



**FACULTEIT ECONOMIE
EN BEDRIJFSKUNDE**

**TWEEKERKENSTRAAT 2
B-9000 GENT**

**Tel. : 32 - (0)9 – 264.34.61
Fax. : 32 - (0)9 – 264.35.92**

WORKING PAPER

Consumer Ethics: The Role of Self-Regulatory Focus

Tine De Bock^{*}

Patrick Van Kenhove[†]

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^{*}Tine De Bock is PhD Student at Ghent University, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Department of Marketing, Tweeckerkenstraat 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, Tel +32 9 2643567, E-mail: Tine.DeBock@UGent.be.

[†]Patrick Van Kenhove is Professor of Marketing at Ghent University, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Department of Marketing, Tweeckerkenstraat 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, Tel +32 9 2643526, E-mail: Patrick.VanKenhove@Ugent.be.

Consumer Ethics: The Role of Self-Regulatory Focus

ABSTRACT. The present study investigates the influence of self-regulatory focus on consumer ethical beliefs (i.e., consumers' judgment of various unethical consumer practices). The self-regulatory focus framework is highly influential and applies to an impressively wide spectrum of topics across a diverse array of domains. However, previous research has not yet examined the link between this personality construct and the consumer ethics field. Findings indicate that promotion affects one's attitude toward questionable consumer practices with those having a stronger (versus weaker) promotion focus being more likely to believe these consumer misbehaviors to be acceptable. Further, this study shows that prevention influences one's perception of morally dubious consumer practices with those having a stronger (versus weaker) prevention focus being more inclined to believe these questionable consumer activities to be unacceptable.

KEYWORDS: consumer ethical beliefs, consumer ethics, consumer ethics scale, personal characteristics, self-regulatory focus

Introduction

Contrary to what is brought up by the concept of customer sovereignty (i.e., customers will behave in a manner that is both rational and functional), research indicates that customer misbehavior is not part of a small criminal subculture but representative of customers in general (Fullerton and Punj, 2004; Reynolds and Harris, 2009). Focusing on just one individual form of unethical consumer behavior¹, shoplifting, previous studies represent the shoplifter as a general consumer rather than a distinct criminal type. For example, research estimates that as many as 60 percent of consumers have shoplifted at least once in their lifetime (Klemke, 1992). When the business world wants to tackle consumer misbehavior, they need first and foremost a better insight into why consumers believe these questionable consumer practices to be acceptable. As more research should be done examining personal factors possibly influencing consumers' judgment of unethical consumer activities (i.e., consumer ethical beliefs; Vitell, 2003), the aim of the present study is to enrich the consumer ethics field by investigating the impact of consumers' self-regulatory focus on their beliefs concerning various unethical consumer practices.

Several studies reveal the regulatory focus framework (Higgins, 1997, 1998), which enjoys rapidly growing interest in academic literature, to be related to an impressive diversity of consumer behaviors (for an overview, see Higgins and Spiegel, 2004). However, previous research has not yet examined the relationship between this personality construct and one's perception of unethical consumer practices. As the basis distinction between promotion- and prevention-focused self-regulation appears to have a pervasive impact on human judgment, thought and behavior (e.g., Aaker and Lee, 2001; Zhou and Pham, 2004), self-regulatory focus might offer potential for the study of consumer ethics.

Theoretical Background: Self-Regulatory Focus

Consumers' decisions take place in a context of goals they are striving for, needs they want to accomplish and drives that colour their thoughts (Pham and Higgins, 2005). Self-regulation refers to these processes individuals use to set their goals, choose means to achieve these goals and assess

progress toward these goals (e.g., Carver and Scheier, 1998). Building on the hedonic principle which entails that people approach pleasure and avoid pain, Higgins' regulatory focus theory (1997, 1998) posits that two distinct motivational orientations, shown by bio-psychologists to have distinct physiological bases (e.g., Gray, 1990), regulate this goal-directed behavior. These two types of regulatory foci are labelled as promotion focus and prevention focus. Both foci relate to distinct types of needs, desired end states and strategic inclinations.

Concerning the distinct types of needs, regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) states that the promotion and the prevention system each serve a distinct survival function. More specifically, the theory proposes that individuals' behaviors are guided by a need for nurturance in a promotion-focused mode of self-regulation. Within the prevention system, individuals' actions are guided by a need for security.

