Vigilant Against Manipulation:
The Effect of Regulatory Focus on the Use of Persuasion Knowledge

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Journal of Marketing Research, forthcoming

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This paper proposes that compared to a promotion regulatory focus, a prevention focus increases sensitivity to the advertiser’s manipulative intent. Specifically, when message cues make manipulative intent moderately salient, prevention focused individuals are more likely to activate persuasion knowledge and give less favorable brand evaluations than are promotion focused individuals. When message cues make manipulative intent highly salient or when manipulative intent is not salient, brand evaluations do not differ across regulatory foci. In addition, externally priming suspicion of manipulative intent makes promotion focused individuals react similarly to those with a prevention focus, suggesting that regulatory focus affects vigilance about persuasion.


dKeywords: Regulatory focus, persuasion knowledge, advertising effects.
In recent years, a growing body of literature has examined the content and structure of consumers’ persuasion knowledge (i.e., consumers’ intuitive theories about how marketers try to influence them; Friestad and Wright 1994). Although this literature suggests that persuasion knowledge is goal-directed (e.g., Friestad and Wright 1994; Kirmani and Campbell 2004), little attention has been paid to the effect of motivational factors on the use of persuasion knowledge. This paper addresses this gap by examining the effects of one motivational factor, namely, regulatory focus, on the activation of persuasion knowledge (and thus brand evaluations). According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997), people can attain their goals in two different ways, each involving the use of an alternative regulatory focus. Individuals who pursue a promotion focus perceive their goals as hopes and aspirations, and their predominant strategy is to approach matches to their goals. In contrast, individuals who adopt a prevention focus perceive the same goals as duties and obligations, and their predominant strategy is to avoid mismatches to their goals. While a promotion focus is characterized by eagerness to attain advancements, a prevention focus is characterized by vigilance to assure safety.

Using an advertising context, we examine how regulatory focus interacts with message cues to affect the activation and use of persuasion knowledge; persuasion knowledge, in turn, affects brand evaluations. We propose that compared to a promotion focus, a prevention focus increases sensitivity to the advertiser’s manipulative intent. In the first study, we show that prevention focused individuals are likely to activate persuasion knowledge in the presence of message cues that make the advertiser’s manipulative intent highly or moderately salient. In contrast, promotion focused individuals are likely to activate persuasion knowledge only when message cues make manipulative intent highly salient. Study 2 demonstrates that differences in
sensitivity to manipulative intent underlie these effects, while study 3 further delves into the underlying process.

We posit that the effects of regulatory focus on persuasion knowledge activation reflect differences in direction of processing (i.e., sensitivity to manipulative intent) rather than in depth of processing (i.e., cognitive resources) (Pham and Avnet 2004). As such, this paper makes a contribution to our knowledge of the theoretical antecedents of persuasion knowledge. Prior research shows that persuasion knowledge is more likely to be activated when depth of processing is high (e.g., when individuals have high motivation, ability, and opportunity to process information, Campbell and Kirmani 2000). We suggest that holding depth of processing constant, individuals’ regulatory focus can influence the direction of processing, thereby activating persuasion knowledge and affecting brand evaluations.

In the next section, we describe research on persuasion knowledge and regulatory focus and develop hypotheses about the effects of regulatory focus on the use of persuasion knowledge. We report three studies to test hypotheses and process, and conclude with implications for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Message Cues and Persuasion Knowledge

Persuasion knowledge helps consumers identify when someone is trying to persuade them and how to respond to these persuasion attempts in a way that achieves consumers’ own goals (Friestad and Wright 1994). Persuasion knowledge consists of a variety of beliefs, such as what persuasion tactics are used by marketers; how these tactics affect psychological mediators, such as getting attention, generating interest, or inducing emotion; which tactics are effective or appropriate in different situations; and what are firms’ goals and motives. Activation of
persuasion knowledge usually entails suspicion about the marketer’s ulterior motives, skepticism toward advertising claims, and perceptions of firms or marketing agents as deceptive or manipulative. Suspicion of firms’ ulterior motives or manipulative intent leads to resistance to persuasion, resulting in less favorable brand or agent attitudes (Campbell 1995; Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Jain and Posavac 2004).

