



## The Role of Regulatory Focus in Online Apparel Product Display

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*Introduction.* It is widely recognized that apparel purchases account for a major portion of the total revenue generated by online retailers. According to Enright (2013), online sales of apparel and accessories in the U.S. reached \$54 billion, with an expected annual growth rate of 17.2%. In line with the trend, online apparel retailers have been seeking to develop web sites that can better serve potential customers. Academic researchers have also been providing various suggestions on how consumers behave online and how retailers may enhance the effectiveness of their apparel retail web sites (e.g., Ha et al., 2007). Despite the effort, an area that remains under-researched is the variance in online apparel product display methods. Generally, apparel products are displayed online via one of the following two ways: 1) the product is displayed on its own 2) the product is displayed with a model wearing it. Apparel retail web sites often use a mix of the two methods (e.g., nike.com), however, it is unclear how these different display methods impact consumer behavior and whether one or the other method is more or less effective. We attempt to address this research gap via the use of the regulatory focus theory. Specifically, we propose that prevention-focused individuals prefer apparel products displayed on their own, whereas promotion-focused individuals prefer products displayed with models wearing them.

*Theoretical Framework.* According to Higgins (1997), regulatory focus is an individual's motivational orientation adopted during goal pursuit, and an individual can be either prevention-focused or promotion-focused at any given moment depending on the nature of the situation at hand. More recent studies (e.g., Forster and Higgins, 2005) suggest that prevention-focused individuals rely on reasons, and thus, process information at a more local (concrete) level. Whereas, promotion-focused individuals rely on feelings when making a choice, and thus, tend to process information at a more global (abstract) level.

Based on the above, we predict that prevention-focused individuals will attach more value to products displayed on their own, since such display method encourages the individual to focus on the product itself, and thus, allows the individual to evaluate the product at a more concrete level (e.g. product details). On the other hand, we predict that promotion-focused individuals will attach more value to products displayed with models wearing them, since such display method encourages the individual to focus on the overall style, and thus, allows the individual to evaluate the product at a more abstract level.

*Method.* Two fictitious web pages were developed to test the predictions. The first web page included three product images of a shirt, whereas the second web page included three images of a model wearing the shirt. The product name and the product description was identical for both web pages. For the survey, 409 online consumer panels were randomly primed into either promotion-focus or prevention-focus. Priming was done by combing two traditionally utilized procedures: listing hopes-aspirations or duties-obligations and completing a maze game. Immediately after, participants answered a manipulation check question. Next, participants were

randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (promotion vs. prevention) X 2 (product on its own vs. model wearing the product) between-subjects design. The participants were asked to study a web page showing a shirt priced at \$50, then state how much they would be willing to pay for the shirt had its price not been set already.

*Result.* The results for the manipulation check supported the effectiveness of the regulatory focus priming process. Specifically, promotion-primed individuals, compared to prevention-primed, assigned more weight to what they want to do, rather than what they ought to do ( $M_{\text{promotion}} = 4.50$  ( $SD = 1.613$ ),  $M_{\text{prevention}} = 3.50$  ( $SD = 1.641$ ),  $t(407) = 6.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

A 2 X 2 ANOVA results showed a significant interaction between regulatory focus and online apparel product display method ( $F(1, 405) = 19.96$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As predicted earlier, promotion-primed individuals were willing to pay significantly more when the shirt was displayed with a model ( $M = \$31.98$ ) than when the shirt was displayed on its own ( $M = \$27.03$ ;  $F(1, 200) = 8.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ). On the other hand, prevention-primed individuals were willing to pay significantly more when the shirt was displayed on its own ( $M = \$33.65$ ) than when the shirt was displayed with a model wearing it ( $M = \$26.62$ ;  $F(1, 205) = 11.84$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

*Discussion.* The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of regulatory focus in how consumers respond to different online apparel product display methods. Results suggest that consumers are willing to pay more when there is a fit between the online product display method and their regulatory focus. More specifically, prevention-focused consumers attach more value to products displayed on their own, whereas promotion-focused consumers attach more value to products displayed with models wearing them. This finding has some obvious implications for online apparel retailers. For instance, given that regulatory focus is a situationally induced state-of-mind, retailers could manipulate various components of their websites (e.g. banner messages) to encourage customers to evaluate apparel products at a more concrete level (or abstract), thus making them attach more value to apparel products displayed on their own (or displayed with a model). In addition, previous studies have found that promotion-focused consumers prefer hierarchical display format whereas prevention-focused consumers prefer item-specific listing format (e.g., Pham and Chang, 2010). Based on our findings, one could infer that utilizing models would be more beneficial for online apparel web sites with hierarchical display format.

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