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Explaining consumer attitudes and purchase intentions toward organic food: Contributions from regulatory fit and consumer characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of regulatory fit on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions toward organic food and describes the moderating role of consumer characteristics. To this end, hypotheses have been developed and subjected to empirical verification using a survey. The survey results, obtained in Taiwan, provide reasonable support for the hypotheses. Specifically, the findings from the analysis of variance confirm that the occurrence of a regulatory fit leads to a more positive attitude and a greater intention to purchase organic food than when no regulatory fit occurs. Furthermore, the findings from both moderated regression analysis and simple slope analysis show that the relationships between regulatory fit and both attitude and purchase intention are moderated by consumer characteristics (i.e., trust propensity and self-confidence). Based on the findings, academic and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, consumers have worried about the quality of the food they eat because of food crises, such as mad cow disease, the foot-and-mouth epidemic and the Belgian dioxin scandal (Miles & Fewer, 2001). Recurring food safety incidents have raised consumers' concerns about food quality and safety (Liu, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2013). Furthermore, several researchers (e.g., Chrysohoidis & Krystallis, 2005; Mondelaers, Verbeke, & Huylenbroeck, 2009) proposed that increasing environmental awareness together with concerns regarding safer foods have caused people to question modern agricultural practices. This phenomenon is reflected in a growing demand for organic produce, which is considered less damaging to the environment and healthier than traditionally grown foods (Mondelaers, Aertsens, & Huylenbroeck, 2009; Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998; Williams & Hammit, 2001). By definition, organic foods are not genetically modified and are produced specifically without the application of synthetic chemicals such as pesticides and fertilisers (Chen, 2007). Specifically, organic foods include less harmful additives and more primary nutrients (vitamin C, dry matter, minerals) and secondary nutrients (phyto-nutrients) than traditional foods. Numerous

researchers (Grankvist & Biel, 2001; Lee, Shimizu, Kniffin, & Wansink, 2013; Magnusson, Arvola, Koivisto Hursti, Aberg, & Sjoden, 2001) indicated that consumers perceive foods labelled as organic to be healthier than traditional foods.

Between the sensory aspects of food (e.g., taste, odour, texture characteristics) and the impact of non-food effects (e.g., cognitive information, the physical environment, social factors) (Eertmans, Baeyens, & Van den Bergh, 2001), human food choice is difficult. Although various models represent the complexity of food choice behaviour (Aertsens, Verbeke, Mondelaers, & Huylenbroeck, 2009; Conner, 1993; Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996; Gifford & Bernard, 2006; Zander & Hamm, 2010, 2012), little research has investigated the impact of the regulatory fit effect, especially associated with organic food choice. Social psychologists and marketing researchers have found great success in using Avnet and Higgins' (2006) regulatory fit theory to explain consumer food choice behaviour (Bredahl, 2001; Dreezens, Martijn, Tenbult, Kok, & de Vries, 2005; Verdurme & Viaene, 2003). Specifically, Franssen, Reinders, Bartels, and Maassen (2010) found that the communication message matching a consumer's regulatory orientation (i.e., the occurrence of a regulatory fit) causes more positive attitudes and greater intention to buy foods compared with a communication message that does not match consumer's regulatory orientation. In this context, Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) (Higgins, 1997) seems relevant. According to RFT, consumers differ in their sensitivity to different types of information. Consumers with a

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promotion-focus are particularly sensitive to the presence or absence of positive outcomes, whereas consumers with a prevention focus are particularly sensitive to the presence or absence of negative outcomes. People will experience fit when they adopt goal pursuit strategies or engage in activities that sustain their regulatory orientation (Avnet & Higgins, 2006). Accordingly, the current study investigates whether the influence of an information message regarding organic food is stronger when the message is framed to match consumers' regulatory focus.

Additionally, as no two consumers are alike (Smith & Sivakumar, 2004), Hsu, Chang, and Chen (2012) suggested that consumer characteristics (e.g., trust propensity and self-confidence) play a moderating role in the effectiveness of an information message on consumers' attitudes and behavioural intentions. In summary, this study examines the effects of (1) marketing messages and their fit with consumers' regulatory focus (one of the purposes is to provide insight to marketers on the effective use of marketing messages to affect consumer attitude and purchase intention toward organic food) and (2) the moderating role of consumer characteristics in explaining the relationship between regulatory fit and the consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions regarding organic food.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Message frame