A second difference between the promotion focus and the prevention focus are the distinct types of desired end states. Although there are many ways of classifying goals (e.g., Huffman et al., 2000), Higgins (1987) distinguishes between two types. On the one hand, he discerns ideals which refer to hopes, wishes and aspirations that one would like to achieve and strive for (e.g., dreaming of an adventurous vacation). On the other hand, he distinguishes oughts which refer to people's obligations, duties and responsibilities (e.g., having to provide for a child's education). Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) suggests that ideals tap into the promotion system, while oughts tap into the prevention system.

The promotion and the prevention system are not only different in the needs (nurturance versus security) and the goals (ideals versus oughts) they regulate, but also in terms of the strategic inclinations they invoke to fulfill these needs and goals (Pham and Avnet, 2004; Pham and Higgins, 2005). Both promotion and prevention strategies enable one to decrease the discrepancies between the current state and the desired outcome, but use different means to accomplish this. A promotion focus is captured by an approach oriented strategy. These eagerness means are concerned with the avoidance of errors of omission (i.e., missing an emerging opportunity to accomplish something) and as a result involve achievement through immediate action rather than reflective deliberation. In line with this, promotion-focused individuals think in terms of gains versus non-gains (e.g., Roney et al., 1995; Shah et al., 1998) and thus show a high sensitivity to the presence and absence of positive outcomes. In addition, success reflecting the presence of positive outcomes results in cheerfulness-related emotions

(e.g., feeling satisfied), while failure reflecting the absence of positive outcomes results in dejection-related emotions (e.g., feeling disappointed; Shah and Higgins, 2001).

In contrast, a prevention focus is captured by an avoidance oriented strategy. These vigilance means generate cognitive or behavioral courses that avoid errors of commission (i.e., making mistakes). As a result, prevention focus strategies involve careful assessment of the social context and action consequences. In line with this, prevention-focused individuals tend to frame goal pursuits and outcomes in terms of losses versus non-losses (e.g., Roney et al., 1995; Shah et al., 1998) and are thus highly sensitive to the presence and absence of negative outcomes. Besides, whereas success reflecting the absence of negative outcomes results in quiescence-related emotions (e.g., feeling calm), failure reflecting the presence of negative outcomes results in agitation-related emotions (e.g., feeling tense; Shah and Higgins, 2001).

Research considers these two foci to develop since childhood, and more specifically, to derive from parents' different styles in terms of regulation (Higgins and Silberman, 1998). Parents stressing positive outcomes by, for example, commending the child when s/he acts desirable (while not commending the child when s/he does not behave desirable) brings about a promotion focus. In contrast, parents' focus on negative outcomes by, for example, penalizing the child when s/he acts undesirable (and not penalizing when s/he does not behave undesirable) causes a prevention focus. Furthermore, research assumes that these two foci underlie people's perspectives about what they consider significant in their lives (Carmona et al., 2008) and have a major impact on people's feelings, thoughts and actions (Higgins, 1998). In addition, a considerable amount of empirical evidence supports the major tenets of regulatory focus theory (see for example Higgins, 1997, 1998).

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) posits that an individual's specific focus can vary across situations (e.g., Friedman and Förster, 2001; Shah et al., 1998). Whether an individual actually uses the promotion or the prevention strategy might thus depend on which self-regulation system is temporarily induced in momentary situations. However, and most important for this study, self-regulatory focus can also vary across individuals. In other words, individuals may differ in their chronic or habitual self-regulatory orientations (Higgins et al., 1994). Further, as regulatory focus theory proposes (Higgins, 1997, 1998), promotion focus and prevention focus are distinct constructs or continuums rather than ends of a single continuum as other research's experimental designs often depict and operationalize (Wu et al., 2008). Consequently, although one system may be chronically more accessible than the

other in a given person, research assumes that both self-regulatory foci co-exist in every individual (Zhou and Pham, 2004). This paper constructs separate hypotheses for the two self-regulatory foci as people's chronic promotion and prevention orientations are theoretically independent (i.e., individuals can be high in promotion focus only, high in prevention focus only, high in both or low in both) (Pham and Higgins, 2005).

Hypotheses

Under a promotion focus, the individual's strategic inclination is to approach matches to end states s/he would like to achieve (Higgins, 1999). Such individuals are motivated to use eagerness means to ensure hits (representing gains; i.e., looking for means of advancement) and to ensure against errors of omission or "misses" (representing non-gains; i.e., not closing off possibilities) (Higgins et al., 2001). This eager drive of capturing as many existing opportunities as possible (Higgins, 1998) entails greater risk taking (i.e., risky bias) (Crowe and Higgins, 1997; Förster et al., 2003; Higgins, 1998; Liberman et al., 1999), which from an ethical perspective, relates to lower ethical beliefs (Rallapalli et al., 1994).

