Fitting Construal to Judgment:

The Compatibility Effect of Regulatory Focus and Level of Construal

Punam A. Keller  Angela Y. Lee & Brian Sternthal
Dartmouth College  Northwestern University

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Abstract

This research examines the relationship between regulatory focus and level of construal. Results from six studies show that those with a promotion focus are oriented toward construing information at a higher and more abstract level, whereas those with a prevention focus are oriented toward construing information at a lower, more concrete level (Studies 1 – 3). This fit between regulatory focus and construal level has a positive effect on judgment. Participants perceive greater value (Study 4) and have more favorable attitudes toward a target (Study 5) when it is described at a construal level that fits with their regulatory focus. Participants also exhibit a stronger preference for switching to an alternative when there is a fit between their regulatory focus, the merits of the alternative and the level of construal at which the merits are represented (Study 6).
People experience regulatory fit when their goal pursuit process is compatible with their regulatory focus (Higgins, 2000). According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), individuals with a promotion focus seek accomplishment and growth. They are more sensitive to gains and nongains than to losses and nonlosses. In contrast, individuals with a prevention focus seek security and safety, and are more sensitive to losses and nonlosses than to gains and nongains. Fit occurs when an eagerness means is employed in pursuit of a promotion goal and when a vigilance means is employed in pursuit of a prevention goal. Further, individuals who are promotion-focused experience greater fit when they are striving for gains than when they are guarding against nongains, because more eagerness is involved in the pursuit of a gain than a nongain. Similarly, individuals who are prevention-focused experience greater fit when they are guarding against losses than when they are striving for nonlosses, because more vigilance is involved in avoiding a loss than pursuing a nonloss (Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000).

Recent research indicates that regulatory fit influences a variety of outcomes. When individuals with a promotion focus engage in an eagerness means of goal pursuit or when those with a prevention focus adopt a vigilance means of goal pursuit, they perceive objects to have greater value (Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003), demonstrate superior task performance (Bianco, Higgins, & Klem, 2003), report more intense feelings and emotions (Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000), exhibit higher moral standards (Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003), and develop more favorable attitudes toward a target (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Lee & Aaker, 2004). These outcomes have been observed across different operationalizations of fit that include matching individuals’ regulatory focus with the way they make decisions (e.g., Higgins et al., 2003), or aligning their regulatory focus with the
concerns that are addressed in a persuasive message (e.g., Lee & Aaker, 2004).

The present research extends the analysis of fit between regulatory focus and the means of goal pursuit by examining the relationship between regulatory focus and level of construal, which is defined as the level of abstraction at which goal-directed actions are represented in the cognitive hierarchy (Trope & Liberman, 2003; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987). According to action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987), high-level construals are action identities that are abstract, superordinate and decontextualized. They focus on the desirability of an action by specifying *why* one would perform it. In contrast, low-level construals are action identities that are concrete, subordinate and contextualized. They focus on the feasibility of an action by specifying *how* one performs it. Thus, voting might be construed at a high level as supporting democracy (i.e., why one votes), or at a low level as marking a ballot (i.e., how one votes). Similarly, drinking coffee might be construed at a high level as getting energized, or at a low level as swallowing.

We propose that individuals have a tendency to construe actions at a level that is compatible with their regulatory focus: those with a promotion focus perceive high-level construals to be more compatible with their orientation than low-level construals, and the reverse is true for those with a prevention focus. Further, we propose that individuals are more persuaded by information construed at a level that fits with their regulatory goal than information that does not fit with their goal. Thus, people with a promotion focus are more likely to be persuaded by information construed at a high versus low level, and the reverse is true for those with a prevention focus. We refer to these predictions as the *fit from construal hypothesis*. 
Fit Between Regulatory Focus and Level of Construal

Although no studies have directly tested the hypothesis that there is a fit between promotion focus and high-level construals and between prevention focus and low-level construals, regulatory focus theory and attendant data offer a rationale for this prediction (Brendl & Higgins, 1996; Higgins, 2000). Regulatory focus theory posits that individuals’ goal orientation influences their tolerance for making different types of errors (e.g., Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000). Those with a prevention focus are oriented toward safety and security. In pursuit of this goal, they exhibit a vigilance strategy and are more inclined to guard against errors of commission than errors of omission (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002); that is, they are more willing to forego alternatives to limit the chances of making mistakes (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Levine et al., 2000). Concrete, low-level construals provide the information specificity needed to limit such errors; hence prevention-focused individuals are more oriented toward low-level construals. On the other hand, those with a promotion focus adopt an eagerness strategy in the pursuit of accomplishment and growth. This orientation prompts them to guard against errors of omission rather than errors of commission (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Levine et al., 2000); thus, they are more willing to entertain alternative possibilities to enhance their chances of goal attainment. Abstract, high-level construals provide such an opportunity; hence promotion-focused individuals are more oriented toward high-level construals. Consistent with this analysis, Liberman et al. (1999) speculate: “a prevention focus encourages the representation in a more concrete and detailed form because every component of the task can potentially thwart the goal of safety and security. In contrast, a promotion focus might
encourage a more abstract and general representation of a task because the goals of advancement and growth depend on finding any means of making progress (p. 1143).”

Support for the fit from construal hypothesis is found in cross-cultural research (Morris & Peng, 1994; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). Morris and Peng (1994), for example, found that participants from a collectivist culture, compared to those from an individualist culture, assigned a greater weight to low-level contextual factors than to high-level dispositional factors when they explained social events (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). When asked to describe themselves, participants from an individualist culture were also more likely to provide self-descriptions that were relatively abstract (e.g., kind, honest), whereas those from a collectivist culture used more concrete self-descriptions (e.g., brother, student; Trafimow et al., 1991). Given the finding that members of an individualist culture are likely to be promotion focused and members of a collectivist culture are likely to be prevention focused (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000), these results can be interpreted as evidence that there is a fit between promotion focus and high-level construals, and between prevention focus and low-level construals.

