Parity Product Features Can Enhance or Dilute Brand Evaluation:
The Influence of Goal Orientation and Presentation Format

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Two studies examine the impact of adding parity features to an advertising message that compares a dominant target brand to a competitor. We document that in some instances the presence of parity features prompts more favorable target evaluations (enhancement), whereas in others it results in more negative evaluations of the target (dilution). We predict when each of these outcomes will occur on the basis of a fit between an individual’s regulatory goal focus and the means of goal pursuit depicted in the message presentation. Enhancement occurs when there is a fit between an individual’s regulatory goal and how message information is presented, and dilution occurs when there is nonfit.
Consider a recent comparative ad for Crest MultiCare toothpaste in which this brand is compared to Colgate Total on a variety of features. As might be expected, on some features Crest is described as superior (better taste, fresher feeling breath). On other features Colgate is depicted as performing better (helps reduce gingivitis), perhaps to enhance the credibility of Crest’s superiority claims. There are also a number of features possessed by both brands (helps fight cavities, helps brush away plaque). The inclusion of such parity features might be justified as a means of clarifying the target brand’s frame of reference, but it also raises a question about their impact on the judgment of the advertised brand.

Three predictions about the impact of parity features are plausible. The most intuitive one is that the presence or absence of features common to alternative brands would not influence brand preference. If brand A is preferred to brand B in the absence of parity features, including these features in the brand descriptions adds a constant and thus should preserve individuals’ initial preference. Testing this hypothesis has attracted little interest, perhaps because the prediction is a null effect.

An alternative prediction is that the inclusion of parity features enhances the preference for an initially preferred brand. In a study examining this prediction, participants were asked to choose between two brands, each represented by different values on the same two features (Chernev 1997). When they were told that one of the two features was more important than the other, the brand that dominated on the important feature was chosen more frequently. More interesting was the observation that this advantage increased significantly when participants were subsequently informed that both brands had additional attractive features in common. Similarly, other investigations have reported that the evaluation of a brand initially perceived to be superior was enhanced by the addition of nondiagnostic features (Carlson, Meloy, and Russo 2006). We
refer to the more favorable evaluations that occur in the presence of parity features than in their absence as an *enhancement* effect.

There are also grounds for the premise that the inclusion of parity features can reduce liking for a dominant brand, which we refer to as a *dilution* effect. Demonstrations of the dilution effect have typically involved showing that the addition of nondiagnostic information reduces the belief that an object or person is associated with a particular outcome (Meyvis and Janiszewski 2002; Nisbett, Zukier, and Lemley 1981). For example, participants’ belief that engineers would tolerate more shock than music majors was significantly diminished when nondiagnostic information about the person’s age and hometown were included in the description (Nisbett et al. 1981). It is plausible that the dilution effect observed for nondiagnostic features might also occur in response to the presentation of parity features. These observations raise the question of when the addition of parity features would result in an enhancement of target evaluations and when they would stimulate a dilution effect.

Several theoretical accounts offer predictions about when enhancement and dilution effects are likely to occur. One explanation is cognitive. According to this view, judgments reflect the application of a particular strategy in processing the message content. Enhancement occurs because decision-makers identify a preference early in the judgment process and distort their assessment of subsequent information so that it is consistent with their initial opinion (Carlson et al. 2006). In contrast, if judgments were based on an averaging of the features considered, adding parity features would result in a dilution effect.

Enhancement and dilution effects can also be the result of meta-cognitive processes. Recent theorizing suggests that the correspondence or *fit* between an individual’s self-regulatory goal and the means of goal pursuit results in a positive subjective experience that is transferred to
the evaluation of the target object (Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004; Higgins et al. 2003a; Labroo and Lee 2006). In the absence of such correspondence nonfit occurs, which creates a negative subjective experience that is transferred to the judgment of the target. Based on these observations, our prediction is that the correspondence between a participant’s regulatory goal in processing a message and the means of goal pursuit embodied in how message information is presented will result in a subjective experience of fit that is manifested by enhancement, whereas nonfit between a regulatory goal and the presentation format prompts a dilution of the target evaluation. We refer to these predictions as the fit hypothesis. We test this hypothesis as an explanation for enhancement and dilution effects in the context of an advertising message that compares a target and alternative brand on discriminating and parity features.

Support for the fit hypothesis would suggest that the inclusion of parity features in a message can produce enhancement and dilution effects, and would identify when each of these effects is expected. Confirmed predictions would also be congenial with the view that fit induces enhancement via the transfer of a positive subjective experience to the evaluation of the target, and that nonfit results in dilution through the transfer of a negative subjective experience to the target’s evaluation. Finally, support for the fit hypotheses would provide guidelines to practitioners about the type of message formats that are likely to be most persuasive to audiences with different self-regulatory goals.