When individuals have a promotion focus, they are more open to change (Liberman et al., 1999), resulting in an orientation of "open mindedness" and a preference for openness to change (Dholakia et al., 2006). Valuing openness to change is likely to correspond with an unethical disposition because questionable consumer practices give the opportunity to explore some variety and stimulation through change from fixed patterns. When openness to change is important to an individual's life, s/he is more likely to let his/her life be guided by the excitement of experiencing and discovering opportunities rather than by customs, traditions and standards. In line with this reasoning, a recent study of Steenhaut and Van Kenhove (2006) shows that valuing openness to change results in a more tolerant judgment of unethical consumer practices. Therefore, this study expects that consumers being high (versus low) in their promotion focus, and thus giving priority to change compared to conservation, are more likely to evaluate ethically questionable consumer actions as appropriate. Promotion focus strategies involve goal pursuit in a wilful or approach-oriented manner and involve achievement through immediate action rather than reflective deliberation. Similarly, Brebels et al. (2008) suggest that the

inner states of promotion-focused individuals guide their behavior more strongly than normative expectations. Based upon all the findings mentioned above, we expect that:

H1: Promotion relates negatively to consumer ethical beliefs. That is, individuals scoring higher on promotion are more likely to tolerate unethical consumer practices compared to individuals scoring lower on promotion.

A prevention focus fosters a strategic inclination to avoid mismatches to desired end states (Higgins, 1999). This leads to a motivation to use vigilance means to ensure “correct rejections” (representing non-losses; i.e., be careful) and to ensure against errors of commission or “false alarms” (representing losses; i.e., avoid mistakes) (Higgins et al., 2001). This vigilant drive of protecting against potential mistakes or threats (Higgins, 1998) involves lesser openness to risk (i.e., a conservative bias) (Crowe and Higgins, 1997; Förster et al., 2003; Higgins, 1998; Liberman et al., 1999), which from an ethical point of view, relates to higher ethical beliefs (Rallapalli et al., 1994).

In addition, individuals with a prevention focus fixate on stability and status quo (Liberman et al., 1999). Stability or rejecting change has the potential benefit of safety and security, which individuals with a prevention focus prefer (Liberman et al., 1999). Consequently, prevention-focused individuals show inclinations toward careful and routine ways of thinking (Förster and Higgins, 2005; Friedman and Förster, 2001; Liberman et al., 1999; Liberman et al., 2001; Seibt and Förster, 2004; Semin et al., 2005; Zhu and Myers-Levy, 2007). This preference for conservation is likely to correspond with an “ethical compass” viewing unethical consumer practices as being similar to breaking traditional patterns of behavior and the violation of expectations and norms. When conservation is important to an individual's life, s/he is more likely to let his/her life be guided by customs, traditions and standards rather than going the limit for experiencing excitement and discovering opportunities. In line with this reasoning, findings of Steenhaut and Van Kenhove's (2006) study show that valuing conservation results in a more intolerant judgment of unethical consumer practices. Therefore, this paper assumes that consumers being high (versus low) in their prevention focus, and thus giving priority to conservation compared to change, are more likely to evaluate ethically questionable consumer actions as inappropriate. Further, prevention-focused individuals are particularly sensitive to and vigilant about (the violation of) normative standards (Keller et al., 2008). Before acting, they carefully assess the social context and actual

consequences, with normative expectations rather than their inner states guiding their behavior (Brebels et al., 2008).

The mentioned characteristics of being less open to risks, having a preference for stability and status quo, and vigilance about the violation of normative standards make a prevention focus similar to Hofstede's cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance can be defined as the extent to which one feels threatened and nervous by uncertain, unknown, ambiguous or unstructured situations (Hofstede, 1991). Consumers nurtured in strong uncertainty avoidance countries are less likely to tolerate deviations from society-based norms or ideals and attempt to take control of unpredictable situations by maintaining rigid codes of beliefs and behavior, such as ethical norms and standards. In other words, people high in uncertainty avoidance prefer the status quo and feel the need for many precise laws and explicit rules to combat the uncertainty and unpredictability (Ferrell and Skinner, 1988). Past research also indicates that individuals who are high in uncertainty avoidance are less likely to take risks (Hofstede, 1984), which from an ethical perspective, relates to higher ethical beliefs (Rallapalli et al., 1994). In addition, previous studies propose high uncertainty avoidance to be related to greater ethicality (e.g., Vitell et al., 1993).