Freitas, Salovey and Liberman (2001; Study 1) also report findings that are consistent with the notion of a fit between regulatory focus and level of construal. Participants completed the Behavioral Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) as a means of measuring their chronic tendencies to construe actions in low- versus high-level terms. The BIF is a 25-item dichotomous response survey in which respondents may describe an action (e.g., reading) either in terms of a low-level (“following lines of print”) or high-level construal (“gaining knowledge”). Participants who were inclined to construe actions at a high versus a low level expressed more interest in bowling with someone who was described as possessing
better skills than they had. To the extent that preference for a partner with better skills reflects an eagerness orientation motivated by the goal of achieving gains, and preference for a weaker partner reflects vigilance and the attendant goal of limiting losses, these results support the view that promotion focus is related to high-level construals and prevention focus is related to low-level construals.

Credence for this interpretation is offered in other studies. In a follow-up study, Freitas et al. (2001, Study 2) observed a preference for a better partner when the event was in the distant future, but a weaker partner when the event was in the near future. Pennington and Roese (2003) reported a convergent outcome by varying regulatory focus directly rather than through the valence of the partner’s ability. They found that a promotion focus was associated with distant future events and prevention focus with near future events. When these findings are considered in the context of studies reporting that distant future events prompt high-level construals and near future events prompt low-level construals (for a review, see Trope & Liberman, 2003), they offer support for the prediction of a fit between regulatory focus and level of construal.

The Effects of Fit from Construal on Judgment

If a promotion focus is compatible with high-level construals and a prevention focus is compatible with low-level construals, as our analysis suggests, it would provide the basis for predicting that fit between regulatory focus and the level of construal has a positive effect on judgment. The hypothesis is that those with a promotion focus will have a more favorable attitude toward a target when information relating to the target is construed at a high level because it resonates with the eagerness strategy of guarding against errors of omission,
whereas those with a prevention focus will have a more favorable attitude toward the target when the information is construed at a low level that is congenial with the vigilance strategy of guarding against errors of commission.

Previous findings in the literature suggest that more favorable judgments emerge when promotion focus is matched with an eagerness rather than a vigilance strategy, and when prevention focus is matched with a vigilance as opposed to an eagerness strategy. For example, Higgins et al. (2003) found that participants assigned greater value to a coffee mug when they experienced regulatory fit (i.e., eagerness-promotion or vigilance-prevention) than when they experienced nonfit (i.e., eagerness-prevention or vigilance-promotion). Similarly, Avnet and Higgins (2003) showed that a reading lamp was perceived to have greater value when participants’ strategy for selecting the lamp, which entailed either eagerness (progressive elimination of alternatives) or vigilance (full comparison of alternatives), matched their self-regulatory tendency.

Research by Lee and her colleagues (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee et al., 2000) also demonstrates the effect of regulatory fit on judgments. In particular, participants prompted to adopt a promotion focus reported that gain-framed information was more important than loss-framed information, and the reverse was true for those with a prevention focus (Lee et al., 2000). In Lee & Aaker (2004), participants were more persuaded when the frame of the information fit with the regulatory focus of the message (i.e., promotion-gain frame, prevention-loss frame) than when it did not (i.e., promotion-loss frame, prevention-gain frame). To the extent that a gain frame is associated with an eagerness strategy and a loss frame is associated with a vigilance strategy, these findings provide further evidence in support of the fit from construal hypothesis on judgment.
Overview of the Research

The objective of the present research is to test the hypothesis that people experience fit when their regulatory focus matches the level at which information is construed. According to the fit from construal hypothesis, high-level construals are associated with an eagerness orientation and low-level construals are associated with a vigilance orientation. We assess these possibilities in two ways. First, we examine the relationship between regulatory focus and level of construal. Our prediction is that those with a promotion focus are oriented toward high-level construals, and those with a prevention focus are oriented toward low-level construals. In addition, we test the view that fit from construal influences judgment. We predict that people with a promotion focus will evaluate a target construed at a high versus low level more favorably and those with a prevention focus will evaluate the target construed at a low versus high level more favorably.

Six studies are presented to test these hypotheses. In Studies 1-3, we show that participants with a promotion focus are more likely to construe information at a high than at a low level compared to those with a prevention focus. We also demonstrate that participants perceive features construed at an abstract, high level to be more useful in advancing a promotion goal, and features construed at a concrete, low level to be more relevant in advancing a prevention goal (Study 4). In addition, we find that when a target is construed at a level that fits with participants’ regulatory focus, a more favorable attitude toward the target emerges (Study 5). Finally, we observe that participants’ propensity to switch to an alternative (rather than stay with an initial option) is enhanced when their regulatory focus is compatible with the merits presented to motivate switching as well as with the level of construal at which these merits are represented (Study 6).
Study 1: The Effect of Regulatory Focus on BIF

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that individuals with a promotion focus are oriented toward conceptualizing information at a higher level of construal than those with a prevention focus. We operationalized regulatory focus by priming participants with information that emphasizes gains or losses (Lee et al., 2000, Study 1), and assessed their tendency to construe information at a high- versus low-level using the 25-item Behavioral Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989).

Method

Participants and procedure. Thirty-five undergraduate students from Northwestern University (mean age = 20, 19 women) participated in the study for $5. They were randomly assigned to the two regulatory focus conditions.

To prime regulatory focus, all participants were presented with the following scenario: “Imagine you are playing in a game show and so far you have claimed $1200 in prizes. You have just played the fourth round and lost. Now the game show host presents you with two options.” About half of the participants were then exposed to promotion-focused information emphasizing potential gains, “If you pick Alternative A, you will keep $400 worth of the prizes. If you pick Alternative B, there is a 2/3 probability that you will not win any of the $1200 worth of prizes and a 1/3 probability that you will win all $1200 worth of prizes.” The remaining participants were exposed to prevention-focused information emphasizing potential losses, “If you pick Alternative A, you will have to give up $800 worth of prizes. If you pick Alternative B, there is a 2/3 probability that you will lose all $1200 worth of prizes, and a 1/3 probability that you will not lose any of the $1200 worth of prizes.” All participants then rated the situation described in the scenario on a two-item 7-point scale (1 = very bad, unfavorable,
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7 = very good, favorable), completed the 25-item BIF questionnaire and responded to some demographic measures and filler items.

Results

The results of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the favorableness rating ($r = .85$) for the game show scenario indicated that the effect of regulatory focus was marginally significant, $F(1, 34) = 3.63, p = .06$. Participants considered the scenario that emphasized potential gains to be more favorable ($M = 4.56$) than the one that emphasized potential losses ($M = 3.82$). This suggests that participants apprehended the difference in the valence of the two scenarios.