**PREDICTING ENHANCEMENT AND DILUTION EFFECTS**

The fit hypothesis implies that two factors determine the persuasive impact of a message: Individuals’ regulatory goal when processing a message and the means of goal pursuit that is
facilitated by the message. Regulatory focus goals related to nurturance and security are frequently activated in consumption settings. One such goal involves a promotion focus, which is oriented toward advancement and growth (Higgins 1997). To enhance the occurrence of these outcomes, promotion-focused individuals exhibit an eagerness that is manifested by an inclination to ensure against errors of omission (Higgins 1997). In contrast, individuals with a prevention focus goal exhibit a concern for safety and security that is characterized by vigilance and is manifested by an inclination to ensure against errors of commission.

When individuals adopt a regulatory focus goal, regulatory mode is a particularly salient means of goal pursuit (Kruglanski et al. 2000). Regulatory mode theory identifies two means of goal pursuit: locomotion and assessment. Locomotion is the aspect of self-regulation concerned with movement from place to place or state to state including the movement from a current state to a desired end (Avnet and Higgins 2003; Higgins, Kruglanski, and Pierro 2003b; Kruglanski et al. 2000). In contrast, an assessment mode of self-regulation involves a full comparison of alternatives with regard to goals, means, and outcomes as a basis for evaluation (Avnet and Higgins 2003; Higgins et al. 2003b; Kruglanski et al. 2000). In the context of a persuasive message that involves a comparison of choice alternatives, a locomotion mode of goal pursuit might be activated by the sequential presentation of information where the features possessed by a target and alternative brand, including parity features, are revealed over time. An assessment mode of goal pursuit might be facilitated by a message format that presents all the features possessed by a target and alternative brand simultaneously, because this format would encourage a full and thorough comparison of the brands.

The fit hypothesis makes several predictions regarding the correspondence between a regulatory focus goal orientation and a mode means of goal pursuit. For those adopting a
promotion focus, the eagerness that is prompted is expected to correspond with messages that employ a locomotion means of goal pursuit resulting in the subjective experience of fit that is transferred to the evaluation of the message. This transfer would be manifested by an enhancement effect. Stated formally, the hypothesis is:

\[ H_{1a} \]: When those with a promotion focus are exposed to a message that involves a locomotion means of goal pursuit, fit will occur and enhancement will be found.

In contrast, a prevention focus would not fit with a locomotion means of goal pursuit because the movement from state to state makes it difficult to engage in the detailed comparison of features that is needed to avoid making errors in judgment. This nonfit is expected to induce a negative subjective experience that is transferred to the evaluation of the target, resulting in a dilution effect: Thus, the hypothesis is:

\[ H_{1b} \]: When those with a prevention focus are exposed to a message that involves a locomotion means of goal pursuit, nonfit will occur and dilution will be found.

The fit hypothesis also makes predictions about the outcomes that will occur when those varying in their regulatory focus are presented information that involves an assessment means of goal pursuit. The prediction is that assessment would foster an opportunity to engage in comparison of alternatives and thus fit with a prevention focus and the attendant efforts to be vigilant and minimize errors in judgment. This fit would create a positive subjective experience that is transferred to the evaluation of the target. The result is an enhancement effect. In contrast, for those with a promotion focus an assessment means of goal pursuit was not expected to affect evaluations because these individuals would experience neither fit nor nonfit. Although an assessment means might facilitate comparison that conflicts with the eagerness goal of those with a promotion focus, it is unlikely to compel them to engage in a comparison of the
alternatives on a feature-by-feature basis. Rather, those with a promotion focus would be likely to attend to the target dominant features, and as a result be unaffected by the presence of parity features. Thus, the predictions are:

\( H_{2a} \): When those with a promotion focus are exposed to a message that involves an assessment means of goal pursuit, neither fit nor nonfit will occur and evaluations will be unaffected by the presence of parity features.

\( H_{2b} \): When those with a prevention focus are exposed to a message that involves an assessment means of goal pursuit, fit will occur and enhancement will be found.

**OVERVIEW OF STUDIES**

Several considerations guided the design of our studies. In order to highlight the presence of parity features, we developed a print ad that compared the features of a target and alternative brand side-by-side (see the appendix). This format made the diagnostic and parity features evident to participants: if a brand dominated the alternative on a feature, the feature was diagnostic, whereas if the brands exhibited the same performance on a feature it was a parity feature. The experimental conditions presented both diagnostic and parity features.