Concerning all these findings, we put forward the following hypothesis:

H2: Prevention relates positively to consumer ethical beliefs. That is, individuals scoring higher on prevention are less likely to tolerate unethical consumer practices compared to individuals scoring lower on prevention.

Study 1

Methodology

Sample

Data were collected in two phases, separated by a period of about two weeks. In a first phase of data-gathering, undergraduate students from a major university fill in a self-administered questionnaire. The authors inform them about the fact that this research would consist of two unconnected parts of

interrogation (cf. psychological separation; Podsakoff et al., 2003) which would take place at different points in time. The first part of the research consists of questions about self-regulatory focus. After two weeks, all the participants (N=594) of the first phase get an invitation to respond to another questionnaire with the goal of examining their consumer ethical beliefs. In total, 452 students (response rate=76.1%), ranging in age from 17 to 26 years (M=20, SD=1.85), participate in the second research part of which 258 are female (57.1%) and 194 are male (42.9%). The authors opt for this temporal separation of measurement of the predictor (i.e., self-regulatory focus) and criterion variable (i.e., consumer ethical beliefs) to control for common method bias. That is, asking about one's self-regulatory focus may make these foci more salient to the respondents, which could ultimately lead to an artifactual covariation of the two constructs under investigation (i.e., self-regulatory focus and consumer ethical beliefs) (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Measures

Independent Variables

A reliable and valid Dutch version (Franken et al., 2005) of Carver and White's (1994) BIS/BAS Scales assesses participants' chronic self-regulatory foci. The Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) and the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) are two general motivation systems that underlie affect and behavior (Gray, 1990). The BIS controls the experience of anxiety in response to anxiety-relevant cues and is particularly sensitive to signals of punishment and in general to the presence or absence of negative outcomes. The BAS controls the experience of such positive feelings as satisfaction and happiness when a person is exposed to cues of impending reward and of such negative feelings as sadness and frustration when the reward is unattainable (Carver, 2004; Carver and White, 1994). In addition, the BAS is specifically sensitive to signals of reward as well as to the general presence or absence of positive outcomes. These definitions reflect the core features of the prevention focus and the promotion focus, respectively (Carver, 1996; Carver and White, 1994; Higgins et al., 1994). This enables us to use the BIS/BAS Scales, which became one of the established ways of investigating self-regulatory focus, as indicators of chronic availability of prevention and promotion foci (cf. Dholakia et al., 2006; Lauriola et al., 2005; Leone et al., 2006; Mann et al., 2004).

The BIS subscale, a multidimensional construct to operationalize prevention focus, consists of 7 items (e.g., 'I worry about making mistakes'). Three subscales refer to different BAS facets which this paper uses to measure promotion focus: Reward Responsiveness (5 items; e.g., 'When I see an opportunity for something, I get excited right away'), Drive (4 items; e.g., 'When I go after something I want, I move on it right away') and Fun Seeking (4 items; e.g., 'I often act on the spur of the moment'). To get an overview of the BIS/BAS items, see Appendix A (in the remainder of this text, the authors speak about prevention and promotion instead of BIS and BAS). Respondents indicate the extent to which they endorse the different statements reflecting promotion and prevention goals on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Both subscales are reliable (prevention: $\alpha=.83$; promotion: $\alpha=.76$) and do not correlate with one another ($r=0.04$; $p>.05$). Distinct promotion and prevention scores are calculated by averaging the items belonging to each of these subscales. Higher scores on the separate subscales indicate greater chronic-prevention and chronic-promotion goal orientations. This study treats the prevention ($M=5.2$; $SD=0.93$) and promotion ($M=5.1$; $SD=0.61$) scores as separate continuous variables in subsequent analyses (cf. Yi and Baumgartner, 2008).

Dependent Variables

To measure consumer ethics, we use the Consumer Ethics Scale (Muncy and Vitell, 1992; Vitell and Muncy, 1992) which the majority of empirical work in the consumer ethics area applies. This scale proves to be reliable and valid in several studies, either within one-country (e.g., Chiou and Pan, 2008; Vitell et al., 2007) or cross-culturally (e.g., Al-Khatib et al., 2005; Rawwas et al., 2005). More specifically, the Consumer Ethics Scale examines the extent to which respondents believe certain questionable consumer practices to be appropriate or not. Initial results indicated that consumers react differently to different types of ethical issues. The authors (Muncy and Vitell, 1992; Vitell and Muncy, 1992) discovered a four factor structure of ethical beliefs. The first category, "actively benefiting from illegal activities", comprises actions which the consumer initiates and which men almost universally perceive as illegal (e.g., changing price tags on merchandise in a store). In the second category, "passively benefiting at the expense of others", consumers take advantage of a seller's mistake rather than their own actions (e.g., getting too much change and not saying anything). In the third dimension, "actively benefiting from deceptive or questionable practices", the consumer instigates an action that