We recognise that marketing messages may be more persuasive if they fit an individual's regulatory orientation and we therefore employ common research on message framing. As indicated by Rothman and Salovey (1997), health messages are typically either gain-framed, that is, framed to convey the benefits of conducting health-promoting behaviour (e.g., performing a breast self-exam), or loss-framed, that is, framed to convey the costs associated with failing to conduct health-promoting behaviour (e.g., not performing a breast self-examination). Gain-framed messages enhance persuasion when utilised to encourage preventive health behaviour such as utilising mouth rinse to prevent gum disease (Rothman, Martino, Bedell, Detweiler, & Salovey, 1999) or the application of sunscreen to prevent skin cancer (Detweiler, Bedell, Salovey, Pronin, & Rothman, 1999), whereas loss-framed messages enhance persuasion when used to promote health detection behaviour such as HIV testing (Kalichman & Coley, 1995) or mammography and breast self-examination (Banks et al., 1995; Finney & Iannotti, 2002). Predictions regarding the health domain-dependent effects of gain- and loss-framed messages originated in prospect theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), which suggests that people are risk seeking in the area of losses and risk averse in the area of gains.

2.2. Regulatory fit effects

Higgins (1997) suggested that consumers could be segmented into two different motivational orientations – promotion-focus and prevention-focus. Consumers with a promotion-focus are motivated by achieving ideal goals such as their hopes, aspirations and accomplishments. However, those with a prevention-focus are motivated by goals related to their responsibilities, duties and obligations. Kirmani and Zhu (2007) proposed that promotion-focused people are likely to pursue their goals with eagerness, whereas prevention-focused people are likely to pursue their goals with vigilance. The regulatory focus can be activated by stimulants/priming such as experimental promotion versus prevention framing (Avnet & Higgins, 2006; Wang & Lee, 2006). Findings from RFT show that contextual cues such as the framing of a rewards system or the

priming of hopes or duties can affect an individual's situational regulatory focus (Higgins, 2000).

Aaker and Lee (2006) indicated that people with promotion goals are sensitive to gains and non-gains, whereas people with prevention goals are sensitive to losses and non-losses. Thus, different goals trigger the selective identification and the placing of trust in information that assists people in achieving their goal. When people engage in activities or adopt goal pursuit strategies that support their regulatory orientation, they will experience regulatory fit (Avnet & Higgins, 2006). When actions serve to maintain the goal orientation of an individual, they tend to elicit stronger reactions to that which they are evaluating at that time. Avnet and Higgins (2006) found that people with a regulatory focus (either a promotion- or prevention-focus) are willing to pay more for a product that matches their regulatory orientation. When people experience regulatory fit, their attitude toward a product becomes more positive. Kruglanski (2006) proposed that regulatory fit, which occurs when an individual's goal is matched, should give an individual a positive sense of satisfaction. Wang and Lee (2006) proposed that individuals develop more positive attitudes toward their target when the strategy they adopt or the information they review fits their regulatory goal. An experience that feels right gives an individual a sense of self-assurance and self-worth (Kruglanski, 2006). Further Lee and Aaker (2004) proved that regulatory fit leads to favourable attitudes, which enhance approach behaviours.

In addition, the regulatory fit of an experience that feels right and an experience that feels good (Aaker & Lee, 2006) in turn increase the strength of engagement in the actual behaviour (Hong & Lee, 2008). Thus, when individuals are strongly engaged with something, they become highly attentive, involved and occupied with it (Avnet & Higgins, 2006). Lee and Aaker (2004) demonstrated that regulatory fit affects intended behaviour, given that an individual desires to pursue a goal. Lee and Higgins (2008, p. 328) stated that those experiencing regulatory fit 'become more engaged in the activity'. They argue that regulatory fit is mainly a magnifier of people's attitudes and behaviours, which signifies that regulatory fit is more likely to intensify reactions and behaviour. Thus, based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are constructed:

H1: When promotion-focused consumers (prevention-focused consumers) are exposed to a gain-framed message (loss-framed message), the occurrence of regulatory fit will evoke a more positive attitude toward organic food than when no regulatory fit occurs.

H2: When promotion-focused consumers (prevention-focused consumers) are exposed to a gain-framed message (loss-framed message), the occurrence of regulatory fit will evoke greater intention to purchase organic food than when no regulatory fit occurs.

2.3. Trust propensity as a moderator

Hsu et al. (2012) confirmed that consumer characteristics such as individual trust propensity significantly affect consumer shopping behaviour. Trust propensity is a personality trait defined as a 'general willingness based on extended socialisation to depend on others' (McKnight & Chervany, 2001/2002; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Trust propensity characterises a consumer's tendency to trust or distrust other consumers. Those who typically trust others under conditions of uncertainty believe they will be treated reasonably and that, over time, their positive actions will be reciprocated (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983). McKnight, Cummings, and Chervany (1998) suggested that high trust propensity individuals believe 'that things turn out best when one is willing to depend on others, even though others may or may not be trustworthy'. Trust propensity intensifies or reduces the signals

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