We propose that when individuals process ads, the tendency to activate persuasion knowledge may depend on two factors: 1) the extent to which message cues make manipulative intent salient; and 2) regulatory focus. Message cues that increase the salience of the advertiser’s manipulative intent or ulterior motive are likely to activate persuasion knowledge (Campbell and Kirmani 2000). For instance, ads that use certain types of attention-getting tactics, such as delayed sponsor identification, a borrowed interest appeal, or negative comparisons, increase perceptions of the firm’s manipulative intent, resulting in less favorable brand evaluations (Campbell 1995; Jain and Posavac 2004). Moreover, message cues that might be potentially misleading or deceptive, such as disclosures (Johar and Simmons 2000) and incomplete comparisons (Barone et al 1999), may also activate persuasion knowledge, at least among consumers who recognize them as persuasion tactics.

We propose that message cues are likely to vary in terms of the salience of manipulative intent. Some message cues (e.g., a biased source) make manipulative intent highly salient, while other cues (e.g., an independent source) make manipulative intent less salient. In between these two extremes are cues that may make manipulative intent moderately salient. Message cues that make manipulative intent moderately salient are referred to as ambiguous cues, because they may have multiple interpretations (Hoch 2002), one of which is an inference of manipulative intent. For instance, an incomplete comparison (e.g., Brand X is better than the leading brand)
may be interpreted as indicating Brand X’s superiority or may raise suspicion about why the advertiser did not specify the leading brand. For ambiguous cues, situational or individual characteristics may determine whether manipulative intent becomes more salient than another interpretation. We suggest that individuals’ regulatory focus will affect how they react to ambiguous message cues. As developed below, we suggest that individuals with a prevention focus are more likely to interpret ambiguous cues as reflecting manipulative intent than are individuals with a promotion focus.

Regulatory Focus and Persuasion Knowledge

According to regulatory focus theory, people can attain their goals in two different ways, each involving the use of an alternative regulatory focus (Higgins 1987; Higgins et al. 1994). Individuals who adopt a promotion focus perceive their goals as hopes and ideals. Thus, promotion focused individuals are sensitive to the presence or absence of such positive outcomes, and are inclined to approach matches to their goals. In contrast, individuals who adopt a prevention focus perceive the same goals as duties and obligations. Thus, prevention focused individuals are sensitive to the absence or presence of these negative outcomes, and are inclined to avoid mismatches to their goals. Individuals who adopt a promotion versus a prevention focus have been shown to exhibit different psychological states during the process of goal attainment (Crowe and Higgins 1997; Liberman et al. 1999). While individuals with a promotion focus are likely to pursue their goals with eagerness, individuals with a prevention focus are likely to pursue their goals with vigilance.

This fundamental difference in the use of approach versus avoidance strategies may affect a variety of consumer behavior, such as information processing (Pham and Higgins 2005), hypothesis generation (Liberman et al. 2001), and memory (Higgins et al. 1994). For instance,
Pham and Higgins (2005) suggest that during information search, promotion focused individuals’ approach tendencies make them more likely to focus on positive signals about the available options during search. In contrast, prevention focused individuals’ avoidance tendencies make them more likely to focus on negative signals. Because the use of persuasion knowledge entails negative attributions about the advertiser’s manipulative intent, this suggests that promotion and prevention focused individuals may activate persuasion knowledge differently when viewing an ad.

Specifically, we propose that because promotion focused individuals seek to approach matches to the desired end state, they are likely to focus on positive information and use approach strategies when viewing an ad. Given the goal of making a good decision about the product, they may think in terms of how the ad information can help them make a purchase decision. Only when presented with cues that make manipulative intent highly salient will promotion focused individuals evoke negative persuasion knowledge. Thus, their brand evaluations are likely to be more favorable when message cues make manipulative intent less or moderately salient than when message cues make manipulative intent highly salient.

In contrast, because prevention focused individuals seek to avoid mismatches to the desired end state, they are more likely to focus on negative information and use avoidance strategies when viewing an ad. In attempting to make a good decision, they may think in terms of how to avoid being unduly persuaded. Thus, they may be vigilant against manipulation, leading to activation of negative persuasion knowledge and greater skepticism about ad claims even in the presence of ambiguous cues. This suggests that their brand evaluations are likely to be more favorable when message cues make manipulative intent less salient than when message cues make manipulative intent moderately or highly salient. This leads to the following hypothesis:
H1: Compared to a promotion focus, a prevention focus will lead to less favorable brand evaluations in the presence of ambiguous cues. Brand evaluations will be equally unfavorable across levels of regulatory focus in the presence of cues that make manipulative intent highly salient and equally favorable in the presence of cues that make manipulative intent less salient.