To test the fit hypothesis predictions requires a means of detecting whether enhancement and dilution occurred. With this in mind, a control condition was included in all the studies where research participants received only diagnostic information, that is, information about features on which a target brand dominated the alternative. This control condition served as a baseline where brand evaluations were not expected to be influenced by perceptions of fit or nonfit, and instead would presumably be based on message content. The difference between the
control condition, which presented only diagnostic information, and the experimental conditions, which included both diagnostic and parity information, provides a basis for inferring enhancement and dilution effects. Enhancement would be demonstrated when the target brand is evaluated more favorably in the experimental conditions than in the control, and dilution would be observed when the target is evaluated less favorably in the experimental conditions than in the control. Moreover, because the experimental and control conditions differ only with regard to the presence of parity features, the observation of enhancement or dilution is likely to be influenced by meta-cognitive processes where evaluations are attributable to the subjective experience of processing the message rather than to differences in message content.

Two studies are reported. Study 1 examines the fit hypothesis predictions regarding when enhancement and dilution effects are likely to be observed. In study 2, alternative means of stimulating locomotion and assessment were introduced to rule out a cognitive account for the data.

**STUDY 1: FIT BETWEEN REGULATORY FOCUS AND MODE**

Two factors were manipulated to test the fit hypothesis: participants’ regulatory goal focus (promotion or prevention) and the means of goal pursuit represented by the format used to present the message (locomotion, assessment, or control). The critical dependent variable was the evaluation of the target brand. The prediction is that enhancement would be observed when there was a fit between an individual’s regulatory focus and the means of goal pursuit represented by the message format (promotion-locomotion, prevention-assessment), dilution
would occur when there was nonfit (prevention-locomotion), and no effect would be found in the absence of fit or nonfit (promotion-assessment).

**Method**

Sixty-six graduate students (19 women) participated in this study. All participants were entered in a lottery for which there were five winners. They were informed that they would be completing a number of separate studies. The first study was described as investigating peoples’ empathy in adopting hypothetical roles. This description served to introduce an owl and cheese task, which has been used successfully to manipulate regulatory focus (Friedman and Förster 2001). All participants were asked to solve a maze task where a mouse positioned in the middle of a maze was seeking a path to leave the maze. In the promotion focus condition, the motivation to leave the maze was to get to the cheese, whereas in the prevention focus condition it was to escape from an owl that was lurking overhead. All participants completed the task successfully.

Immediately after the regulatory focus induction, research participants performed what was described as a separate experiment in which they were presented with a message describing two laptop computers using a feature-by-feature comparison format (see the appendix). The number of features described in the message was varied. All participants received information about two features (size of the hard drive, and size of the monitor) on which the target brand dominated the alternative. For participants in the control condition, this was all the information they received. For the remaining participants, the brands were described on eight features, the first two of which were the same diagnostic features as those listed in the control condition and the other six were parity features.
Two alternative approaches were used to present the brand information to those in the eight feature conditions. A locomotion means of goal pursuit was induced by the sequential presentation of the features. The same two target dominant features as those shown in the control condition were presented on one page and these features plus the remaining six parity features were shown on a second page. An assessment means of goal pursuit was induced by comparing the two brands on the eight features presented simultaneously on a single page.

After exposure to the message, participants evaluated the target brand on seven items (e.g., bad/good, dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable). Responses were on seven point scales, where larger numbers indicated more favorable evaluations. The seven items loaded on a single scale that was reliable (α = .89). Thus, each participant’s ratings on the seven items were averaged to form an evaluation score.

Results

Evaluations. Means and standard deviations on evaluations categorized by the experimental treatments are shown in table 1. A 2 (regulatory focus: promotion, prevention) x 3 (presentation format: two feature control, eight sequential, eight simultaneous) ANOVA indicated that the interaction was significant (F(2, 60) = 11.96, p < .001). The effects of a locomotion means of goal pursuit were examined first. For those with a promotion focus, evaluations were more favorable when the presentation of the eight features was sequential than in the control condition where only the two target dominant features were presented (F(1, 60) = 4.72, p < .03), thus providing evidence for an enhancement effect (hypothesis 1a). In contrast, a dilution effect was found for those with a prevention focus: The sequential presentation of the
eight features resulted in less favorable evaluations than in the two feature control condition, although this outcome did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($F(1, 60) = 2.89, p = .09$). Thus, only weak support is provided for hypothesis 1b.

The effect of an assessment means of goal pursuit was examined next. For those with a promotion focus, no difference in evaluations was found whether exposure was to the two target dominant feature control or to the eight features simultaneously ($F < 1$). This outcome is consistent with hypothesis 2a and may be attributable to the fact that the presentation of either two features or eight features simultaneously prompted a focus on the two target dominant features, which was facilitated by the presentation of these features first. Thus, neither fit nor nonfit occurred. In contrast, an enhancement effect was found for prevention-focused participants: They were more favorable when eight features were described simultaneously than in the control condition ($F(1, 60) = 5.27, p < .03$). This finding provides support for hypothesis 2b.