The effect of the prime on participants’ BIF scores was examined next. Coding of participants’ responses on the BIF questionnaire was binary (high-level construal = 1, low-level construal = 0), and each participant’s responses across the 25 items were summed to provide a BIF score. The results of a one-way ANOVA indicated that the effect of regulatory focus was significant, $F(1, 34) = 7.49, p = .01$. As predicted, promotion-focused participants who were primed with the gain scenario ($M = 15.13$) were more likely to construe the behaviors at a high level than prevention-focused participants who were primed with the loss scenario ($M = 11.37$).

Study 2: The Effect of Regulatory Focus on Selective Elaboration

The results of Study 1 suggest that those with a promotion focus are more likely to represent actions as high-level construals than those with a prevention focus. In Study 2, we further test this hypothesis by examining the extent to which those with a promotion versus prevention focus elaborate on information construed at a high versus low level. Participants
were presented with both high-level construal information that focuses on the why aspects of certain behaviors (i.e., why they exercise) and low-level construal information that focuses on the how aspects of these behaviors (i.e., how to exercise using a treadmill). To ensure that the fit effect is not influenced by the content of the information other than its level of construal, we held the regulatory focus of the information constant by including both promotion concerns for achievement (building stamina) and prevention concerns about safety (preventing cardiovascular disease) in the high-level construal description. Along the same lines, the low-level construal description addressed both promotion (a popular machine because it is easy to use) and prevention concerns (sets the pace so you’re more likely to finish) of exercising with a treadmill. Participants were asked to indicate whether they thought more about the goals of exercising (i.e., high-level information pertaining to why one exercises) or the benefits of the exercise machine (i.e., low-level information on how the machine works) while reading the message. The prediction is that, in relation to those primed with a prevention focus, participants primed with a promotion focus would indicate that their thoughts were more about the goals of exercising (high-level construal) than about the benefits of the exercise machine (low-level construal).

Method

Participants and procedure. Thirty-seven graduate students from Cornell University (mean age = 29, 19 women) participated in the study. They were given the cover story that their task was to evaluate certain ideas that might be incorporated in some advertising campaigns. They were randomly assigned to either the promotion or prevention-focus condition.

To prime regulatory focus, participants were first presented with information that
emphasized either gains or losses (Lee et al., 2000, Study 2). This entailed asking them to imagine that they were playing in a tennis tournament and had made it to the finals. Those in the promotion focus condition read, “If you win this last match, you will win the championship title as well as the huge trophy.” The remaining participants who were in the prevention focus condition read, “If you lose this last match, you will lose the championship title as well as the huge trophy.” They were then asked to rate the favorableness of the situation on a 7-point scale (1 = very unfavorable, 7 = very favorable).

Next, participants were presented with the target stimuli. They were asked to imagine the following: “With the winter months finally over, you have been thinking about going to the gym more regularly. You’d like to start exercising again.” They then read the high-level construal description: “Exercising is good for building stamina and achieving cardiovascular training. It will help you get into shape, and prevent cardiovascular disease. You do want to be healthy. Besides, it’s a good idea to get back into shape before summer comes.” This is followed by the low-level construal description: “The treadmill is a very popular machine because it is easy to use. It sets the pace for you so you’re more likely to finish the routine once you get started. And it helps you burn 650 calories an hour, more than any other type of exercise machine.”

Participants were then asked to indicate on a 7-point scale whether they thought more about information construed at the high- or low-level while reading the scenario (1 = I thought more about why I should exercise than the benefits of the treadmill, 7 = I thought more about the benefits of the treadmill than why I should exercise). They also responded to some demographic measures.

Results
Participants presented with the win-framed tennis tournament scenario considered the scenario to be more favorable ($M = 6.34$) than those presented with the lose-framed scenario ($M = 5.62$), $F(1, 35) = 4.10, p < .05$. This suggests that participants were sensitive to the regulatory focus manipulation.

More central to our hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA showed that the effect of regulatory focus was significant, $F(1, 35) = 4.58, p < .05$. Those primed with a promotion focus reported thinking more about the high-level than the low-level construal information ($M = 2.56$) in relation to those primed with a prevention focus ($M = 3.84$). These results offer further evidence that regulatory focus orients people toward information construed at particular levels.

**Study 3: The Effect of Regulatory Focus on Categorization**

In Study 3, we used yet another approach to test the hypothesis that people with a promotion focus instantiate more abstract representations that are construed at a higher level, whereas those with a prevention focus activate more concrete representations that are construed at a lower level. We primed regulatory focus by asking participants either to write about their hopes and aspirations (promotion focus) or to write about their duties and responsibilities (prevention focus; Freitas & Higgins, 2002). Participants then classified objects into categories (Liberman et al., 2002). This task is based on the premise that abstract categories are more inclusive, as fewer details about the kinds of objects that hold membership are specified; hence those who construe information at a high level would need fewer categories to classify the objects in relation to those who construe information at a low level. The fit from construal hypothesis predicts that promotion-focused participants who
have more abstract representations would use fewer categories when classifying objects in relation to those with a prevention focus.

**Method**

*Participants and procedure.* Fourteen staff members from Northwestern University (mean age = 32, 11 women) participated in the study in exchange for a $2.50 coupon that they could use at the cafeteria as well as a chance to win a bottle of champagne. Participants were randomly assigned to the two regulatory focus conditions. Those in the promotion focus condition were asked to think about their hopes, aspirations, and dreams, and to list a few of them, whereas those in the prevention focus condition were asked to think about and list a few of their duties, obligations, and responsibilities. Next, all respondents indicated what was more important for them to do on a 7-point scale (1 = *something I ought to*, 7 = *something I want to*).