In addition, we propose that persuasion knowledge mediates these effects.

H2: Persuasion knowledge mediates the effects of regulatory focus and salience of manipulative intent on brand evaluations.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, our predictions are based on differences in direction, rather than depth, of processing across regulatory foci. We do not claim that vigilance increases the amount of processing devoted to the ad; rather, prevention focused individuals are more sensitive to manipulative intent. Moreover, although the notion that regulatory focus entails differences in direction rather than depth of processing is similar to Pham and Avnet (2004), our process is different from the one proposed in Pham and Avnet (2004). They observed that promotion focused individuals are more likely to base judgments on their subjective affective reactions to the ad; in contrast, prevention focused individuals are more likely to base judgments on the substance of the message. We claim that both prevention and promotion focused individuals are examining the message content, but their reactions to the content are different.

**STUDY 1**

The objective of the first study was to test hypotheses 1 and 2. The study employed a 2 (regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) X 3 (salience of manipulative intent: low, moderate, or high) between-subjects design. Respondents were 129 undergraduate students who received course credit for participation and who were randomly assigned to treatments.
Manipulations

Regulatory focus was manipulated by priming ideals (promotion) or oughts (prevention). In the promotion focus condition, respondents were asked to think about their past hopes, aspirations, and dreams, and to list two of them. In addition, they were asked to think about their current hopes, aspirations, and dreams, and to list two. In the prevention focus condition, respondents thought about their past duties, obligations, and responsibilities, and listed two; they also thought about their current duties, obligations, and responsibilities, and listed two. This manipulation has been shown to be effective in other studies (e.g., Pham and Avnet 2004).

Respondents saw a one-page print ad for the target brand of digital cameras, called Calan. The ad contained a headline, a picture of the camera, and three sets of claims in the copy (See Appendix A for sample ad). Salience of manipulative intent was manipulated through the second claim, which varied the source of a study and the type of comparison. Specifically, the target claim reported results from a study that “consumers rated Calan as producing better quality pictures than the leading brand.” This incomplete comparison was expected to be more ambiguous than a comparison that specified the leading brands as Canon and Kodak. A between subjects pretest on a different group of 57 respondents from the same population showed that the incomplete comparison claim was perceived as more ambiguous than the specific comparison claim ($M_{specific\ comparison} = 2.59; M_{ambiguous\ comparison} = 3.50, F(1,55) = 4.13, p < .05; 1 = not at all ambiguous; 7 = extremely ambiguous). Thus, the incomplete comparison made manipulative intent moderately salient, because some people might be suspicious that the firm was intentionally omitting the name of a mediocre referent brand.

In addition, the study was attributed either to an independent source (i.e., Consumer Reports) or a biased source (i.e., the Calan company). When the source was biased, the
advertiser’s manipulative intent was highly salient. The pretest described earlier also established that perceived manipulative intent was higher when the source of a study was biased than when it was independent. Specifically, two groups of respondents were presented with a claim concerning a study by either an independent source or a biased source and asked to rate the extent to which it reflected an attempt to persuade by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means on a seven-point scale (with higher numbers indicating greater manipulativeness). The claim was perceived as more manipulative when the source was biased than when it was independent \( (M_{biased} = 5.33, M_{independent} = 4.30; F(1,55) = 4.51, p < .04) \).

Taking the study source and the type of comparison together, salience of manipulative intent was high when the study was done by a biased source (Calan) and the comparison was ambiguous (leading brand). Salience of manipulative intent was moderate when the study was done by an independent source (Consumer Reports) and the comparison ambiguous (leading brand). Finally, salience of manipulative intent was low when the study was done by an independent source (Consumer Reports) and the comparison was specific (leading brands, such as Canon and Kodak).

Measures

**Brand attitude and perceived quality.** Attitude toward the brand \( (A_b) \) was measured as an average of three seven-point items: unfavorable/favorable, dislike/like, and unappealing/appealing (Cronbach’s alpha = .92). In addition, perceived quality was measured relative to other digital cameras as an average of five seven-point items: lower/higher quality, performance, reliability, sharp pictures, and stylishness \( (\alpha = .90) \).

**Persuasion knowledge.** Activation of persuasion knowledge was measured in two ways. The first was respondents’ assessment of the ad’s deceptiveness, which was a measure of
skepticism about the ad. This measure was an average of three seven-point items rating the ad: unbelievable/believable, not truthful/truthful, and deceptive/nondeceptive ($\alpha = .83$). These items are reverse coded, so higher numbers indicate greater deceptiveness.

