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## The Impact of Regulatory Focus and Temporal Distance on Evaluation of Consumer Reviews

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Keywords: Consumer reviews, regulatory focus, consumption time, temporal distance

As a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), online consumer reviews have been regarded as one of the most influential sources of information transmission that directly affects consumers' product evaluations and purchase decisions (Doh & Hwang, 2009). Although prior work has focused largely on the effects of review valence and review volume on subsequent judgments, the influence of temporal perspective (proximal vs. distant) on review evaluations remained largely unexamined in the apparel industry. Moreover, relatively little research has explored the role of regulatory focus in influencing consumer responses to online product reviews.

By integrating regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) and construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998), this study aims to investigate whether the persuasive effects of self-regulatory focused online reviews vary as a function of temporal distance. The central tenet of self-regulatory focus theory is that individuals are motivated to behave in a certain way depending on different goal orientations: promotion (*toward nurturance and achievement*) and prevention (*toward safety and security*). According to the construal level theory, people tend to construe information at low-construal level for near-future, thereby prevention-focused message is more persuasive than promotion-focused online reviews. In contrast, they tend to construe information high-construal level for distant future, thereby promotion-focused message is more persuasive. Thus, the following hypotheses were generated:

- H1:** *When a purchase is temporally proximal, prevention-focused reviews will lead to more favorable attitude toward the online consumer reviews.*
- H2:** *When a purchase is temporally distant, promotion-focused reviews will lead to more favorable attitude toward the online consumer reviews.*

A pretest was first conducted to pre-check the manipulation of regulatory focus goals in consumer reviews and temporal distance using 111 undergraduate students (Female = 45.9%, Mean age = 20). We confirmed that manipulations of regulatory focus and temporal distance were successful ( $M_{\text{prevention}} = 5.01$  vs.  $M_{\text{promotion}} = 5.82$ ;  $t(1, 109) = 1.08, p < .01$ ;  $M_{\text{near}} = 4.02$  vs.  $M_{\text{distant}} = 5.14$ ;  $F(1, 109) = 1.74, p < 0.01$ ). A main experiment was conducted in a research lab using a 2 (regulatory-focused consumer reviews: prevention vs. promotion) X 2 (temporal distance: proximal vs. distant) between-subjects factorial design. In this experiment, a fictitious apparel brand of athletic shoes called "Newton" was used to control for potential confounding variables. A total of 219 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university participated and received extra credit (Female = 54.1%, Mean age = 20). After participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, an online shopping scenario with either a proximal or a distant temporal manipulation condition was shown. Next, they were asked to read consumer reviews related to athletic shoes (see Appendix 1).

The result showed that there was no main effects of regulatory-focused reviews ( $F(1, 218) = 1.47, p = .23$ ) and temporal distance ( $F(1, 218) = .42, p = .52$ ) on the attitude toward review. However, there was a significant two-way interaction effect between regulatory-focused reviews and temporal distance on review attitude ( $F(1, 218) = 4.99, p < .05$ ). Furthermore, planned contrasts showed that the prevention-focused reviews ( $M_{\text{prevention}} = 6.38, SD = 1.23$ ) resulted in more favorable attitude toward the reviews than the promotion-focused reviews ( $M_{\text{promotion}} = 5.81, SD = 1.72$ ) in the near future condition ( $t = 2.32, p < .05$ ). However, there is no significant differences in review attitude between prevention-focused reviews ( $M_{\text{prevention}} = 5.89, SD = .89$ ) and promotion-focused reviews ( $M_{\text{promotion}} = 6.02, SD = .93$ ) in distant future condition ( $t = -.774, p = .44$ ). Therefore, H1 was supported, but H2 was rejected.

This proposed research offers practical guidelines for marketing practitioners in apparel industry on how they can segment their target audiences and improve search engine positioning. Typically, the recommendations can be generated based on the previous purchase experiences or similarity between products. However, we offer an alternative way how to manage online reviews drawing on regulatory fit between review types and consumption timeframe. For instance, marketers should design effective recommendation systems to enhance different promotion strategies, such as advance selling versus on-site selling. When marketers plan on-site selling events, they may place the prevention-focused online reviews that focus on avoiding negative outcomes on the top of the consumers' review pages.

#### Appendix 1. Experiment stimuli

(Promotion-focused online consumer reviews)

(Prevention-focused online consumer reviews)

Most Helpful Consumer Reviews	Most Helpful Consumer Reviews
<p><b>Great running shoes</b> By S. Cool on November, 2015</p> <p>I work all day on my feet. I love these shoes because the scientific engineered foam lining can actually <b>maximize support and increase shocking absorption</b>. They are more comfortable than any athletic shoes I have.</p> <p><b>As expected, all is good</b> By Emily Ali on December, 2015</p> <p>They are very nice shoes. I recommend trying a pair of shoes on if you look for stylish running shoes that help to <b>improve athletic performance and promote endurance</b>.</p>	<p><b>Great running shoes</b> By S. Cool on November, 2015</p> <p>I work all day on my feet. I love these shoes because the scientific engineered foam lining can <b>actually minimize the pain of running</b>. They are more comfortable than any athletic shoes I have.</p> <p><b>As expected, all is good</b> By Emily Ali on December, 2015</p> <p>They are very nice shoes. I recommend trying a pair of shoes on if you look for stylish running shoes that <b>prevent muscle strain and sour ligaments that occur during running</b>.</p>

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