Participants then performed two classification tasks (Liberman et al., 2002). First, they were asked to classify objects that they would take with them on a camping trip. They were given the following instruction: “Imagine that you are going with your family on a camping trip and you’re thinking about what to bring. Take a look at the following items and place them into groups by writing the items that belong together, and then circling the items that belong in the same group. Please make sure to include every item, even if you would not use it in reality. Also, please do not overlap; that is, place each item in only one group.” The items were: brush, tent, matches, camera, soap, gloves, bathing suit, shovel, fishing pole, hat, snorkel, shirts, sweater, sneakers, coat, raft, dog, boots, marshmallows, socks, blanket, flashlight, pants, sunglasses, rifle, shoes, cigarettes, rope, hot dogs, canteen, toothbrush, underwear, beer, sleeping bag, pillow, insect repellant, potato chips, and ax.
In the second categorization task, respondents were asked to image that they were helping to organize a yard sale and to classify objects for the yard sale: chairs, roller blades, sweaters, crib, candy dish, fish tank, board games, blender, bikes, coats, dumbbells, infant clothes, books, coffee maker, puzzles, plates, CDs, toaster, toys, cutlery, shoes, skis, chess set, bird cage, ties, baseball cards, picture frames, juicer, ceramic figurines, glassware, boots, dolls, clock, records, T-shirts, lamps, skateboards, and paint brushes. After completing this task, they responded to some demographic questions.

Results and Discussion

Participants who wrote about their hopes and aspirations indicated that it was more important for them to do what they wanted to \( (M = 4.00) \) rather than what they ought to as compared to those who wrote about their duties and obligations \( (M = 2.50) \), \( F(1, 12) = 3.63, p = .08 \). This suggests that the regulatory focus manipulation was successful.

The number of categories that participants used to classify the objects in each of the two scenarios was coded as the dependent measure. The results of a 2 (regulatory focus) \( \times 2 \) (categorization task) repeated measures ANOVA with task being a within-participant factor indicated that the main effect of task was not significant, \( F(1, 12) = 1.38, p > .20 \). There was no difference between the number of categories that participants used to classify the objects in the camping \( (M = 6.21) \) versus the yard sale scenario \( (M = 6.86) \). The interaction was also not significant, \( F < 1 \). More central to our hypothesis, participants with a promotion focus \( (M = 11.00) \) used fewer categories than those with a prevention focus \( (M =15.83) \), \( F(1, 12) = 9.35, p = .01 \). A multivariate analysis conducted on the two scenarios showed that participants primed with a prevention focus \( (M = 7.50) \) used more categories to classify objects in the camping scenario than those primed with a promotion focus \( (M = 5.25) \), \( F(1, 12) = 6.31, p < \)
.05; they also used more categories to classify objects in the yard sale scenario \((M = 8.33)\) relative to those with a promotion focus \((M = 5.75)\), \(F(1, 12) = 6.12, p < .05\).

The result of this study provides convergent evidence that promotion focus prompts a higher and more abstract level of construal than does a prevention focus. Because a higher level of construal enhances the perception of commonalities among objects, promotion-focused participants who were more likely to construe information at a high level used fewer categories to classify objects than their prevention-focused counterparts.\(^1\)

**Discussion of Studies 1 - 3**

The results of three studies support our hypothesis that those with a promotion focus are more likely to construe information at a high rather than low level of abstraction, and the reverse is true for those with a prevention focus. Across three different operationalizations of regulatory focus (game show scenario emphasizing gains versus losses in Study 1, a potential win or loss in a tennis tournament in Study 2, and thoughts about hopes and aspirations versus duties and obligations in Study 3) and three different assessments of level of construal (the BIF in Study 1, a self-report of whether “thoughts were focused on high or low-level construals” in Study 2, and a category classification task in Study 3), these results present convergent evidence that promotion and prevention foci are associated with different levels of construal.

The finding that a promotion focus is compatible with high-level construals and a prevention focus is compatible with low-level construals offers a starting point for predicting the compatibility effects of regulatory focus and level of construal on judgments. Recent research suggests that fit enhances value (e.g., Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Lee & Aaker,
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2004). It follows that judgments will be more favorable when information is construed at a level that fits with the individual’s regulatory focus. We test this hypothesis in three studies. In Study 4, we assess whether fit from construal increases perceived usefulness of product features. In Study 5, we examine the effect of fit from construal on participants’ attitude toward a product. And, in Study 6, we extend Liberman et al.’s (1999) findings that a promotion focus stimulates change by examining the effect of fit from construal on participants’ preference for stability versus change. The prediction is that both promotion- and prevention-focused respondents will be persuaded to switch to a different alternative when information about the alternative fits with their regulatory goal.

Study 4: The Effect of Fit From Construal on Perceived Value

In this study, we examined the fit between regulatory focus and level of construal on the perceived value of product features. According to action identification theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), high-level construals address desirability concerns and indicate why an action is performed, whereas low-level construals address feasibility concerns and indicate how the action is performed. The fit from construal hypothesis predicts that product features construed at a high level (i.e., those that address desirability issues) should be considered more useful in the pursuit of a promotion goal, and those features construed at a low level (i.e., those that address feasibility issues) should be more useful in the pursuit of a prevention goal. To test these predictions, feature descriptions of a digital camera were categorized as high- or low-level construals depending on whether the descriptors were more about why one would take pictures (i.e., high-level construal) or about how the camera works (i.e., low-level construal). The effect of fit is determined by the
extent to which participants thought features construed at a high- versus low-level would help them achieve something they want (i.e., a promotion goal) or help them prevent something they do not want (i.e., a prevention goal).

Method

Participants and procedure. Fifty-seven undergraduate students from Northwestern University (mean age = 20.5, 40 women) were recruited to participate in a study on consumer insights and social perceptions. They were informed that the task would involve reviewing descriptions of different products and evaluating the products. Participants were told that there were no right or wrong answers and that their responses would be confidential. They were paid $10 for their participation in the study.

Participants were first presented with six product feature descriptions relating to a camera. Three of these were designed to be high-level construals that address why one would use a camera (capture the moment, share the moments, capture the unexpected), and three were designed to be low-level construals that address how the camera works (just point and shoot, can be held in one hand, always ready). Participants were asked to indicate whether each descriptor prompted them to think about “the camera” or about “me and my goals” by marking an “X” in the appropriate box. Participants were then asked to evaluate each feature in terms of how useful it is in the pursuit of a promotion goal (“helps achieve something I want”) and a prevention goal (“helps prevent something I don’t want”) using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much so). Finally, participants responded to some additional questions including demographic information.