The second measure of persuasion knowledge was based on thought protocols. Respondents were asked to record all the thoughts, feelings, or impressions they had about the product and/or ad. These thoughts were coded for persuasion knowledge, including suspicion about the firm’s motives or manipulative intent (e.g., I don’t believe a study done by the company) and skepticism about ad claims (e.g., which leading brands are they comparing to?). Intercoder reliability was .94.

**Manipulation checks and confounds.** Recall that our basic premise is that compared to a promotion focus, a prevention focus increases vigilance against persuasion. As a check to see whether regulatory focus affects suspicion about being persuaded, we asked respondents to indicate their suspicion. The question stated, “Before I saw the ad, I suspected the ad would contain undue persuasion,” (1=strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). This measure followed all the other measures.

Finally, to ensure that regulatory focus affects direction rather than depth of processing, we measured depth of processing in two ways. First, since involvement can lead to greater depth of processing (e.g., Cacioppo et al. 1986), self-reported involvement was measured as a composite of three items on a seven-point scale in response to the question “as you examined the ad, how did you feel?” (involved, interested, engaged, $\alpha = .95$). Second, the total number of relevant thoughts in the protocols was also assessed. This reflects the extent of message elaboration and, thus, depth of processing.

**Results**
**Manipulation check.** To test whether a prevention focus induced a higher suspicion level than a promotion focus prior to seeing the ad, we ran a 2 X 3 ANOVA on participants’ reported suspicion of the ad’s containing undue persuasion. Only a main effect of regulatory focus emerged as significant \((F(1,123) = 4.93, p < .03)\), with prevention focused individuals reporting higher suspicion levels than promotion focused individuals before they saw the ad \(M_{promotion} = 4.22, M_{prevention} = 4.80\). This provides support for the basic premise of differential suspicion.

**Depth of processing.** A 2 X 3 ANOVA revealed no significant main or interaction effects on either of the two measures of depth of processing (all \(ps > .14\)). The level of self-reported involvement and total number thoughts were the same across conditions. See table 1 for cell means. Thus, as expected, regulatory focus did not affect depth of processing.

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**Brand attitude and perceived quality.** H1 suggests an interaction of regulatory focus and salience of manipulative intent on brand evaluations. A 2 X 3 ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect on both brand attitude \((F(2,123) = 3.10, p < .05)\) and perceived quality \((F(2,123) = 3.14, p < .05)\). In addition, there was a main effect of salience of manipulative intent on both measures, with more favorable evaluations as salience decreased (brand attitude: \(M_{low} = 4.32, M_{moderate} = 3.82, M_{high} = 3.05; F(2,123) = 8.41, p < .001\); perceived quality: \(M_{low} = 4.42, M_{moderate} = 4.12, M_{high} = 3.41; F(2,123) = 9.64, p < .001\).

The interaction effect, depicted in Figure 1, was consistent with H1. Prevention versus promotion focused individuals formed less favorable brand evaluations when salience of manipulative intent was moderate (brand attitude: \(M_{promotion} = 4.41, M_{prevention} = 3.23; F(1,123) = \)
7.04, \( p < .01 \); perceived quality: \( M_{promotion} = 4.51, M_{prevention} = 3.72; F (1,123) = 5.73, p < .02 \)). However, their evaluations were equivalent when salience was low (brand attitude: \( M_{promotion} = 4.33, M_{prevention} = 4.30; F < 1 \); perceived quality: \( M_{promotion} = 4.30, M_{prevention} = 4.53; F < 1 \)), or when salience was high (brand attitude: \( M_{promotion} = 2.89, M_{prevention} = 3.21; F < 1 \); perceived quality: \( M_{promotion} = 3.30, M_{prevention} = 3.52; F < 1 \)).

Contrasts within regulatory focus revealed that promotion focused individuals gave less favorable evaluations when salience of manipulative intent was high rather than moderate (brand attitude: \( F (1,123) = 12.10, p < .001 \); perceived quality: \( F (1,123) = 13.66, p < .001 \)) or low (brand attitude: \( F (1,123) = 10.49, p < .01 \); perceived quality: \( F (1,123) = 8.95, p < .01 \)). The difference between moderate and low salience was not significant (\( Fs < 1 \)). In contrast, prevention focused individuals formed more favorable brand evaluations when salience of manipulative intent was low rather than high (brand attitude: \( F (1,123) = 6.34, p < .05 \); perceived quality: \( F (1,123) = 9.48, p < .01 \)) or moderate (brand attitude: \( F (1,123) = 5.88, p < .05 \); perceived quality: \( F (1,123) = 5.99, p < .05 \)). The difference between moderate and high salience conditions was not significant (\( Fs < 1 \)). Thus, \( H1 \) is supported.

