

Research Article

# Stylistic properties and regulatory fit: Examining the role of self-regulatory focus in the effectiveness of an actor's vs. observer's visual perspective

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## Abstract

Building on regulatory focus research, we investigate how certain visual elements of an advertising message, such as stylistic properties, contribute to regulatory fit and persuasion. Across three experiments, we examine how the visual perspective (actor's vs. observer's) through which a product is depicted in an ad affects product evaluations among participants with different regulatory foci (promotion- vs. prevention-focused). Specifically, we find that when an actor's perspective is used in an ad to portray a product, regulatory fit occurs among promotion-focused (vs. prevention-focused) participants and they report more favorable product evaluations; conversely, when an observer's perspective is used, regulatory fit occurs among prevention-focused (vs. promotion-focused) participants and they evaluate the product more favorably. An analysis of internal vs. external evaluation thoughts helps explain the persuasion effects.

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## Introduction

Visual images represent a common tool employed by advertisers and marketers to promote their products or services. The persuasive power of visual images has been discussed and evidenced in research on visual communication and consumer behavior (Messaris, 1997; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004; Scott, 1994; Scott & Batra, 2003). In many situations, the effectiveness of a visual image in an ad depends on its stylistic properties, such as camera angle, orientation of an object, and visual perspective (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 2005; Yang, Zhang, & Peracchio, 2010). This article focuses on a frequently employed stylistic property: visual perspective. In practice, marketers may employ

either an actor's (see the left in [Appendix A](#) for an example) or an observer's (see the right in [Appendix A](#); Libby, Shaeffer, & Eibach, 2009) visual perspective to depict a product in an attempt to appeal to consumers. An *actor's visual perspective* is also referred to as the first-person perspective, in which individuals see an event through their own eyes. An *observer's visual perspective* is also labeled as the third-person perspective, in which individuals see themselves and an event from the perspective of an external observer (Sutin & Robins, 2008). In this article, we examine how these different visual perspectives affect consumers' evaluations of the product promoted in the ad. We propose that the persuasiveness of an actor's vs. observer's visual perspective hinges on consumers' regulatory focus.

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 2000) suggests two regulatory orientations during goal pursuit: promotion- vs. prevention-focused. Promotion-oriented consumers are guided by their needs for growth in pursuing a goal and deploy an eagerness strategy to regulate their behavior. In contrast,

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prevention-oriented consumers are more dominated by their security needs and resort to a vigilance strategy in behavior regulation. In situations where consumers' strategy of goal pursuit (eagerness vs. vigilance) fits or corresponds with their regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention), consumers experience regulatory fit. Research has ascertained a number of variables that may facilitate regulatory fit, which springboards further favorable effects on downstream variables such as value of the product, brand evaluations, and willingness to pay (Avnet & Higgins, 2006; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010). In a persuasion context, for example, much research has focused on how message framing (e.g., abstract vs. concrete framing, Lee et al., 2010; gain and non-gain vs. loss vs. non-loss, Lee & Aaker, 2004) influences regulatory fit experienced by promotion- and prevention-focused consumers. However, no prior research has examined how stylistic properties of visual images used in ads affect regulatory fit and subsequent persuasion. Drawing on research from visual perspectives and regulatory focus theory, we theorize a favorable effect of the fit between regulatory orientation and visual perspective such that employing a promotion-oriented visual perspective (an actor's perspective) to depict a product enhances product values and evaluations among promotion-focused consumers, whereas using a prevention-oriented visual perspective (an observer's perspective) increases product values and evaluations among prevention-focused consumers.

For the remainder of the article, we first review pertinent literature on visual communication and regulatory focus theory. Then we articulate our theoretical framework that delineates how regulatory fit between consumers' regulator focus and visual perspective (actor's vs. observer's) affects the evaluations of products displayed with different visual perspectives in ads. After that, we present three experiments offering support to our hypotheses and the underlying mechanism. Finally, we discuss the theoretical contributions of our research in bringing together the literature on visual perspective and regulatory focus, and offer implications of our findings for marketers and advertisers.

## Theoretical framework

### *Visual perspectives and information processing*

A growing body of research has examined the effects of an actor's vs. observer's visual perspective on memory, attribution, self-perception, and thinking style in the context of social event and action (e.g., Frank & Gilovich, 1989; Libby et al., 2009). This stream of research suggests that visual perspective has important implications for people's thoughts, feelings, and goals, and is integrally related to evaluative or self-evaluative processes. Specifically, different visual perspectives prompt consumers to attend to distinct information, rendering different aspects of the social target or event salient, which in turn affects people's emotions (Hung & Mukhopadhyay, 2012), interpretation of

actions (Libby & Eibach, 2002), and judgment and decision making (Jones & Nisbett, 1972).

This line of work in general contends that an actor's perspective encourages consumers to rely more on their internally driven states (Pronin & Ross, 2006). To explain, an actor's perspective has been found to encourage consumers to immerse themselves in an event as if to experience or re-experience the event (Valenti, Libby, & Eibach, 2011), hence orienting consumers toward the surroundings and situational factors in the consumption experience (Hung & Mukhopadhyay, 2012; Jones & Nisbett, 1972). Such immersion in an experience and attention to the situational circumstances have been found to trigger "more direct, and more readily available access to feelings that accompany their actions" (Pronin & Ross, 2006, p. 198). For example, an actor's perspective has been found to induce internally driven, hedonic feelings (e.g., joy or sorrow) but less externally-driven, other-oriented feelings (e.g., pride and guilt; Hung & Mukhopadhyay, 2012). Furthermore, this line of work has shown that an actor's perspective not only triggers more internally-oriented feelings and thoughts, but also renders a higher propensity of consumers to rely on these internal states. For example, McIssac and Eich (2004) show that asking people to recollect their past experiences using an actor's visual perspective renders their internal states surrounding those experiences more salient. Similarly, asking people to focus on their internal feelings when they recount past experiences triggers the adoption of an actor's visual perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983).

In contrast, an observer's perspective encourages consumers to rely more on externally-driven, other-oriented data (e.g., what do other people think of me?). To explain, an observer's perspective has been found to encourage consumers to scrutinize themselves in a scenario, as if they were watching a movie of themselves (Valenti et al., 2011). This enables consumers to focus on the actor (themselves) in the consumption experience as if they were an external observer (Hung & Mukhopadhyay, 2012; Jones & Nisbett, 1972), and allows them to assess themselves from the perspective of another person (Hung & Mukhopadhyay, 2012). Furthermore, as suggested by Hung and Mukhopadhyay (2012) and Pronin and Ross (2006), an observer's perspective also increases the reliance on the externally-triggered, other-oriented inferences (as opposed to internal knowledge). For example, when asked to imagine with an observer's perspective that they have to choose to study for an upcoming exam rather than attending a party, people are more likely to experience self-conscious, other-driven emotions (e.g., pride), instead of internally driven, hedonic feelings (e.g., sad).

Next we turn to the research on regulatory focus to reveal insights into how consumers' regulatory focus may influence the effectiveness of employing an actor's vs. observer's perspective in ads.

### *Regulatory visual perspective fit*

Regulatory focus theory suggests that consumer judgments, decisions, and behaviors can be motivated by two regulatory

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