Results and Discussion
First, ratings of the camera descriptors in terms of whether they prompted more thoughts about the camera or about the goals of the participants were examined. As predicted, participants indicated that the high-level construal features were more likely to prompt them to think about themselves and their goals versus the camera (85.9% vs. 14.1%) relative to the low-level construal features (37.4% vs. 62.6%; $t(57) = 8.57, p < .001$). These results suggest that the level of construal manipulation was successful in that the high-level features were indeed perceived to address why one would use a camera, whereas the low-level features were perceived to relate more to how the camera works.

The fit from construal hypothesis predicts that features construed at a high level should be considered more useful in pursuing a promotion goal than features construed at a low level, and features construed at a low level should be considered more useful in pursuing a prevention goal than features construed at a high level. To test this hypothesis, we created four Usefulness Indices by averaging the promotion and prevention goal attainment ratings across the three high-level and three low-level features: High-Level Promotion Goal Attainment Usefulness Index ($\alpha = .74$), Low-Level Promotion Goal Attainment Usefulness Index ($\alpha = .82$), High-Level Prevention Goal Attainment Usefulness Index ($\alpha = .73$), and Low-Level Prevention Goal Attainment Usefulness Index ($\alpha = .73$). A 2 (regulatory focus: promotion, prevention) $\times$ 2 (level of construal: high, low) repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted with both level of construal and regulatory focus being within-participant factors.

The results indicated that the main effect of construal level was not significant ($F < 1$). However, the main effect of regulatory focus was significant, $F(1, 56) = 72.83, p < .001$. Participants rated the features in general to be more useful for achieving something they wanted ($M = 5.19$) than for preventing something they did not want ($M = 3.77$). More central
to our fit from construal hypothesis, the Regulatory Focus × Level of Construal interaction was significant, $F(1, 56) = 60.20, p < .001$ (see Figure 1). The results of two planned contrasts indicated that participants rated the high-level features ($M = 5.65$) as more useful for attaining a promotion goal than the low-level features ($M = 4.73$), $F(1, 56) = 20.96, p < .001$. In contrast, the low-level features ($M = 4.15$) were more useful for prevention goal pursuit than the high-level features ($M = 3.40$), $F(1, 56) = 16.80, p < .001$.

The results of this study support the premise that there is a fit between regulatory focus and level of construal. In particular, features that address the low-level how aspects of the product (i.e., feasibility issues) are viewed as more useful in advancing a prevention goal than are features addressing the high-level why aspects of the product (i.e., desirability issues). In contrast, features that address desirability issues are perceived as more useful in the pursuit of a promotion goal than those that address feasibility issues.

Study 5: The Effect of Fit from Construal on Attitudes

The results of Study 4 provide evidence that fit from construal enhances perceived value. In Study 5, we extend this analysis to assess whether fit from construal prompts more favorable attitudes. For this purpose, we varied regulatory focus and the construal level of information presented about a fictitious brand that participants subsequently evaluated. Our prediction is that a promotion focus would prompt more favorable attitudes toward the brand that was described in terms of high- versus low-level construals, whereas a prevention focus
would result in more favorable attitudes when the brand was described in terms of low-level construals.

Method

Participants and procedure. Seventy-seven undergraduate students at Dartmouth College (mean age = 21, 41 women) were recruited to participate in this study. Participants were told that the experimenter was interested in understanding how they felt about certain issues. They were assured that their responses would be kept confidential, in the hope that they would provide their honest opinions. Similar to Study 3, participants in the promotion focus condition were asked to think about and then list a few of their hopes, aspirations, and dreams, and those in the prevention focus condition were asked to think about and list a few of their duties, obligations, and responsibilities (Freitas & Higgins, 2002). Then they indicated what they felt like doing on a 7-point scale (1 = do what is right, 7 = do whatever I want).

Next, in a seemingly unrelated study, participants were asked to give their opinion about one of two advertising concepts that might be used for a product launch. Two ads for a fictitious brand of elliptical trainer (Samsa) reflecting different levels of construal were created based on the results of a pretest using participants from the same subject pool. The high-level construal ad was designed to address the why aspects of exercising. It presented the headline, “The Ultimate Aerobic Machine for a Great Workout!” and featured two benefits that addressed high-level concerns (“gives your body complete conditioning while you achieve cardiovascular training” and “ensures that you get buff”). The low-level construal ad was designed to address the how aspects of exercising. Its headline read, “The Ultimate Aerobic Machine with the Right Features!” The ad also described two benefits that addressed low-level concerns (“no-impact stepper designed to cushion each step” and “multiple incline
setting complements the precise, patented geometry of the stride”). Both ads showed a picture of the elliptical trainer, and closed with “Samsa ~ in a class all its own!” All participants then indicated the extent to which the elliptical trainer met their needs (1 = does not meet my needs right now, 7 = meets my needs right now) and responded to some additional measures including demographic information.

Results and Discussion

Participants who were primed with a promotion focus were more inclined to indicate that they felt like doing what they wanted than what was right ($M = 4.19$) as compared to those primed with a prevention focus ($M = 3.02$), $F(1, 73) = 6.60, p = .01$. This outcome suggests that the regulatory focus manipulation was successful.

A 2 (regulatory focus) $\times$ 2 (level of construal) ANOVA was conducted to examine how participants evaluated the elliptical trainer when the ad was construed at a level that is either compatible or incompatible with their regulatory focus. The main effect of regulatory focus was not significant, $F < 1$. However, the main effect of construal level was significant, $F(1,73) = 5.53, p = .02$. Participants thought that the elliptical trainer described in the low-level construal ad ($M = 4.45$) was better at meeting their needs than the one described in the high-level construal ad ($M = 3.46$). Central to the fit from construal hypothesis, the Regulatory Focus $\times$ Level of Construal interaction was significant, $F(1, 73) = 18.22, p < .01$ (see Figure 2). Planned contrasts indicated that participants in the promotion focus condition thought the elliptical trainer described in the high-level construal ad ($M = 4.25$) would better meet their needs than the one described in the low-level construal ad ($M = 3.44$), although the difference was not statistically reliable, $t(73) = 1.43, p = .16$. In contrast, participants in the prevention focus condition thought the elliptical trainer described in the low-level construal
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ad ($M = 5.45$) could meet their needs better than the one described in the high-level construal ad ($M = 2.67$), $t(73) = 4.48, p < .001$.