**Persuasion knowledge.** \( H2 \) predicts that persuasion knowledge will mediate these effects. Separate ANOVAs on perceived ad deceptiveness and on persuasion knowledge thoughts (PK thoughts) revealed a significant interaction effect (ad deceptiveness: \( F (2, 123) = 3.00, p < .05 \); PK thoughts: \( 2,123) = 3.08, p < .05 \)). As with brand evaluations, prevention focused individuals were more likely to activate persuasion knowledge than promotion focused individuals when salience of manipulative intent was moderate (ad deceptiveness: \( M_{promotion} = 3.16, M_{prevention} = 4.03; F (1,123) = 6.43, p < .02 \); PK thoughts: \( M_{promotion} = .17, M_{prevention} = 1.00; F (1,123) = 6.89, p < .01 \)). They were equally likely to activate persuasion knowledge when salience was high (ad
deceptiveness: $M_{promotion} = 3.92, M_{prevention} = 3.98; F < 1$; PK thoughts: $M_{promotion} = .90, M_{prevention} = .81; F < 1$), and equally unlikely to activate persuasion knowledge when salience was low (ad deceptiveness: $M_{promotion} = 3.25, M_{prevention} = 2.97, F < 1$; PK thoughts: $M_{promotion} = .33, M_{prevention} = .17; F < 1$).

Contrasts within regulatory focus revealed that for promotion focused individuals, persuasion knowledge was more likely to be used when salience of manipulative intent was high rather than moderate (ad deceptiveness: $F(1,123) = 5.01, p < .005$; PK thoughts: $F(1,123) = 5.53, p < .02$) or low (ad deceptiveness: $F(1,123) = 3.67, p < .06$; PK thoughts: $F(1,123) = 3.24, p < .07$). The difference between moderate and low salience conditions was not significant ($Fs < 1$). For prevention focused individuals, persuasion knowledge was more likely to be used when salience of manipulative intent was high than low (ad deceptiveness: $F(1,123) = 8.87, p < .01$; PK thoughts: $F(1,123) = 4.19, p < .05$), or moderate than low (ad deceptiveness: $F(1,123) = 9.41, p < .01$; PK thoughts: $F(1,123) = 6.89, p < .01$). The difference between the moderate and high salience conditions was not significant ($Fs < 1$). The protocols revealed that prevention focused individuals were skeptical about the comparison brand in the moderate manipulative intent condition; for instance, they questioned who the leading brands were.

To assess whether persuasion knowledge mediated the treatment effects on brand attitude and perceived quality, we conducted mediation analyses (Baron and Kenny 1986). First, we examined whether perceived ad deceptiveness mediated the treatment effects on brand evaluations. The regulatory focus X salience of manipulative intent interaction was significant on brand evaluations (brand attitude: $b = .23, p < .02$; perceived quality: $b = .18, p < .02$) and perceived ad deceptiveness ($b = .17, p < .03$). However, the treatment effects on brand evaluations were fully mediated by perceived ad deceptiveness (brand attitude: $b_{interaction} = .12,$
Similarly, PK thoughts also mediated the treatment effects on brand evaluations. The interaction effect was significant on PK thoughts ($b = -.16, p < .02$). However, the treatment effects on brand evaluations were fully mediated by PK thoughts (brand attitude: $b_{interaction} = .16, p = .08, b_{PK thoughts} = -.34, p < .01$, Sobel: $Z = 1.92, p < .05$; perceived quality: $b_{interaction} = .13, p = .08, b_{PK thoughts} = -.31, p < .001$, Sobel: $Z = 2.02, p < .05$). Thus, as predicted by H2, persuasion knowledge mediated the treatment effects on brand evaluations.