men do not necessarily perceive as illegal (e.g., not telling the truth when negotiating the price of a new automobile). In the last category, consumers conceive their actions as doing little or no harm, and therefore, they may consider these activities as permissible ('no harm/no foul'; e.g., spending over an hour trying on clothing and not buying anything). We add two new items involving the downloading of copyrighted materials and the buying of counterfeit goods to this latter dimension (cf. Vitell et al., 2007) which are an adaptation from Vitell and Muncy's (2005) recent revision of the Consumer Ethics Scale. Appendix B reports the 24 items constructing four dimensions of this scale.

Respondents indicate how acceptable they think the various unethical consumer practices to be on a 7-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating a more tolerant and thus less ethical view. The reliabilities of the four dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale are as follows: "actively benefiting from illegal activities" (5 items; $\alpha=.65$), "passively benefiting at the expense of others" (6 items; $\alpha=.70$), "actively benefiting from deceptive or questionable practices" (5 items; $\alpha=.65$) and "no harm/no foul" (8 items; $\alpha=.79$). According to Peterson (1994), the above reliabilities for all four dimensions are adequate (i.e., $\alpha>0.65$). Besides, the reliabilities are in line with other consumer ethics studies (cf. Al-Khatib et al., 2005; Rawwas et al., 2005). The authors sum the appropriate items within each dimension to come up with one single numeric value for each of the four dimensions. Descriptive statistics show that respondents generally judge the practices of the "actively benefiting from illegal activities" dimension to be the least acceptable ($M=2.7$, $SD=0.82$). On the other hand, participants tolerate the "no harm/no foul" activities the most ($M=5.3$, $SD=0.82$). Respondents perceive the activities of the active/legal dimension ($M=3.7$, $SD=0.93$) to be more unethical than those of the passive dimension ($M=4.5$, $SD=0.89$), which indicates that this student sample attaches more importance to the legal versus illegal issue than to the active versus passive one. In other words, whether or not the activity might be perceived as illegal forms a more decisive factor in participants' ethical judgments than whether or not the consumer actively seeks an advantage or is basically passive in the process.

Results

We use regression analysis to analyze the data and test the hypotheses with promotion and prevention as independent variables and four dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale (i.e., 'Actively benefiting from illegal activities' (Active/Illegal), 'Passively benefiting at the expense of others' (Passive),

'Actively benefiting from deceptive or questionable practices' (Active/Legal) and 'No harm/No foul' (No harm/No foul)) as dependent variables. Table 1 presents the correlation matrix for all these variables. In order to examine the relationships between the independent variables and each of the four dependent variables, we conduct four separate regression analyses of which the results are shown in table 2. This table clearly indicates that respondents' self-regulatory focus significantly explains their perception of various morally dubious consumer practices (i.e., consumer ethical beliefs), with prevention being the sole exception with regard to the "no harm/no foul" dimension. The signs of the respective beta weights are all in the expected direction (i.e., negative for prevention and positive for promotion). That is, the stronger (versus weaker) respondents' promotion focus, the more likely they are to evaluate questionable consumer practices as permissible. In contrast, the stronger (versus weaker) respondents' prevention focus, the more likely they are to not tolerate these activities. Consequently, these findings support hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2. However, as mentioned, results do not confirm our expectations concerning the negative relationship between prevention and the "no harm/no foul" dimension. This insignificant relationship may exist because respondents may not perceive any of these items to be harmful to others. This finding would be consistent with previous research as the "no harm" label for this dimension indicates. However, following this line of reasoning would bring along that also promotion would not significantly explain respondents' ethical judgment of the "no harm/no foul" activities, which is actually not the case within this study.