Study 6: The Fit from Construal Effects on Stability and Change

The results of Studies 4 and 5 provide convergent evidence in support of the effect of fit from construal on persuasion. Study 4 showed that participants evaluated camera features in the fit conditions to be more useful for goal pursuit than those in the nonfit conditions. Study 5 showed that participants evaluated the elliptical cross trainer more favorably when it was described at a level that fit with their regulatory focus. In Study 6, we provide a further test of the fit from construal hypothesis by examining individuals’ preferences for stability and change.

Recent research by Liberman et al. (1999) offers a starting point for this analysis. Participants in their study were interrupted from the task of describing abstract figures. Later, they were asked to resume the task either by describing the same figure or by describing a new figure. Those with a promotion focus exhibited a tendency to start a new figure, a strategy that fits with their promotion orientation of guarding against errors of omission. In contrast, those with a prevention focus were more likely to return to the interrupted description. This preference for stability is in keeping with their goal of safety by minimizing errors of commission (Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998); that is, staying with an alternative with which they had prior experience might have been perceived as less likely to result in failure compared to starting anew with an unknown figure. Nevertheless, it is plausible that prevention-focused individuals would exhibit change if they were presented information that
fit with their regulatory focus. Extending the regulatory fit hypothesis to include fit from construal, we argue that those with a prevention focus should be more willing to change if the reasons for change are perceived to help achieve safety and security, and are construed at a low level. In contrast, reasons for change that promise advancement and are construed at a high level should stimulate change for those with a promotion focus.

To test these hypotheses, we presented respondents with a message that described the virtues of switching from a treadmill to an elliptical trainer as a means of exercising. Regulatory focus was operationalized by priming participants with information that emphasized gains or losses. Fit with regulatory focus was varied in two ways: the construal level of the information relating to the elliptical trainer, and the merits of changing to an elliptical trainer. Level of construal was manipulated by providing participants with information pertaining to why people exercise with an elliptical trainer (high-level construal) and how people use an elliptical trainer to exercise (low-level construal). The regulatory focus of the merits of changing to an elliptical trainer was manipulated by presenting participants with information about the elliptical trainer that fits with either a promotion goal of achievement (e.g., build stamina), or a prevention goal of safety (e.g., prevent loss of stamina). This manipulation enabled an assessment of whether the presence and absence of content consistent with regulatory focus would influence individuals’ switching behavior. Thus, a 2 (regulatory focus) × 2 (high-level merit) × 2 (low-level merit) full factorial design was used.

We predict a stronger preference for the elliptical trainer when there was a fit between regulatory focus, level of construal and the merit presented than when such a fit is absent. Specifically, those with a promotion focus will indicate a stronger preference for the elliptical
trainers when the merit of this alternative fits with their promotion goal of advancement and is
construed at a high level. By contrast, those with a prevention focus will have a stronger
preference for the elliptical trainer when the merit fits with their prevention goal of safety and
is construed at a low level. Thus, a significant three-way interaction would lend support to
these predictions.

Method

Participants and procedure. One hundred twenty-five undergraduate students from
Northwestern University (mean age = 19.5, 40 women) were recruited on the basis that they
exercised at least occasionally. They were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental
conditions.

Regulatory focus was primed using the same tennis tournament scenario manipulation
as that employed in Study 2. Participants were presented with information that emphasized
either potential gains or losses, which they rated on a two-item 7-point scale (1 = very bad,
unfavorable, 7 = very good, favorable). Respondents then participated in a seemingly
unrelated study. They were provided with a brief description of the treadmill and were asked
to imagine that they had been exercising on the treadmill for 30 minutes, three times per week
during the past month. An elliptical cross trainer that had recently been purchased by the gym
was then presented as an alternative to the treadmill. The high-level construal was introduced
at this point. Participants in the high-level promotion merit condition read, “Many people use
the elliptical cross trainer to build stamina and to achieve cardiovascular training. The goal is
to get in shape and to be fit”; whereas participants assigned to the high-level prevention merit
condition read, “Many people use the elliptical cross trainer to prevent loss of stamina and to
reduce the chances of cardiovascular disease. The goal is to avoid being out of shape and unhealthy."

All respondents then received a low-level construal description of the elliptical trainer. Those in the low-level promotion merit condition read, “The elliptical cross trainer allows people to work their arms and legs at the same time, thus prompting them to assume an erect posture that enhances the effectiveness with which the muscles are exercised. And because different muscles are engaged when exercising with the cross trainer, your entire body becomes fit”. Those in the low-level prevention merit condition read, “The elliptical cross trainer allows you to move your feet in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction so that you can strengthen different leg muscles. Balancing the workload among different muscle groups reduces the chances of developing pain in the shins and knees that often require people to stop exercising for several weeks.”

All participants were then asked to indicate on a 7-point scale the likelihood that they would switch from the treadmill to the elliptical cross trainer (1 = Not at all likely, 7 = very likely). Participants provided demographic information and indicated the extent to which they exercised.

Results and Discussion

The adequacy of the manipulation was examined first. Respondents presented with the gain-framed scenario considered the scenario to be more favorable (M = 4.42) than those presented with the lose-framed scenario (M = 3.77), F(1, 116) = 7.15, p < .01. This suggests that participants were sensitive to the manipulation of regulatory focus.

Next, we examined the effect of fit from construal on participants’ preference for change. Our prediction is that those with a promotion focus will be more persuaded when the
high-level merit of the elliptical trainer addresses promotion concerns relating to advancement than when it addresses prevention concerns relating to safety. Whether the low-level merit is promotion- or prevention-focused should be inconsequential. In contrast, those with a prevention focus will be more willing to switch when the low-level merit addresses prevention rather than promotion concerns, whereas the nature of the high-level merit should not matter. Thus, we expect a significant high-level merit effect in the promotion focus condition, and a significant low-level merit effect in the prevention focus condition. That is, a significant three-way interaction is predicted.