**Discussion**

The findings reported in study 1 provide support for the predictions made by the fit hypothesis regarding an enhancement effect. This outcome was exhibited by those with a promotion focus when the message presentation involved a locomotion means of goal pursuit and by those with a prevention focus when the message presentation involved an assessment means of goal pursuit. In contrast, the fit hypothesis prediction regarding the dilution effect
received less support. Although a dilution effect was observed for prevention-focused individuals exposed to a locomotion means of goal pursuit, this outcome did not reach the conventional level of statistical significance. It may be that presenting six parity features together on the second page in the sequential format provided a basis for those with a prevention focus to engage in enough comparison to limit the observation of the dilution effect. In study 2, we address this issue by reducing the number of parity features to five and by presenting the features over three pages (instead of two) in the locomotion condition.

Although the fit hypothesis accounts for the findings of study 1, it is not the only plausible explanation for the data. As noted earlier, there are alternative cognitive explanations for enhancement and dilution effects. For example, the biased hypothesis testing view would suggest that the presentation of the features on which the target dominates at the outset of the message motivates those with a promotion focus to examine subsequent features with the goal of confirming their favorable impression of the target computer (Meyvis and Janiszewski 2002). In contrast, those with a prevention focus are motivated to search for disconfirming evidence. Viewed from this perspective, a sequential presentation prompts promotion-focused individuals to regard the parity features as confirming their hypothesis, thus inducing an enhancement effect. This enhancement effect is absent when the features are presented simultaneously because the motivation to confirm is absent. Furthermore, the sequential presentation of features induces those with a prevention focus to search selectively for information that is not favorable to the target. Parity features are interpreted in this manner. The result is a dilution effect. When all of the features are presented together this motivation is presumably absent. All features appear to be positive and enhancement is found. Study 2 tests the adequacy of the fit hypothesis and the biased hypothesis testing view in explaining enhancement and dilution effects.
STUDY 2: THE FIT HYPOTHESIS VS BIASED HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Two goals guided the design of study 2. One was to replicate the findings reported in study 1. The other was to distinguish between the biased hypothesis testing view and the fit hypothesis. For this purpose, we varied whether the target dominant features were presented at the outset of the message, as they had been in study 1, or at the end of the message. A key assumption underlying the biased hypothesis testing account is that the presentation of the target dominant features at the outset of the message triggers the outcomes observed. If these features were to be presented last, the biased hypothesis testing view predicts that they would come too late to affect hypothesis testing. Thus, the prediction is that neither the enhancement nor the dilution effect would be observed.

A different prediction is made by the fit hypothesis. Presenting the target dominant features last would be viewed as a locomotion means of goal pursuit by those with a promotion focus. This perception should emerge even if the features were presented simultaneously. After not being able to distinguish between the alternatives because they shared parity features, the last features mentioned provide a basis for preferring the target brand and thus create a sense of locomotion (Carver and Scheier 1998). This perception of a movement toward the goal fits with the eagerness of those with a promotion focus. Thus, the fit hypothesis prediction is:

\[ H_{3a}: \] When those with a promotion focus are exposed to a message where the target dominant features are presented last, a locomotion means of goal pursuit will occur, whether the presentation is sequential or simultaneous, resulting in fit and enhancement.
For prevention-focused participants, the fit hypothesis prediction is that an enhancement effect will occur whether target dominant features are presented at the outset of the message (H2b) or at the end. This is because a simultaneous presentation facilitates a full comparison of the alternative brands that is concordant with a prevention focus, whatever the placement of the target dominant features.

H3b: When those with a prevention focus are exposed to a message where the presentation is simultaneous and the target dominant features are presented last, an assessment means of goal pursuit will occur resulting in fit and enhancement.

The evaluations exhibited by those with a prevention focus when the presentation format is sequential and the target dominant features are presented last are more difficult to predict. The sequential presentation might prompt dilution because of the nonfit between the prevention focus and the locomotion means of goal pursuit. However, it is also possible that in the absence of target dominant features at the outset of a sequential message, comparison of the alternatives is not triggered until these two diagnostic features appear at the end of the message. At this point, it might be too late for locomotion to disrupt comparison. Thus, prevention-focused individuals would experience neither fit nor nonfit and their evaluations would be similar to those in the control condition where only the dominant features are presented. These alternative hypotheses are examined in this study.

