

# **New vs. Standard Songs as a Nonverbal Cue in Advertising: A Regulatory Focus View**

Makoto Ono  
School of Global Japanese Studies  
Meiji University, Tokyo

Akinori Ono  
Faculty of Business and Commerce  
Keio University, Tokyo

## **Abstract**

Although music in advertising is an essential element for influencing consumers' attitudes, the effects of music on consumers' attitudes remain poorly understood. In this study, we conducted three studies to examine the cognitive mechanisms underlying music effects based on regulatory focus theory. While previous research has considered consumers' regulatory focus mindset as a given, this research assumes that consumers' regulatory focus can be influenced by the familiarity of the song employed in the ad, and found the regulatory fit between the song and the message in an ad is crucial for forming a favorable attitude toward the ad. The results of empirical analyses in three studies suggest that a new song (/a standard song), which is unfamiliar (/familiar) to consumers should be adopted as music in advertising, if and only if the advertised product has a value related to a promotion (/prevention) focus.

## ***Keywords***

Regulatory focus theory, promotion focus, prevention focus, new songs, standard songs

## **Research Objectives**

An advertisement is composed of various elements. A picture of the product, the brand name, the copy regarding the appealing point, the endorser, and the background picture are probably the fundamental components of the advertisements. Although overshadowed by these elements, music in advertising is also an essential element for influencing consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions nonverbally.

However, the effects of music on consumers' attitudes and evaluations are complex and remain poorly understood (Allan, 2007). Previous research has argued that the image of the music in advertising is likely to be transferred to the advertised product through the advertisement (meaning transfer) and, thus, it is important that the image evoked by the music is congruent with the image that was held by the advertised product (Scott, 1990; Hung, 2000, 2001). More recent research has examined the differences among consumers in what kind of music is more effective based on regulatory focus theory (Sunaga, Meng, & Zhuang, 2020).

Sunaga, et al. (2020) found that a combination of the violin or flute (/piano) timbre with individuals' promotion focus (/prevention focus) enhances their evaluations on the advertisement and advertised product. In these authors' experiments, the instrumental differences in the regulatory fit were not due to differences in timbre, but rather to the familiarity of timbre for individuals. Respondents perceived piano timbre as familiar, inducing the respondents' feelings of security, which fit with a prevention focus.

Note that the point of their argument should be unfamiliar vs. familiar, not violin vs. piano. There is no universality in the statement that violin music is unfamiliar and piano music is familiar. In other words, some individuals are familiar with violin music, and some are unfamiliar with piano music.

Furthermore, it is certain that consumers with a promotion focus (/prevention focus) prefer viewing ads with information regarding the presence of positive outcomes (/the absence of negative outcomes) if the ads can be chosen and unfavorable ads are avoidable (Takeuchi, 2018). However, when ad viewing is unavoidable, consumers may be influenced by the focus of the ads and be subject to change their regulatory reference. Indeed, whereas pioneering advertising research on regulatory focus has derived a simple finding that if an advertising stimulus is promotional (/preventive), then the stimulus is preferred by consumers with a promotion focus (/prevention focus) (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Avnet & Higgins, 2006; Pham & Avnet, 2004; Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003), recent research has derived a complex finding that if an advertising stimulus is promotional (/preventive), then that stimulus activates the consumer's promotion focus (/prevention focus) and results in favorable attitude toward the ad and advertised brand only when the advertising message is promotional (/preventive). The latter type of studies has dealt with exposure to dogs (/Cats) (Jia, Yang, and Jiang 2022) and accessibility of friend (/family) (Fei, You, & Yang, 2020) as advertising stimuli, and no research has focused on music in advertising.

Thus, in this research, we aim to extend the recent ad music research based on regulatory focus theory as following. (1) We investigate whether consumer responses to an unfamiliar new song (not violin timbre) is different from responses to a familiar standard song (not piano timbre). Moreover, (2) we investigate attitude formation as a result of the regulatory fit of ad messages to the consumers' regulatory focus influenced by the ad music, instead of the

regulatory fit of ad messages to the ad music.

## **Hypotheses**

As mentioned above, this research is to solve two problems in the most recent ad music research: (1) They have not dealt directly with whether the song is new or standard; and (2) they did not deal with its congruity with the advertising message.