Participants’ willingness to switch was analyzed using a 2 (regulatory focus) × 2 (high-level merit) × 2 (low-level merit) ANOVA. The results showed that the main effect of regulatory focus was significant, $F(1, 117) = 3.70, p = .05$. Those primed with a promotion focus ($M = 5.49$) were more likely to switch to the elliptical cross trainer than those primed with a prevention focus ($M = 5.03$), replicating Liberman et al.’s (1999) findings that those with a promotion focus prefer change. Also consistent with the notion that promotion focus is compatible with high-level construals and prevention focus is compatible with low-level construals, the main effect of high-level merit was marginally significant, $F(1, 117) = 2.88, p = .09$, and the main effect of low-level merit approached significance, $F(1, 117) = 2.53, p = .11$. Participants were more persuaded when the high-level reasons why people exercise with an elliptical cross trainer addressed promotion concerns ($M = 5.53$) than when they addressed prevention concerns ($M = 5.09$). Participants were also more inclined to switch when the low-level information about the elliptical trainer was prevention-focused ($M = 5.42$) than when it was promotion-focused ($M = 5.07$). Concordant with the fit from construal hypothesis, the Regulatory Focus × Low-level Merit interaction was significant, $F(1, 117) = 17.06, p < .001$. 
Participants primed with a prevention focus were more likely to switch when they were presented with low-level information that addresses prevention concerns than promotion concerns ($M = 5.72$ vs. $4.20$), $t(117) = 3.99$, $p = .0001$. In contrast, promotion-focused participants were more likely to switch when they were presented with low-level promotion-focused information ($M = 5.90$) than with low-level prevention-focused information ($M = 5.04$), $t(117) = 2.14$, $p = .03$. The results also showed a marginally significant High-level Merit $\times$ Low-level Merit interaction, $F(1, 117) = 2.96$, $p = .09$. When participants were presented with high-level promotion information, low-level prevention-focused information ($M = 6.00$) prompted more switching than low-level promotion-focused information ($M = 5.09$), $t(117) = 1.98$, $p = .05$. However, when participants were presented with high-level prevention information, whether the low-level information was promotion-focused ($M = 5.05$) or prevention-focused ($5.12$) did not make a difference, $t < 1$. Neither the Regulatory Focus $\times$ High-level Merit interaction, $F(1, 117) = 1.15$, $p > .20$, nor the three-way interaction was significant, $F < 1$.

Although the predicted three-way interaction was not significant, we conducted separate 2 (high-level merit) $\times$ 2 (low-level merit) ANOVAs for each of the two regulatory focus conditions to provide a more direct test of the fit from construal hypothesis (see Figures 3A and 3B). For participants primed with a promotion focus, the results of a 2 $\times$ 2 ANOVA showed that the predicted main effect of high-level merit was significant, $F(1,55) = 4.63$, $p < .05$. These participants were more likely to switch when the high-level reasons for exercising with an elliptical cross trainer emphasized promotion concerns ($M = 5.96$) than when they emphasized prevention concerns ($M = 5.19$). The main effect of low-level merit was also significant, $F(1,55) = 3.90$, $p = .05$. Participants were more likely to switch when the low-
level information was compatible with their promotion focus \((M = 5.90)\) than when it was incompatible \((M = 5.04)\). These two main effects were qualified by a marginal two-way interaction, \(F(1,55) = 2.99, p = .09\). Contrasts showed that when the high-level merit was compatible with participants’ promotion focus. Whether the low-level merit addressed promotion \((M = 6.00)\) or prevention concerns \((M = 5.91)\) had no effect, \(t < 1\). When the high-level merit was compatible with a prevention focus, these promotion-focused participants were more willing to switch when the low-level merit addressed promotion concerns \((M = 5.84)\) than when it addressed prevention concerns \((M = 4.47)\), \(t(55) = 2.14, p < .02\).

For those participants primed with a prevention focus, the results of a 2 (high-level merit) \(\times\) 2 (low-level merit) ANOVA indicated a single main effect of low-level merit, \(F(1,62) = 14.30, p < .001\). As predicted, these participants were more likely to switch when they were presented with low-level information that was compatible with their regulatory goal \((M = 5.72)\) than when it was incompatible \((M = 4.20)\), regardless of whether the high-level reasons for exercising were promotion-focused or prevention-focused. No other effects were significant, \(F_s < 1\).

The results of this study indicated that participants with a promotion focus were more likely to switch to the elliptical cross trainer than those with a prevention focus. This finding provides further evidence that the two regulatory foci are associated with different strategies, and that promotion focus prompts greater change (Liberman et al., 1999). More importantly, results showing that high-level information was more persuasive when it addressed promotion versus prevention concerns, and the reverse being true of low-level information are consistent
with the fit from construal hypothesis. As predicted by the fit from construal hypothesis, promotion-focused participants exhibited more positive behavioral intentions toward the elliptical cross trainer when the high-level information was compatible with their regulatory focus, even though the low-level information was incompatible with their goal. In contrast, prevention-focused participants were more persuaded when the low-level information was compatible versus incompatible with their prevention concerns, even though the high-level information was incompatible with their prevention focus. Further, they were reluctant to switch when the low-level information addressed promotion concerns, even though the high-level information was compatible with their prevention goal. We note with interest that the predicted three-way interaction was not observed because promotion-focused participants were also more willing to switch when they were presented with low-level information that was compatible with their regulatory focus, even though the high-level information was incompatible with their regulatory focus. We elaborate on this issue below.

General Discussion

The present research offers support for the view that people with a promotion focus are likely to construe information at a higher level of representation than people with a prevention focus. Using multiple operationalizations of regulatory focus and different means of assessing levels of construal across three studies, we present convergent evidence that distinct regulatory focus is associated with different levels of construal. Consistent with the notion that an orientation that guards against errors of omission is compatible with a more abstract and general representation of information, and an orientation that guards against errors of commission is compatible with a more concrete representation of information.
(Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Levine et al., 2000), the results of these studies provide evidence that promotion focus encourages the construal of information at a high level whereas prevention focus encourages the construal of information at a low level.

