

“Be All You Can Be”: The Influence of Advertising Slogans on Regulatory Focus and Consumer Spending Behavior

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Advertisers and marketers often try to influence consumers' choices by creating advertising slogans that appeal to our future goals, dreams and wishes (e.g., “Let’s make things better”, “Just do it”, “Be all you can be”). Associating brands with personal dreams and ambitions may imply that purchasing these brands can help us achieve and express our ideals and aspirations. In two studies we test the proposition that exposure to advertising slogans containing values related to achievement and personal goals will make consumers aware of the discrepancy between the person they are at this particular point in time (actual self-state) and the person they desire to be in the future (ideal self-state). We propose that this slogan-induced discrepancy can be decreased by various forms of consumer behavior, not necessarily related to the advertised product.

Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins 1997) states that individuals adopt a *promotion* focus orientation when they are concerned with reaching their ideal selves. Individuals with this strategy regulate their behavior towards desired end states and positive outcomes in order to decrease the experienced discrepancy between their actual and ideal state. Based on earlier research, showing that advertisements focusing on the independent self can induce promotion-related values (Hamilton and Biehal 2005), we expect that advertising slogans reminding us of the goals and ideals relating to our hopes, wishes, and aspirations are suited to directly induce the self-regulation mechanism of promotion focus. Furthermore, we hypothesize in study 1 that this activated promotion orientation influences personal spending intentions. We predict that participants who are exposed to promotion-related slogans intend to spend relatively more money on means that will help them achieve their goals and aspirations (i.e., education) than on means unrelated to valued promotion ideals (i.e., entertainment).

Study 1

We tested our hypotheses in a 2 (slogan: promotion-focused vs. control) x 2 (spending: education versus entertainment) design with repeated measures on the second factor. Participants' focus orientation was manipulated by either exposing them for 40 seconds to four promotion-based slogans for various products (e.g., “Straight to your dreams”) or to four different neutral control slogans for the same products (e.g., “Getting you around”). After exposure, participants completed an adapted version of the proverb-task (Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2003) which measured participants' state focus orientation. Subsequently, they were asked to estimate the amount of money they were planning to spend on their academic education and entertainment in the upcoming month.

As expected, we found that participants in the promotion-focus condition were more promotion focused than participants in the control condition. Moreover, compared to participants in the control condition, we found that participants in the promotion-focused condition planned to spend relatively more money on means related to aspirations and accomplishment, i.e. on their academic education, than on entertainment.

Study 2

In study 2 we extended the results found in Study 1 by focusing on actual spending behavior. Based on the “value from fit” principle (Higgins 2000), entailing the notion that individuals experience a

regulatory fit when they pursue goals that match their (current) focus, we propose that participants are more inclined to donate money to a charity that expresses values that are congruent with their current orientation, than when the charity's values and goals are incongruent with their current orientation. Furthermore, we test whether private self-consciousness moderates the effect of orientation fit on charity donation. People with a high private self-consciousness are more attuned to their inner state and feelings than people with a low private self-consciousness. We expect that this salience of inner feelings and state intensifies the experienced focus orientation and therefore increases the experienced fit or misfit, which will affect the amount of money donated.

These hypotheses were tested in a 2 (orientation: fit versus misfit) x 2 (private self-consciousness: high versus low) between-subjects design. To measure participants' individual differences in private self-consciousness, participants completed a translated version of the Private Self-Consciousness Scale (Vleeming and Engelse 1981) originally developed by Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975). We used the same focus orientation manipulation as in study 1 wherein half of the participants were exposed to promotion-based slogans and half of the participants to control slogans. After the ostensible end of the experiment, participants were asked to donate some money to an unrelated charity aimed at helping educational projects in third world countries. Before they had to decide whether and how much money they wanted to donate they received information concerning this charity. This information contained clear promotion orientation goals and values related to accomplishment and achievement. This enabled us to create a fit condition (promotion-based slogans and promotion-oriented charity) and a misfit condition (control slogans and promotion-oriented charity).

The results showed that actual spending behavior was affected by exposure to promotion-based slogans. Participants donated more money when the expressed values of the charity matched their own regulatory focus than when there was no such fit. Furthermore, as expected, we found that private self-consciousness moderated the relation between orientation induction and donation. Participants high in private self-consciousness donated more money to the charity when it matched their orientation than when it did not fit with their current orientation. For participants low in private self-consciousness, the impact of orientation fit on amount of money donated was less pronounced. This suggests that participants with a high private self-consciousness are more aware of their current orientation state and experience “the value from fit” more intensively than participants with a low private self-consciousness. Interestingly, for these individuals, a regulatory focus induced by advertising slogans was found to carry over and affect consumer behavior in an unrelated domain: i.e., donating money to charity.

These results have important theoretical as well as practical implications. We found that a slogan-induced orientation state can affect actual spending behavior. Furthermore, we extended earlier findings on the impact of regulatory focus on consumer behavior by assessing the role of the consumer's self-consciousness and found evidence for the notion that the “value from fit” perception requires a “mirror on the self”. On a practical note, our findings are of importance for marketers as they should keep in mind that activating desired goals and ideals may benefit other causes than their own.

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