**Method**

We followed a procedure similar to that used in the previous study to test these predictions. Two hundred students (125 women) participated in this study for which each was
paid $10. To assess the robustness of the regulatory focus effects, we manipulated promotion or prevention focus using a word completion task (Gilbert and Hixon 1990) rather than the maze task used previously. In the promotion focus condition, they were given accomplishment and growth words to complete, including eager, active, growth, and accomplishment, whereas in the prevention focus condition the words pertained to safety and security, and included safe, vigilant, calm, and secure. The task was to fill in the missing letters in each word (e.g., e_g_r, or s_f_). All participants successfully completed the word task. The premise was that completion of the words would activate a promotion or prevention-focused mindset that would influence processing of the subsequent message.

A pre-test provided support for this expectation. The 44 participants were administered the word completion task, followed by the Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda (2002) scale to measure promotion and prevention focus (9-item promotion scale and 9-item prevention scale). A main effect of word task was observed on both scales. Participants who had completed the promotion words scored higher on the promotion scale ($M = 7.39$) than participants who had completed the prevention words ($M = 6.44$; $F(1, 42) = 7.31$, $p < .01$). In contrast, participants who had completed the prevention words scored higher on the prevention scale ($M = 5.05$) than did those who had completed the promotion words ($M = 4.61$; $F(1, 42) = 3.93$, $p < .05$).

The persuasive message comparing the target and alternative brand of laptop computers was presented at this point. As in study 1, in the control condition participants received information about two product features on which the target brand dominated. These features were the same as those used in study 1. Additional message formats were designed to induce locomotion and assessment means of goal pursuit by presenting five parity features (drawn from the six used in study 1) in addition to the two features on which the target dominated.
Message features were presented sequentially or simultaneously. For both presentation formats, the two target dominant features were presented either first or they were presented at the end of the feature list, after the parity features had been enumerated. Thus, four presentation conditions were created by varying the format and the placement of the target dominant features. In the sequential presentation condition with target dominant features first, the two features on which the target dominated were presented on the first page. These features plus three parity features appeared on a second page, and all seven features were presented on a third page. In the sequential presentation condition with target dominant features presented last, two parity features were presented on the first page, followed by these two features along with three additional parity features on the second page, and then by all seven features, including the two target dominant features at the end of the feature list on the third page. In the simultaneous condition, participants saw all of the features on one page, with the two target dominant features presented either first or last.

A pre-test examined the adequacy of the presentation format manipulation. The 48 participants were presented one of four versions of the target ad: the presentation format was simultaneous or sequential (7 features, over three pages) and the two target dominant features were presented either first and second (first) or sixth and seventh (last). After reading the ad they completed two measures that provided an assessment of the message format: “The way the information about the computers was presented made comparison of alternatives difficult/easy” (7-point scale), and “The way the information about the computers was presented made me feel like I was not making/making progress toward an evaluation” (7-point scale). Only the main effect of presentation format on the ease of comparison measure was significant ($F(1, 47) = 7.18$, $p < .01$): Those exposed to the simultaneous format reported greater ease ($M = 6.46$) than
participants exposed to the sequential format ($M = 5.33$). The location of the target dominant features (first vs. last) did not have a significant effect ($p > .28$). In contrast, two main effects were found on the experience of progress measure. Participants felt that they made greater progress toward an evaluation when exposed to the sequential format ($M = 6.00$) than to the simultaneous format ($M = 5.42$; $F(1, 47) = 4.18, p < .05$), and those who read the target dominant features last ($M = 6.08$) reported a greater feeling of progress than those who were exposed to the target dominant features first ($M = 5.33$; $F(1, 47) = 6.91, p < .01$). These findings indicate that perceived ease of comparison was facilitated by the simultaneous format, while the feeling of making progress was fostered by the sequential format. Further, placing target dominant features last enhanced the feeling of making progress.

After reading the product descriptions, participants completed the same seven item brand evaluation scale as was used in the previous study. These items loaded on a single factor and formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .93$). The target evaluation was followed by a measure of the subjective experience of fit (see Cesario et al. 2004). Participants indicated how they felt about the way the computer information was presented on a seven point scale (1 = felt wrong; 7 = felt right).

**Results**

*Subjective Experience of Fit.* Participants’ subjective experience of fit as indicated by their report of the extent to which they felt right served as the check for our experimental manipulations. A 2 (regulatory focus: promotion, prevention) x 5 (presentation format: two features control, sequential dominant first, sequential dominant last, simultaneous dominant first, sequential dominant last, simultaneous dominant first,
simultaneous dominant last) ANOVA indicated that the interaction was significant ($F(4, 190) = 3.90, p < .001$). As expected, when target dominant features were presented first and the presentation was sequential, those with a promotion focus reported a more positive subjective experience of fit ($M = 5.00; SD = 1.55$) than did those in the two feature control condition ($M = 3.44; SD = 1.72; F(1, 190) = 10.43, p < .002$). For those with a prevention focus, the sequential presentation induced the same experience of fit ($M = 3.72; SD = 1.53$) as was found in the control condition ($M = 3.24; SD = 1.68; F < 1$). Further, when the product features were presented simultaneously, promotion-focused participants reported a similar experience of fit ($M = 3.75; SD = 1.33$) as in the control condition ($F < 1$), whereas those with a prevention focus experienced greater fit when the presentation was simultaneous ($M = 4.90; SD = 1.45$) than in the control condition ($F(1, 190) = 11.64, p < .001$). These outcomes indicate that when target dominant features were presented first, those with a promotion focus experienced fit when features were presented sequentially, whereas prevention-focused individuals experienced fit when feature presentation was simultaneous.