As demonstrated by the results from Studies 4 – 6, people form more positive attitudes when they experience fit from construal; that is, they make more favorable judgments when information presented to them is construed at a level that is compatible with their regulatory focus. In Study 4, participants rated high-level features of the camera as more useful than low-level features in helping them achieve a promotion goal. By contrast, they rated low-level features as more useful in helping them achieve a prevention goal. We also observed more positive attitudes toward an advertised product when participants’ regulatory focus was compatible with the product’s level of construal as described in the ad (Study 5). Participants with a prevention focus evaluated the product more favorably when the ad emphasized low-level product features than when the ad emphasized high-level features. However, the reverse was observed for participants with a promotion focus. These results demonstrating the effect of fit from construal on judgment are consistent with recent findings that report the transfer of regulatory fit to values of objects (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Higgins et al., 2003; Lee & Aaker, 2004). Finally, we found that regulatory-construal fit led to higher likelihood of switching (Study 6). Switching to an alternative was more likely when those with a promotion focus were given high-level merits for switching that are compatible with their promotion goal, even when low-level merits are incompatible with their focus. Preference for change was also stronger when those with a prevention focus were presented with low-level merits for switching that are compatible with their regulatory goal, even when high-level merits are incompatible. Participants were also more persuaded when high-level
merits address promotion rather than prevention concerns, and when low-level merits address prevention rather than promotion concerns.

Our findings showing an effect of fit from construal on preference for stability or change are informative in the context of Liberman et al.’s (1999) proposition that preference for change is more likely when its merits are consistent with regulatory focus than when they are not. Although Liberman et al. (1999) found that promotion focus induces more change than prevention focus, they suggest that the merits for change in their stimuli might have been more promotion oriented and caution that “describing the merits of change in prevention terms of safety and security…should sway individuals in a prevention focus toward choosing change but should have less effect on individuals in a promotion focus” (p. 1144). Our findings further qualify this caveat: those with a prevention focus will embrace change only if the merits for the alternative address prevention concerns and are construed at a low level.

It is interesting to note that whereas prevention-focused participants were persuaded only by low-level construals that are compatible with their regulatory goal, as consistent with the regulatory-construal fit hypothesis, promotion-focused participants were persuaded by both high- and low-level construals that are compatible with their regulatory goal, even though their regulatory focus would have prompted them to pay more attention to high-level construals. This raises the intriguing possibility that the regulatory-construal fit effect may be asymmetrical between those with a promotion and prevention focus.

One plausible explanation for this outcome is the inherent inclination of those with a promotion focus to adopt alternative strategies as a means of avoiding errors of omission. Thus, promotion-focused participants were more readily persuaded to switch. Further, presenting a low-level construal may also allow an inference about a higher-level construal
for those whose cognitive orientation is more abstract and broad and about why an action is performed. Along these lines, information that the exercise machine prevents injuries may have been used by those with a promotion focus to infer that it would result in less down time and more stamina building. In contrast, for those with a prevention focus whose cognitive orientation is more concrete and narrow, only low-level construals are likely to be persuasive because it is difficult to deduce whether a high-level construal provides the assurance of avoiding mistakes and achieving safety. For example, telling participants that an exercise machine allows one to build stamina is not a basis for inferring whether or not it will prevent injury to the knees. Hence an asymmetric pattern of the regulatory-construal fit effect on judgment is observed.

In summary, our studies suggest that compatibility is not simply a matter of congruity between one’s regulatory focus and information regarding the alternative. The level of construal at which information is instantiated also influences compatibility, and in turn affects the judgments rendered. When exposed to messages containing both high- and low-level information, individuals with a promotion focus elaborate more on high-level information that deals with desirability issues, whereas those with a prevention focus elaborate more on low-level information that addresses feasibility issues. This fit from construal effect on information processing is evidenced in the self-reported data reported in Study 2, and in participants’ preference for switching in Study 6. The implication is that selective elaboration of information in fit versus nonfit condition may render the information more fluent and in turn lead to more favorable attitudes. The notion that persuasion is driven by enhanced fluency is consistent with recent research investigating the mechanism underlying the regulatory fit effects (Higgins et al., 2003; Lee & Aaker, 2004).
It is interesting to note that the effects of promotion focus appear to be similar to those associated with a positive mood. In relation to a neutral mood state, a positive mood state facilitates the association of disparate cues (Kahn & Isen, 1993; Lee & Sternthal, 1999), fosters the processing of abstract information such as metaphors (Roehm & Sternthal, 2001), stimulates the generations of alternatives (Murray et al., 1990) and enhances creativity (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987). These findings would appear to suggest that a promotion focus might operate by inducing a positive mood. However, recent investigations report that regulatory focus does not affect mood (e.g., Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Higgins et al., 2003). A positive mood effect is also not consistent with a regulatory goal driven by self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1997). One plausible account for the common effects of positive mood and promotion focus is that a positive mood state induces promotion focus. Alternatively, it may be that both positive mood and promotion focus operate independently but has similar effects on information processing. Empirical verification of these accounts awaits future research.
References


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Authors’ Notes

Punam A. Keller, Tuck School of Business, Dartmouth College; Angela Y. Lee and
Brian Sternthal, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University.

All three authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Angela Y. Lee, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208-2001.

Electronic mail may be sent to aylee@kellogg.northwestern.edu.
To assess the robustness of our findings, we replicated the results of the camping categorization task with fifteen undergraduate students from Northwestern University (mean age = 22, five women) who participated in the study for $2. Participants were randomly assigned to the two regulatory focus conditions and followed the same procedure with the exception that they were asked to classify objects in the camping scenario only. Consistent with our predictions, the results of a one-way ANOVA showed that those in the prevention focus condition used more categories ($M = 7.50$) to classify the camping items compared to those in the promotion focus condition ($M = 5.14$), $F(1, 13) = 5.10, p < .05$. 
Figure 1: Feature value as a function of regulatory focus and level of construal (Study 4)

Figure 2: The effect of fit from construal on attitude (Study 5)

Figure 3A: The effect of regulatory-construal fit on preference for change for promotion-focused participants (Study 6)

Figure 3B: The effect of regulatory-construal fit on preference for change for prevention-focused participants (Study 6)
Figure 1

[Bar chart showing the comparison of Usefulness of Feature between High-level Construal and Low-level Construal for Promotion Goal and Prevention Goal.]
Figure 2

![Graph showing regulatory focus and attitude]

- High-level Construal
- Low-level Construal

Promotion and Prevention categories on the x-axis, with attitude on the y-axis ranging from 0 to 6.

Attitude levels for promotion and prevention under high-level and low-level construal are depicted.
Figure 3A

![Graph showing the relationship between Promotion and Prevention with High-Level Information.](image)

Figure 3B

![Graph showing the relationship between Promotion and Prevention with Low-level Information.](image)