 0.38 , $F(1,226)=5.01$, $p<0.05$). These results showed that the manipulation was valid.

A moderated regression was then run examining the three-way interaction effect between message framing (dummy coded 0=negative message, 1=positive message), regulatory focus (continuous variable), and message strength (dummy coded 0=strong message, 1=weak message). When running the regression, product involvement was used as the control variable since previous research had argued that product involvement influences the information processing of a message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). The results of the moderated regression analysis showed a significant two-way interaction effect between message framing and regulatory focus ($b=0.438$, $t=2.708$, $p<0.001$) and a three-way interaction effect between all three variables ($b=-0.469$, $t=-2.192$, $p<0.05$). To examine the two-way interaction effect between message framing and regulatory focus in the strong message condition and weak message condition, two moderated regressions were run—one for each condition. Results showed that in the weak message condition, the interaction effect between message framing and regulatory focus was not significant ($p>0.8$); however, in the strong message condition, the interaction effect between the same two variables was significant ($b=0.436$, $t=2.817$, $p<0.001$).

To further elucidate the pattern of the interaction effect, a spotlight analysis was conducted following the procedure proposed by Aiken, West and Reno (1991). A spotlight analysis of cases one standard deviation above the mean on the regulatory focus index (promotion-focused) indicated that promotion-focused individuals had a more positive attitude toward taking vitamins in the positive framing condition than under the negative framing condition ($b=0.611$, $t=2.124$, $p<0.05$). However, a spotlight analysis of cases one standard deviation below the mean on the regulatory focus index (prevention-focused) indicated that prevention-focused individuals had a more positive attitude toward taking vitamins in a negative framing condition than in a positive framing condition ($b=-0.542$, $t=-1.900$, $p=0.060$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 1. Moderated Regression Analysis (3-way Interaction of Message Strength, Message Framing, and Regulatory focus)

	Unstandardized beta	S.E	Standardized beta	t	p
Involvement	.481	.058	.485	8.278	.000
Message strength (A)	.032	.257	.013	.124	.901
Message framing (B)	-.365	.256	-.144	-1.427	.155
Regulatory focus (C)	-.027	.106	-.031	-.259	.796
A x C	-.004	.151	-.004	-.027	.978
B x C	.438	.162	.371	2.708	.007
A x B	.390	.348	.134	1.121	.264
A x B x C	-.469	.214	-.310	-2.192	.029

*R square=0.263, adjusted R square=0.236

Table 2. Moderated Regression Analysis (2-way Interaction of Message Framing and Regulatory Focus in a Strong Message Condition)

	Unstandardized beta	S.E	Standardized beta	t	p
Involvement	.471	.078	.491	6.041	.000
Message framing (A)	-.364	.244	-.147	-1.490	.139
Regulatory focus (B)	-.026	.101	-.028	-.260	.795
A x B	.436	.155	.337	2.817	.006

*R square=0.301, adjusted R square=0.275

3.8. Discussion

The results of Study 1 showed that message strength was a significant moderating factor in the interaction effect between message framing and regulatory focus. That is, the interaction effect between message framing and regulatory focus was significant only in a strong message condition confirming the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus found by previous research studies while a weak message negated the match-up effect altogether.

4. STUDY 2

4.1. Participants

Study 2 was conducted to test whether the interaction effect between message framing and regulatory focus would remain constant even under a strong message condition in which the participant considered making a purchase for someone else. The same research company employed in Study 1 was hired to conduct an online experiment, and participants were recruited in the same way as outlined in Study 1.

A total of 106 undergraduates in Korea, all of whom were in their 20s, participated in the online experiment. The average age of the participants was 22.9 years old; 49% of the participants were male and 51% were female. Upon completion of the experiment, participants were awarded a small amount of points that could be used like cash at online shopping malls

4.2. Experimental Design

In order to test Hypothesis 2, Study 2 focused only on strong advertising messages in gift-giving situations. A 2 between subject design—message framing: positive vs. negative—was adopted, and regulatory focus was measured as a continuous variable. Participants were randomly distributed to one of the conditions and were asked to answer several questions after reviewing an advertisement created by the researchers.

4.3. Materials and Procedure

The same advertisements used in Study 1 were also used in Study 2, and the procedure of Study 2 was the same as the procedure of Study 1 except for the following. First, Study 1 included both strong message and weak message conditions while Study 2 examined only strong message conditions. Second, participants in Study 2 were given additional instructions before reviewing the advertisements promoting vitamins. Specifically, these instructions asked participants to imagine that they were considering purchasing the vitamins as a gift for someone else. After the participants reviewed the advertisement, they were asked to answer several questions.

4.4. Measures

Purchase intention was measured by three items: (1) impossible to purchase/possible to purchase; (2) improbable to purchase/probable to purchase and (3) unlikely to purchase/likely to purchase ($\alpha=0.950$). Product involvement in connection to the vitamins presented was measured using three items: (1) Vitamins are not of any interest to me; (2) Vitamins are important; and (3) Purchasing vitamins is significant (Zaichkowsky, 1985, $\alpha=0.803$). Regulatory focus was measured with six items for promotion focus ($\alpha=0.866$) and five items for prevention focus ($\alpha=0.831$) as suggested by Higgins et al. (2001). A regulatory focus index was established using the same procedures outlined in Study 1 by subtracting the average score of prevention-focused items from the average score of promotion-focused items. For the manipulation check, two items were used to measure how much participants focused on positive and negative aspects of taking vitamins respectively. All items were measured anchoring from disagree to agree using a 7-point scale.