New songs are unfamiliar to consumers and thus are likely to arouse their sense of adventure. Therefore, an advertisement featuring a new song as the ad music would activate consumers' promotion focus mindsets. In this situation, when exposed to a promotion focused advertising message, consumers experience a regulatory fit and thus evaluate the advertisement as more favorable. On the other hand, if exposed to a prevention focused advertising message, consumers are not able to experience a regulatory fit and thus evaluate the advertisement as unfavorable.

Standard songs are familiar to consumers and thus are not likely to arouse their sense of adventure. Therefore, an advertisement featuring a standard song as the ad music would activate consumers' prevention focus mindsets. In this situation, when exposed to a prevention focused advertising message, consumers experience a regulatory fit and thus evaluate the advertisement as more favorable. On the other hand, if exposed to a promotion focused advertising message, consumers are not able to experience a regulatory fit and thus evaluate the advertisement as unfavorable.

*H1a:* New songs activate consumers' promotion focus.

*H1b:* Standard songs activate consumers' prevention focus.

*H2a:* Advertisements featuring a new song with a promotion focused message result in more favorable consumer attitudes than those with a prevention focused message.

*H2b:* Advertisements featuring a standard song with a prevention message result in more favorable consumer attitudes than those with a prevention focused message.

## **Study 1**

The first experiment was conducted to test H1a and H1b. We operationally defined "new songs" as ten pop music songs released within three months by singers who had released another hit song were selected as "new songs," whereas "standard songs" as another ten songs by the same singers that had been a big hit in the past and were still in the top on a famous download site.

One hundred male and female students in a university were assigned at random into two groups, in which fifty students were asked to listen to ten "new songs", while others were

asked to listen to ten “standard songs” and to answer questions. The first question was on whether they were familiar with the song. If a respondent was in the “new song” group and if the measured level of familiarity was high, then his or her responses were excluded from the dataset. Similarly, if a respondent was in the “standard song” group and if the measured level of familiarity was low, then, his or her responses were excluded from the dataset.

We also measured the degree of consumer involvement with respect to ten singers who released twenty songs used in the experiment. That was because the responses of high-involvement consumers, i.e., fans to any songs released by a singer, would be different from those of the average consumers. Similarly, the responses of low-involvement consumers, i.e., anti-fans of a singer and anti-all singers in the pop music category would be different from those of the average consumers. The results showed that high-involvement consumers matched those who answered that they were familiar with “new songs” and were excluded, while low-involvement consumers matched those who answered that they were unfamiliar with the “standard songs,” and they were also excluded.

To measure their regulatory orientations, the participants were asked to complete the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) (Haws, Dholakia, & Bearden, 2010).

## **Study 2**

Study 2 was conducted to test H2a. Fifty university students were asked to take part in the experiment and to be exposed to ten unfamiliar “new songs.” We prepared twenty types of advertisements (10 new songs × 2 types of messages) regarding a fictional brand of document binder, an important item for university students. In each of the ad films, as an endorser, a university student introduced the product while an ad music played in the background. At the end of the product description, the endorser said, “... That’s how you can find the information you need quickly!” (the advertising message related to promotion focus), or “...That’s how you can prevent you from missing the information you need!” (the advertising message related to prevention focus).

## **Study 3**

Study 3 was conducted to test H2b and paired with Study 2. Fifty university students were asked to take part in the experiment and to be exposed to ten familiar “standard songs.” We prepared 20 types of advertisements (10 standard songs × 2 types of messages) regarding the same product as in Study 2. In each of the ad films, the endorser also said the same messages as in Study 2.

## Discussion

As a result of three studies mentioned above, all hypotheses were supported. Previous research has argued that violin timbre, which is unfamiliar to people, is congruent with promotion focus, whereas piano timbre, which is familiar to people, is congruent with prevention focus. In contrast, this research focused directly on familiarity and found that new songs induced promotional focus, while standard songs induced prevention focus. Furthermore, while previous research considered consumers' regulatory focus mindset as a given, this research assumed that consumers' regulatory focus can be influenced by the familiarity of the ad music and found the regulatory fit between the song and the message in an advertisement is crucial for forming a favorable attitude.

As a managerial implication, advertisers should adopt a new song that is unfamiliar to their customers as ad music when they advertise a product with values related to a promotion focus. Conversely, firms should use a standard song that is familiar to consumers when they sell a product with values related to a prevention focus. Values of a product can be associated with both promotional and prevention focuses. In such cases, the firms should decide the ad music according to the appealing point of the advertisement.

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