Table 1

Correlations between variables used in regressions

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Active/Illegal					
2. Passive	0.47***				
3. Active/Legal	0.62***	0.53***			
4. No harm/No foul	0.34***	0.48***	0.42***		
5. Promotion	0.10*	0.11*	0.11*	0.13**	
6. Prevention	-0.18***	-0.15**	-0.18***	-0.03	0.04

N=452; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 2

Results of regression analyses

	Dependent variable			
	Active/Illegal	Passive	Active/Legal	No harm/No foul
Promotion	0.10*	0.12*	0.12*	0.13**
Prevention	-0.18***	-0.16**	-0.18***	-0.036
R ²	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.02
F-value	9.92***	8.55***	10.48***	4.23*

N=451; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Using a student sample makes it possible to control several sources of variation. Gender is the only variable in this study that could generate a possible source of variation. To check the role of this variable, we first estimate the original regression equation. Afterwards, we enter gender as a moderator into the regression equation and assess the change in R². As this change is not statistically significant (p=.22 for 'Active/Illegal', p=.44 for 'Passive', p=.85 for 'Active/Legal', and p=.17 for 'No harm/No foul'), a significant moderator effect of the variable gender is not present (Hair et al., 2006).

Study 2

Methodology and Results

In the past, many studies examining consumer ethics use student samples since they represent an important segment of consumers for many marketers (Chan et al., 1998; Higgs-Kleyn, 1998; Muncy and Eastman, 1998; Rallapalli et al., 1994). Further, because of the essentially exploratory nature of this research and because the items of the measurement scales are relevant to the respondents who answer them, using a student sample forms no serious limitation for this study (Ferber, 1977). However, a restriction of this sampling frame is that caution should be taken in trying to generalize the findings to other samples. Therefore, we want to investigate whether the results of the first study hold when using a sample drawn from a more general population.

The methodology of the second study is exactly the same as the one used in the first study among students (cf. supra). In total, 254 respondents participate in the second study. Table 3 provides an overview of the characteristics of this sample. Compared to the country's population, the sample is slightly more female and highly educated.

Table 3

Sample characteristics

<u>Gender</u>	Male	40.9%
	Female	59.1%
<u>Age</u>	≤24	2.8%
	25-34	41.7%
	35-44	20.9%
	45-54	19.3%
	55+	15.4%
<u>Education</u>	Primary education	1.2%
	Lower secondary education	2.4%
	Higher secondary education	16.5%
	Higher (non-university) education	39.8%
	Higher university education	35.4%
	Postgraduate education	4.7%
<u>Income</u>	< 500 euro	3.2%
	500 - 1499 euro	26.0%
	1500 - 2499 euro	46.1%
	2500 - 3499 euro	13.0%
	≥ 3500	5.2%
	I'd rather not say this	6.7%

N=254

Table 4 gives an overview of the reliabilities, mean scores and standard deviations of promotion, prevention and the four dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale. Similar to our first study, these statistics show that respondents generally judge the practices of the “actively benefiting from illegal activities” dimension to be the least acceptable while they tolerate the “no harm/no foul” activities the most. Further, respondents again attach more importance to the legal versus illegal issue than to the active versus passive one when making ethical judgments about consumer misactions.

Table 4

Number of items, reliabilities, means and standards deviations of variables used in regressions

Construct	# items	Alpha	M	SD
1. Active/Illegal	5	0.71	2.1	0.76
2. Passive	6	0.75	3.7	1.03
3. Active/Legal	5	0.68	3.4	1.05
4. No harm/No foul	8	0.77	4.7	0.91
5. Promotion	13	0.83	5.0	0.73
6. Prevention	7	0.79	5.2	0.82

N=254

Table 5 presents the correlation matrix for both the independent and dependent variables.

Table 5

Correlations between variables used in regressions

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Active/Illegal					
2. Passive	0.59***				
3. Active/Legal	0.63***	0.67***			
4. No harm/No foul	0.37***	0.52***	0.52***		

5. Promotion	0.16*	0.17**	0.16*	0.18**	
6. Prevention	-0.22**	-0.21**	-0.18**	-0.05	0.09

N=254; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Similar to the findings of study 1, results (see table 6) indicate that respondents being high in promotion tolerate unethical consumer practices more compared to respondents being low in promotion. Further, we again find that high prevention-focused individuals believe unethical consumer practices to be less acceptable than low prevention-focused individuals. Consequently, these findings also support hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2. There is, however, one exception. As in the first study, results indicate an insignificant relationship between prevention and the “no harm/no foul” dimension.