Discussion

The results from study 1 provide support for the hypotheses that regulatory focus interacts with message cues to affect brand evaluations, and that activation of persuasion underlies these effects. In support of the basic premise that a prevention focus makes individuals more vigilant against persuasion, respondents indicated greater suspicion of undue persuasion under a prevention than promotion focus prior to ad exposure. Upon seeing the ad, individuals with a prevention focus were more suspicious about brand claims, perceived the ad as more deceptive, and evaluated the brand less favorably when presented with message cues that made manipulative intent highly or moderately salient. In contrast, individuals with a promotion focus were suspicious and reacted unfavorably only when message cues made manipulative intent highly salient.

The differences across regulatory foci could not be attributed to depth of processing, given the same level of cognitive responses (i.e., the total number of relevant thoughts) and self-reported involvement level. These results are consistent with Pham and Avnet (2004), who found that the same manipulation of regulatory focus did not affect involvement, mood, or need for
cognition. However, our process mechanism differs from theirs. Regression analysis revealed that, in our study, regulatory focus did not change respondents’ reliance on substantive assessments versus subjective feelings in forming their attitudes. The regression analysis was similar to the one reported in Pham and Avnet (2004, p.508), and showed no significant effects of regulatory focus on whether substantive assessments or subjective feelings affected brand attitude.

Study 1 provides some evidence that differences in sensitivity to manipulative intent underlie the responses of promotion and prevention focused individuals to ambiguous message cues. In the next study, we expand on this finding by examining two process-related issues. First, we examine whether sensitivity to manipulative intent means that regulatory focus affects perceptions of the diagnosticity of manipulative intent, desirability of manipulative intent, or both. Our premise is that promotion and prevention focused individuals differ in terms of perceptions of how diagnostic a cue is of manipulative intent, and that this perception affects brand evaluations. However, it could be that the two foci also differ in terms of whether they think manipulative intent is desirable. In other words, prevention focused individuals may find manipulative intent to be less appealing than do promotion focused individuals. We directly measure desirability and diagnosticity to throw light on this issue.

Second, to further confirm that sensitivity to manipulative intent underlies the results, we increase the sensitivity of promotion focused individuals to manipulative intent by externally priming suspicion. Externally priming suspicion should make individuals under a promotion focus more vigilant about manipulative intent, leading them to respond similarly to those in a prevention focus. Prior research shows that external priming of suspicion can affect message processing. For instance, Darke and Ritchie (forthcoming) found that priming advertising
deception may activate negative stereotypes about marketing, making individuals distrustful of advertising claims from the same or different source. Similarly, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) showed that externally priming suspicion of ulterior motives may lead to negative evaluations of salespeople.

Because the differential effects of regulatory focus occurred only in the ambiguous cue condition (i.e., when manipulative intent was moderately salient), we examine this condition more carefully. We propose that externally priming suspicion of manipulative intent will activate the persuasion knowledge of individuals in a promotion focus. Therefore, compared to a no suspicion priming condition, promotion focused individuals primed with suspicion may be more vigilant about manipulative intent when they see an ad with an ambiguous cue. This would result in less favorable brand evaluations for promotion focused individuals when suspicion is primed than when it is not primed. In contrast, priming suspicion should not affect the responses of prevention focused individuals, since their persuasion knowledge is already activated when they encounter an ad. This leads to the third hypothesis, which deals with the situation *when ad cues are ambiguous about manipulative intent.*

**H3:** When suspicion is not primed, a prevention focus will lead to more negative brand evaluations than will a promotion focus. When suspicion is primed, however, brand evaluations will be equally negative under a promotion and prevention focus.

*STUDY 2*

The objective of the study was to further examine the underlying process mechanism for the effects observed in study 1. The study employed a 2 (regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) X 2 (suspicion: externally primed vs. not) between-subjects design. Respondents
were 82 undergraduate students who received course credit for participation and who were randomly assigned to treatments.

Procedure and Manipulations

The procedure was similar to that in study 1, except that the suspicion prime occurred prior to the regulatory focus manipulation. The suspicion priming manipulation was in the form of an unrelated task in a separate booklet prior to the main study. Respondents were told that they would be evaluating a short newspaper article for its relevance to college students. Two different articles were created (see appendix B). In the suspicion primed condition, the article was intended to make consumers vigilant about corporate fraud. Specifically, the article described a company whose CEO had fabricated financial figures to show a profit. Subsequently, auditors had reviewed the company’s financial statements and exposed the deception. Note that this article had nothing to do with advertising, thereby reducing the likelihood that respondents would see the relationship between the two studies, and ensuring that the manipulation induced generalized suspicion rather than suspicion of advertising claims. A similar manipulation has been used in prior work (Darke and Argo 2005). In the suspicion unprimed condition, the article described a new concept car at the design stage by Volkswagen.

