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Regulatory Fit and Taste Perceptions



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One way we can increase the amount of fruits and vegetables individuals eat is by increasing enjoyment during the taste experience. Taste is a subjective experience that is not simply derived from the chemical composition of the food. A variety of situational factors can alter the taste experience. For example, the color and label information has been shown to change the perception of flavor in chocolate (Shankar, Levitan, Prescott, & Spence, 2009). If foods are perceived to taste better then it is likely that people would eat them. Psychological theories suggest ways that tastiness can be enhanced. Regulatory focus theory describes motivational orientations, namely promotion and prevention orientations that people take on during goal pursuit (Higgins, 1997). Promotion focus involves the desire for advancement, accomplishments, aspirations, and what can be gained by achieving a goal. It also deals with achieving ideals (i.e., what we want to do versus what we should do). Prevention orientation is concerned with protection, safety, responsibility, and what negative outcomes can be avoided from achieving a goal. It deals with what we ought to do versus what we want to do. When these orientations match aspects of the situation, regulatory fit occurs. For example, our methodology involved manipulating how a message was framed (i.e., either focused on the gains or the avoided losses that come along with eating a healthy food). Experiencing regulatory fit makes us “feel right” and this feeling may transfer to other judgments (e.g., how much a product is worth).

Our research tested whether regulatory fit can be applied to enhance the taste of foods. Using a mixed design, participants’ preexisting motivational orientations were measured and conditions of fit and non-fit were created by randomly assigning participants to either the gain or loss-framed message condition. Foods were then sampled and rated for enjoyment. The hypotheses we tested using regulatory foci as predictors of taste ratings, yielded nonsignificant

results. Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) and Behavioral Approach System (BAS) scores were collected in addition to prevention and promotion scores. Hypotheses were tested using the BIS/BAS scale because they are conceptually analogous to prevention and promotion, respectively. We did find evidence of a fit effect in the loss-framed condition. As we predicted, as BIS scores increased so did ratings of taste, but only in the loss-framed condition. We did not find evidence of a fit effect in the gain-framed condition. In other words, BAS scores did not relate to taste ratings. We did find partial support for our hypothesis. This research contributes to past research by demonstrating fit can be applied to influence sensory judgments, like how enjoyable food tastes. This has important implications for how to help people maintain healthy lifestyles. For example, if someone’s motivational orientation is known, situations can be framed to induce fit so that enjoyment of healthy foods increases. If healthy foods tasted good, people would eat them. This research highlights the importance of paying attention to individual differences and controlling aspects of the situation to create more positive outcomes.