4.5. Results

An index was calculated by subtracting the average score of negative aspects items from the average score of positive aspect items (An index=average score of positive aspect items – average score of negative aspect items). The index was then analyzed to see whether it differed depending on the message framing condition. Analysis results showed

that participants in the positive frame condition focused more on the positive aspects of taking vitamins (as opposed to the negative aspects of not taking vitamins) than in the negative frame condition ($M=1.58$ vs. 0.44 , $F(1,104)=13.54$, $p<0.01$).

A moderated regression analysis was then run to test Hypotheses 2. Results supported the presence of the main effects of message framing and regulatory focus ($b=0.681$, $t=2.214$, $p<0.05$; $b=0.238$, $t=1.992$, $p<0.05$), but also showed that there was no significant interaction effect between the two variables ($p>0.5$). These results mean that participants showed a higher purchase intention for positive frames compared to negative frames (dummy coded 0=negative message, 1=positive message), and prevention-focused individuals showed a lower purchase intention compared to promotion-focused individuals regardless of message framing. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

Table 3. Moderated Regression Analysis (2-way Interaction of Message Framing and Regulatory Focus in a Strong Message Condition in Which Consumers Consider Making a Choice for Someone Else)

	Unstandardized beta	S.E	Standardized beta	t	p
Involvement	.344	.105	.292	3.282	.001
Message framing (A)	.681	.307	.241	2.214	.029
Regulatory focus (B)	.238	.119	.266	1.992	.049
A x B	-.094	.160	-.087	-.589	.557

*R square=0.221, adjusted R square=0.190

4.6. Discussion

The results of Study 2 showed that even in a strong message condition, the match-up effect of message framing and regulatory focus was rendered null when participants considered buying the product as a gift for someone else. However, results also unexpectedly indicated that promotion-focused individuals showed a higher purchase intention compared to prevention-focused individuals regardless of message framing under gift-giving conditions with a strong message. Gift-giving is characterized by high levels of uncertainty that stem from trying to predict the preferences of others and the fear of failing to make the right choice and experiencing embarrassment or disapproval from others. However, making the right choice in selecting a gift for someone else can also elicit positive responses such as gratitude, making it possible for a gift-giver to make a good impression on the gift recipient. Thus, the results of Study 2 imply that promotion-focused individuals may put more weight on the positive aspects or potential gains associated with gift-giving rather than any negative aspects or potential losses that may negate the effect of message framing.

5. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research expands the scope of previous research and supports the theory that the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus can be negated depending on message strength or purchasing context, such as gift-giving. Specifically, in strong message conditions, the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus was found to be valid, supporting the theory that positive frames are more persuasive for promotion-focused individuals while negative frames are more persuasive for prevention-focused individuals. However, under weak message conditions, the match-up effect was not significant since the weakness of the message lowered persuasiveness for both positive and negative frames.

In addition, research showed that even in strong message conditions, the match-up effect could be negated by manipulating certain conditions. More specifically, this research investigated gift-giving situations and found that prevention-focused individuals exhibited a low level of purchase intention in both positive and negative frames since they tend to put more emphasis on the risks or uncertainty related to gift-giving. This research contributes to the understanding of the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus by showing that the match-up effect is not valid in weak message conditions or in gift-giving situations. This research is particularly significant in that explores the situational variable of gift-giving as it relates to persuasion—a variable that has remained largely unstudied in existing research.

Also, this research provides practical implications for marketing practitioners. First of all, it suggests that the persuasive impact of an advertising message is dependent on each consumer's individual psychological traits. This implies that marketing practitioners should selectively expose their message to target audiences to improve persuasion. Also, this research suggests that message strength is a critical factor in message persuasion. Although message strength as a crucial part of persuasion may be seen by some as common sense, there are many advertisements that lack any scientific or credible evidence supporting their product. This research implies that marketing practitioners could improve the persuasive effect of their advertising by improving message strength. Lastly, this research shows that in gift-giving situations, negative frames are not effective for marketing to either promotion-or prevention-focused individuals and that positive frames are effective for both promotion-and prevention-focused individuals. Thus, for consumers considering purchasing a product as a gift, positive frames should be implemented to increase sales.

Finally, this research has several limitations. First, this study measured regulatory focus instead of attempting to manipulate it. Regulatory focus can be activated by priming. Future research could expand on the results of this study by manipulating regulatory focus. Second, this research showed that the match-up effect between message framing and regulatory focus is negated when the message is weak or when consumers purchase a product as a gift. Future research could further explore other variables that might eliminate the match-up effect or reverse its direction. For example, Malaviya and Brendl (2014) suggested hedonic motive or hedonic outcome as crucial variables and showed that negative frames are more persuasive for promotion-focused individuals while positive frames are more persuasive for prevention-focused individuals, depending on hedonic motives or hedonic outcomes derived from the message. Further research is needed to investigate variables that could reverse the match-up effect.

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The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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