A different pattern of results was observed when target dominant features were presented last. When the presentation of product features was sequential, promotion-focused individuals reported a more positive subjective experience of fit ($M = 5.00; SD = 1.12$) than was found in the two feature control condition ($F(1, 190) = 10.19, p < .002$). The subjective experience reported by prevention-focused individuals when the presentation was sequential ($M = 4.09; SD = 1.54$) differed marginally from the experience they reported in the control condition ($F(1, 190) = 3.12, p = .08$). Finally, when the features were presented simultaneously, both promotion ($M = 4.95; SD = 1.61; F(1, 190) = 9.55, p < .002$) and prevention-focused individuals ($M = 4.78; SD = 1.44; F(1, 190) = 10.40, p < .002$) reported a greater experience of fit than that reported in the control
condition. These outcomes indicate that the subjective experience of fit was greater when those with a promotion focus were presented target dominant features last (either sequential or simultaneous), and those with a prevention focus were presented the features simultaneously.

*Evaluations.* A 2 (regulatory focus: promotion, prevention) x 5 (presentation format: two features control, sequential dominant first, sequential dominant last, simultaneous dominant first, simultaneous dominant last) ANOVA indicated the presence of the interaction shown in figure 1 ($F(4, 190) = 7.57, p < .0001$). Means and standard deviations on evaluations categorized by the experimental treatments are shown in table 1. To interpret this interaction, we first examined the effects of the treatments that replicated those examined in study 1. When target dominant features were introduced first and the presentation was sequential, those with a promotion focus exhibited an enhancement effect: Evaluations were more favorable when the presentation of the product features was sequential than in the two feature control condition ($F(1, 190) = 21.79, p < .0001$). In contrast, a dilution effect was observed for those with a prevention focus when the product features were presented sequentially: A sequential presentation prompted less favorable evaluations than in the control condition ($F(1, 190) = 4.60, p < .03$). These findings are consistent with the fit predictions related to a locomotion means of goal pursuit (hypotheses 1a and 1b).

Next, we examined the effect of assessment where the features were presented simultaneously and the target dominated features were the first ones listed. For those with a promotion focus, the evaluation of the target in this condition did not differ from the evaluation...
observed in the control condition ($F < 1$). In contrast, those with a prevention focus exhibited enhancement: Presenting the seven features simultaneously led to more favorable evaluations than were found in the control condition ($F(1,190) = 3.97, p < .05$). These findings are consistent with the fit predictions related to an assessment means of goal pursuit (hypotheses 2a and 2b).

The effects of presenting the target dominant features last were examined next. As predicted, for promotion-focused participants a sequential presentation of features led to enhancement (hypothesis 3a): Evaluations were more favorable when the presentation of product features was sequential than they were in the control condition ($F(1,190) = 4.35, p < .04$), which is the same outcome as we observed when target dominant features were presented first. In contrast, when the feature presentation to prevention-focused individuals was sequential, target evaluations did not differ from those in the control condition ($F < 1$). This outcome differs from the dilution effect found when the dominant target features were presented first. We offer an explanation for this finding in the General Discussion.

Finally, the effects of presenting the features simultaneously with target dominant features last were examined. Consistent with H3a, those with a promotion focus reported more favorable evaluations in response to the presentation of the seven features simultaneously than in the control condition, providing evidence for an enhancement effect ($F(1,190) = 4.80, p < .03$). Those with a prevention focus exhibited the same enhancement effect when the features on which the target dominated were presented last as they did when these features were presented first (hypothesis 3b): Presenting the seven features simultaneously lead to more favorable evaluations than in the control condition ($F(1,190) = 4.10, p < .04$).