Table 6

Results of regression analyses

	Dependent variable			
	Active/Illegal	Passive	Active/Legal	No harm/No foul
Promotion	0.18**	0.19**	0.17**	0.18**
Prevention	-0.23***	-0.22***	-0.19**	-0.06
R ²	0.08	0.08	0.06	0.03
F-value	10.85***	10.37***	8.03***	4.48*

N=254; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Discussion

The present study examines the impact of self-regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997, 1998) on individuals' judgment of unethical consumer practices (i.e., consumer ethical beliefs). Findings indicate that promotion affects one's attitude toward questionable consumer practices with those having a stronger (versus weaker) promotion focus being more likely to believe these misbehaviors to be acceptable. Further, this study shows that prevention influences one's perception of morally dubious

consumer practices with those having a stronger (versus weaker) prevention focus being more inclined to believe these questionable activities to be unacceptable.

This study contributes to the marketing ethics field. In this latter area of research, most attention to date focuses on (consumers' perceptions of) the morality of business and marketing practices (Fukukawa, 2003; Schlegelmilch and Robertson, 1995; Vitell et al., 2001). However, marketing is an exchange process between buyers and sellers who both might be subject to ethical lapses (Rao and Al-Wugahan, 2005). Consumers are also a major part of the sales transaction dyad and ignoring them in ethics research may result in an inadequate understanding of that process (Swaidan et al., 2003; Vitell, 2003) and in the development of ineffective marketing strategies (Swaidan et al., 2004). By examining ethical issues from the perspective of consumers, this paper fills the gap in marketing ethics literature concerning the ethical beliefs and attitudes of the final consumer regarding potentially unethical consumer practices (cf. Vitell et al., 1991). Further, this study also meets the more general and recent call for research into deviant consumer behavior (e.g., Fullerton and Punj, 2004; Harris and Ogbonna, 2002).

Another contribution of this paper is that it addresses the need expressed by recent research to examine the range of antecedents of dysfunctional consumer behavior (e.g., Al-Rafee and Cronan, 2006; Fullerton and Punj, 2004; Vitell, 2003). By investigating the relationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethical beliefs, we also add to the knowledge surrounding regulatory focus. In the course of its existence, regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) has proven to be highly influential. This framework of motivational processes applies to an impressively wide spectrum of topics and psychological phenomena across many different domains (for an overview, see Higgins and Spiegel, 2004). Despite the wide relevance of the regulatory focus theory, no previous studies have examined the consequences of a promotion and a prevention focus for consumer ethical decision making. Even less attention has been devoted to these regulatory systems in marketing (e.g., Aaker and Lee 2001; Andrade 2005; Cohen and Andrade 2004; Kidwell et al., 2008). This makes our paper of interest to marketing theorists. As Reynolds and Harris (2009) state, there exists a tendency within research fields to stay within the own literature boundaries. However, creating new insights into phenomena with a rich but diverse research tradition like unethical consumer behavior necessitates enrichment by delving into the wide existing array of perspectives and positions.

Next to this theoretical contribution, this study has also practical relevance. As a focus for research, consumer ethics has the benefit of generating a better understanding of why consumers undertake unethical behavior (Vitell and Paolillo, 2003). Answering this question can help to limit consumer misbehavior in the marketplace which often pose a significant cost to business (Rawwas and Singhapakdi, 1998). An increased insight of the factors that relate to unethical consumer behavior enables managers to design systems, structures and priorities calculated to lower misbehavior (Reynolds and Harris, 2009). Suppose, for example, that the movie industry wants to launch a movie message to decrease digital piracy behavior. As the two self-regulatory foci can be situationally induced (e.g., Friedman and Förster, 2001; Roney et al., 1995), it might be useful to make the prevention focus salient within this message (e.g., making individuals think about their duties and obligations; individuals facing the contingency of suffering or avoiding punishment) as this study shows that high prevention relates to greater ethicality.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

We want to end this paper by pointing out some limitations and suggestions for further research. A first restriction is the limited percentage of variance that the independent variables explain for each of the dimensions of the Consumer Ethics Scale. Actually, various studies claim that personality variables often fail to explain more than 10 percent of the variance in behavior (e.g., Kassarian et al., 1981). In this way, our study is no exception. Obviously, other constructs not included in this study may account for the rest of this variance. As a matter of fact, a lot of variables could intervene between the “stage” of self-regulatory focus (which is something quite ‘abstract’ and deeply routed within a person) and consumer ethical beliefs (which forms a more concrete ‘phase’ in the ethical decision making process). Unraveling the processes that lie behind this interrelationship would be a research endeavor. Nevertheless, the present study investigates the role of a specific construct (i.e., individual's self-regulatory focus), and with respect to this goal the research is a “successful operation”.