Discussion
The results found in study 2 provide a conceptual replication of the findings reported in our previous study in those conditions where the target dominant features were presented first. These outcomes are predicted by both biased hypothesis testing and the fit hypothesis. However, only the fit hypothesis anticipates the findings when target dominant features are presented last: Presenting the features simultaneously with the target dominant features listed last prompted an enhancement effect in both regulatory focus conditions, and presenting the features sequentially with target dominant features last resulted in an enhancement effect for those with a promotion focus. Finally, as predicted by the fit hypothesis, the subjective experience was more positive when there was a fit between individuals’ regulatory focus and the message presentation format than when such fit was absent.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The present research demonstrates that the addition of parity features to a preferred brand can result in three different outcomes. An enhancement effect was observed when there was a fit between message recipients’ regulatory focus and the means of goal pursuit presented in the message. Those with a promotion focus exhibited enhancement when the message conveyed a locomotion means of goal pursuit, whether locomotion was made operational by a sequential presentation of the message with target dominant features first or last, or by introducing the features simultaneously and presenting target dominant features last. These findings suggest that messages conveying a sense of movement from state to state resonate with promotion-focused individuals. Enhancement was also found for those with a prevention focus when the means of
goal pursuit involved a simultaneous presentation of the features and target dominant features were presented either first or last. A simultaneous means of goal pursuit appears to provide a format that allows for the full comparison that is fundamental to assessment and that leads to a feeling of fit for those with a prevention focus.

A dilution effect was observed when nonfit occurred between a message recipient’s regulatory focus and the means of goal pursuit presented in the message. Prevention-focused individuals exhibited a dilution effect when the presentation was sequential and target dominant features were presented first. These findings suggest that locomotion induces a feeling of nonfit when comparison is stimulated at the outset of the message, perhaps because locomotion disrupts efficient comparison that is fundamental to assessment.

Finally, we observed a null effect in two situations. One emerged when those with a prevention focus were exposed to a sequential presentation where target dominant features were presented last. Viewed in terms of the fit hypothesis, this outcome occurred because presenting the target dominant features last resulted in comparison being prompted too late to be interfered with by a locomotion means of goal pursuit that would otherwise produce nonfit. The other null effect occurred when promotion focused individuals received a simultaneous presentation with the target dominant features presented first. The fit hypothesis accounts for this outcome by noting that a simultaneous presentation does not compel promotion-focused individuals to engage in the comparison that is thought to produce nonfit. Thus, the fit hypothesis interprets the null effects we report in terms of a failure to evoke comparison. If this account is correct, stimulating comparison at the outset of the message should produce nonfit and therefore a dilution effect rather than the null effects we observed.
Two follow-up studies were conducted to test these predictions. As in study 2, the message compared two brands on seven features where the target brand dominated the alternative on two features. In both studies, a condition was included where a comparison mindset was primed prior to the message presentation (Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, and Steller 1990). The task involved the comparison of 10 statements of fact against some relevant standard. For example, one statement was “Joan pays $18,000 per year for tuition. How expensive is the tuition compared to those of other colleges?” Responses were on a seven point scales (e.g., very inexpensive/very expensive).

In the first follow-up study, 77 participants were administered the same word completion task as that used in study 2 to prompt a prevention focus and then they read the target message. One group of participants received a message that included only the two target dominant features, another group was exposed to a message that included all seven features presented sequentially with target dominant features presented last, and a third group received the same sequential message, but only after they had completed the comparison mindset task. After exposure to the message, participants completed the same target evaluation items as those employed in study 2. The findings indicated the presence of a significant main effect of presentation format ($F(2, 74) = 5.56, p < .01$). As we observed in study 2, evaluation of the target was no different when the presentation was sequential with target dominant features last ($M = 5.24$) than when only the two target dominant features were presented ($M = 4.90; F(1, 74) = 1.09, p < .30$), whereas when the sequential presentation was preceded by the comparison mindset prime, a dilution effect was observed: Evaluations were less favorable in the presence of the comparison mindset ($M = 4.17$) than when the two target dominant features were presented ($F(1, 74) = 4.82, p < .03$).
These findings suggest that the feeling of nonfit and the resulting dilution effect among those with a prevention focus are triggered by two factors: a stimulus that evokes a comparison of a target and an alternative brand’s features at the outset of the message, and a message format that fosters a locomotion means of goal pursuit. When the presentation is sequential, comparison can be triggered by presenting the target dominant features first, or by priming participants to engage in comparison at the outset of the message. When this occurs, a dilution effect is found. In the absence of a comparison trigger at the outset of the message, as occurred when participants were exposed to a sequential presentation with target dominant features last, a sequential presentation does not engender the feeling of nonfit. Stated another way, locomotion induces a feeling of nonfit when prevention-focused individuals are attempting to engage in a feature-by-feature comparison.