Second, the BIS/BAS Scales or other established ways of assessing respondents' self-regulatory focus (e.g., Higgins et al., 2001; Lockwood et al., 2002) have a restriction in that they are self-report measures. Consequently, the degree to which respondents possess insight into their own motivational state and experiences limits the use of these scales (Summerville and Roese, 2008).

Instead of these multi-item measurement scales, future research might use different tests that show to distinguish well among a promotion and a prevention focus. Examples are the speed/accuracy test (Förster et al., 2003), choice test (Wang and Lee, 2006), determination task (Liberman et al., 1999) and gift task (Liberman et al., 1999). The plus-point of these tasks is that participants do not need good knowledge about their own self-regulatory focus. In addition, respondents are not aware of the real intention of these tests. Research often refers to these tasks, which have a close link with regulatory focus theory.

Third, self-regulatory focus is not just an individual difference variable relevant to chronic personal predilections, one can also situationally induce this focus. In other words, individuals are not only chronically predisposed to experience a particular state; researchers can also temporarily induce this motivational state in them by properties of the current situation (Crowe and Higgins, 1997). Investigating someone's consumer ethical beliefs after an experimental manipulation of this motivational construct would be interesting.

Finally, future studies investigating the interrelationship between self-regulatory focus and consumer ethics might include a behavioral aspect or at least behavioral intentions into their research design. Just like almost all previous consumer ethics studies, this paper uses ethical beliefs as a proxy for intentions and behavior, theorizing that these ethical evaluations influence consumers' intentions to engage in morally dubious practices. However, factors other than ethical beliefs are likely to have an impact on unethical behavioral intentions which in turn influence unethical consumer behavior (Vitell, 2003).

Appendix A: BIS/BAS Scales

BIS

1. I worry about making mistakes
2. I feel worried when I think I have done poorly at something
3. I feel pretty worried or upset when I think or know somebody is angry at me
4. I have very few fears compared to my friends ®
5. If I think something unpleasant is going to happen I usually get pretty “worked up”
6. Even if something bad is about to happen to me, I rarely experience fear or nervousness ®
7. Criticism or scolding hurts me quite a bit

BAS-Reward

1. When good things happen to me, it affects me strongly
2. When I’m doing well at something, I love to keep at it
3. When I get something I want, I feel excited right away
4. When I see an opportunity for something, I get excited right away
5. It would excite me to win a contest

BAS-Drive

1. When I go after something I want, I move on it right away
2. When I want something, I usually go all-out to get it
3. I go out of my way to get things I want
4. If I see a chance to get something I use a “no holds barred” approach

BAS-Fun

1. I will often do things for no other reason than they might be fun
2. I often act on the spur of the moment
3. I crave excitement and new sensations
4. I’m always willing to try something new if I think it will be fun

Appendix B: Consumer Ethics Scale

Actively benefiting from illegal activities

1. Changing price tags on merchandise in a retail store.
2. Drinking a can of soda in a supermarket without paying for it.
3. Reporting a lost item as “stolen” to an insurance company in order to collect the insurance money.
4. Giving misleading price information to a clerk for an unpriced item.
5. Returning damaged goods when the damage was your own fault.

Passively benefiting at the expense of others

6. Getting too much change and not saying anything.
7. Moving into a new residence, finding the cable TV is still hooked up, and using it (rather than signing up and) (without) paying for it.
8. Lying about a child's age in order to get a lower price.
9. Not saying anything when the waiter or waitress miscalculates a bill in your favour.
10. Joining a CD club just to get some free CD's, with no intension of buying any.
11. Observing someone shoplifting and ignoring it.

Actively benefiting from deceptive or questionable practices

12. Using an expired coupon for merchandise.
13. Stretching the truth on an income tax return.
14. Not telling the truth when negotiating the price of a new automobile.
15. Using a coupon for merchandise you did not buy.
16. Returning merchandise to a store by claiming that it was a gift when it was not.

No harm/no foul

17. Taping a movie off the television.

18. Copying computer software or games that you did not buy.
19. Installing software on your computer without buying it.
20. "Burning" a CD instead of buying it.
21. Returning merchandise after trying it and not liking it.
22. Spending over an hour trying on clothing and not buying anything.
23. Downloading music from the internet instead of buying it.
24. Buying counterfeit goods instead of buying the original manufacturers' brands.

Note

¹In the academic literature, researchers use various terms to describe consumers behaving unethically. Examples are: problem customers, jaycustomers, aberrant consumers, dysfunctional customers and misbehaving consumers. We group all these designations as unethical behavior/consumers (cf. Mitchell et al., 2009), but sometimes use these terms interchangeably within this paper.

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