In another follow-up study, we examined the explanation offered by the fit hypothesis for the null effect observed when promotion-focused individuals were presented all features simultaneously with target dominant features first. Our expectation was that we would observe a dilution effect if the simultaneous presentation was preceded by a comparison prime. Forty-six participants were induced to adopt a promotion focus by completing the maze task used in study 1 (the “cheese” condition). They were then presented the message in one of three formats. Some participants received a message that included only the target dominant features (control condition), others were exposed to the simultaneous message with target dominant features first, and the remainder were presented the same simultaneous message after completing the comparison mindset task. A marginally significant main effect of presentation format was found ($F(2, 43) = 2.89, p = .07$). Those promotion-focused participants who received the simultaneous message exhibited evaluations ($M = 4.92$) that were no different from those exhibited in the
control condition where only the target dominant features were presented \((M = 5.18; F < 1)\), replicating the finding in our previous studies. However, when the same simultaneous message was preceded by the comparison mindset prime, a dilution effect was observed: Evaluations of the target were significantly less favorable when all features were presented simultaneously \((M = 4.29)\) than in the control condition \((F(1, 43) = 5.32, p < .03)\). These finding suggest that those with a promotion focus do not spontaneously engage in comparison, but when prompted to do so in the context of a simultaneous format, they exhibit dilution.

Our investigations suggest that the fit hypothesis offers a more parsimonious explanation for our data than does biased hypothesis testing. This latter view cannot account for the effects we observe when target dominant features are presented last. At the same time, the biased hypothesis testing view can explain phenomena that are not accounted for by the fit hypothesis. For example, the fit hypothesis does not anticipate that once a decision maker establishes a preference, subsequent features are interpreted to fit the initial preference. Our view is that the fit hypothesis predicts evaluations when the target and the competing brand have parity features because this context triggers a reliance on meta-cognitive processes. In contrast, when the features are nondiagnostic in that they are not central to a judgment, but at the same time are not parity features, decision makers are likely to use message content to render a judgment. The adequacy of this analysis warrants further investigation.

From a practical perspective the present investigation suggests that consumers’ evaluations of a brand go beyond their assessment of its features. Evaluations also depend on the correspondence between consumers’ self-regulatory goals and how information is presented. When consumers have accomplishment as their goal, as might be the case when young adults are contemplating a choice of investment, message presentations that promote locomotion are
appropriate. This might entail developing a comparative print ad where information is presented sequentially on different pages and where the introduction of critical features on which a brand dominates a competitor is forestalled until the end of the feature list. Or the ad might introduce additional target dominant features each time information is presented. In contrast, when consumers are guided by vigilance, as older consumers might be when selecting an investment or when any consumer faces a substantial risk of a negative outcome as might occur in the consumption of health services, presenting all information simultaneously is likely to stimulate comparison that enhances fit. Finally, in the absence of knowledge about consumers’ goal orientation, a comparative message should employ a format where target dominant features are presented last and simultaneously, because our research suggests that this presentation is likely to stimulate enhancement in both those with a promotion and prevention focus.
APPENDIX

Please examine the following information for two brands of laptop computer and form your opinion about each brand. They sell for about the same price.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Brand A</th>
<th>Brand B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Display Size (Size of the monitor available for display)</td>
<td>19 inches</td>
<td>17 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard Drive (Amount of storage space available)</td>
<td>40 GB</td>
<td>30 GB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory (Amount of information active at one time)</td>
<td>384 MB</td>
<td>384 MB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD/CD Burner</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warranty</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>4.8 lb</td>
<td>4.8 lb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 hour hotline</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battery Life (hours you can use your computer without plug in)</td>
<td>3.0 hours</td>
<td>3.0 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: In study 1, all eight features shown above were presented, whereas in study 2 and the two follow-up studies only the first seven features were included.
REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Promotion focus</th>
<th>Prevention focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>Study 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-features</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.66)</td>
<td>(1.28)</td>
<td>(0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-sequential</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(dominant first)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-simultaneous</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(dominant first)</td>
<td>(1.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-sequential</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(dominant first)</td>
<td>(1.21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-sequential</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(dominant last)</td>
<td>(1.05)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-simultaneous</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(dominant first)</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-simultaneous</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(dominant last)</td>
<td>(1.25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE 1

STUDY 2 TARGET BRAND EVALUATIONS
FIGURE 1: STUDY 2 TARGET BRAND EVALUATIONS
1) PREDICTING ENHANCEMENT AND DILUTION EFFECTS

1) OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

1) STUDY 1: FIT BETWEEN REGULATORY FOCUS AND MODE

2) Method

2) Results

3) Evaluations

2) Discussion

1) STUDY 2: THE FIT HYPOTHESIS VS BIASED HYPOTHESIS TESTING

2) Method

2) Results

3) Subjective Experience of Fit

3) Evaluations

2) Discussion

1) GENERAL DISCUSSION

1) APPENDIX

1) REFERENCES

1) TABLE 1

1) FIGURE 1