To assess the equivalence of the two primes on dimensions unrelated to suspicion, respondents in this study evaluated the article on measures such as believable, interesting, informative and meaningful (seven-point scales). These measures were combined to form an ad perception index ($\alpha = .72$). ANOVA on this index revealed no significant differences across the two primes ($p > .16$). In addition, a separate pretest with 37 respondents from the same population assessed equivalence on other dimensions, such as mood and involvement. In a between subjects design, respondents read either the suspicion prime ($n = 18$) or the no suspicion
prime (n = 19). They then filled out some measures, including the PANAS scale (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988), involvement, and suspicion. Responses to the PANAS scale were analyzed separately for positive and negative mood; we created a positive (α = .88) and negative (α = .92) mood scale (5 point scales) by averaging all positive items and all negative items, respectively. ANOVA revealed that the primes did not differentially affect negative (M_{suspicion} = 1.51, M_{no suspicion} = 1.26; F(1, 35) = 1.97, p > .17) or positive (M_{suspicion} = 2.27, M_{no suspicion} = 2.61; F(1, 35) = 1.67, p > .20) mood. Similarly, task involvement was measured by the average of three items (involved, engaged, interested) measured on seven-point scales (α = .78). There were no differences across primes on the involvement measure (M_{suspicion} = 4.43, M_{no suspicion} = 4.56; F < 1). Finally, respondents assessed the extent to which the newspaper article made them feel suspicious (average of four items on seven-point scales: concerned, tricked, fooled, suspicious; α = .86). ANOVA revealed a significant effect of prime on this measure (M_{suspicion} = 4.39, M_{no suspicion} = 2.32; F(1, 35) = 18.98, p < .001). Thus, the primes were equivalent in terms of mood, involvement and believability, but they differed in terms of generating suspicion.

After the suspicion priming manipulation, respondents received the regulatory focus manipulation. Regulatory focus was manipulated through priming hopes and ideals versus duties and obligations, as in study 1. In addition, to ensure a strong regulatory focus manipulation, we added a word search task. In the promotion condition, respondents searched for promotion-related words, such as accomplish, achieve, and nurturance. In the prevention condition, they searched for prevention-related words, such as avoidance, caution, and security.

Finally, all respondents saw the ad from the moderately salient manipulative intent condition of study 1, which contained the ambiguous message claim. They then responded to a series of measures, which were the same measures used in study 1 with the following exceptions.
First, to assess diagnosticity of manipulative intent, respondents were shown the target claim again and asked to indicate the extent to which they thought the ad claim tried to persuade by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means (1 = not at all; 7 = extremely). To assess desirability of manipulative intent, respondents indicated agreement with the statement, “It really offends me when a company attempts to persuade by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). These measures were taken after the other measures.

Second, to ensure that the suspicion priming manipulation did not interfere with the regulatory focus manipulation, we added a manipulation check for regulatory focus, which was administered at the end. Respondents were asked to assess two headlines in terms of their suitability for the target ad. The first headline was framed with a promotion focus: “Capture Those Important Moments Now! Calan Camera, For Those Special Memories.” The second headline was framed with a prevention focus: “Don’t Let Those Important Moments Slip By! Calan Camera, For Those Special Memories.” Each headline was rated on three items measured on seven-point scales (bad-good, inappropriate-appropriate, unappealing-appealing, α = .83 and .90, respectively). If the regulatory focus manipulation was successful, promotion (prevention) focused participants should give higher ratings on the promotion-oriented headline (prevention-oriented headline), due to regulatory fit principles (Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004; Zhu 2003).

Results

Depth of processing. A 2 X 2 ANOVA revealed no significant main or interaction effects on the level of self-reported involvement and total number thoughts (all ps > .21). See table 2 for cell means. Thus, as in study 1, regulatory focus did not affect depth of processing.

Insert table 2 about here
Regulatory focus manipulation check. A 2 X 2 ANOVA on the promotion-oriented headline revealed a significant main effect of regulatory focus ($F(1, 78) = 3.97, p < .05$) and no other significant treatment effects. As expected, individuals in a promotion focus reacted more favorably to the headline than did those in a prevention focus ($M_{promotion} = 5.03$, $M_{prevention} = 4.48$). Similarly, there was a significant main effect of regulatory focus ($F(1, 78) = 8.06, p < .05$) and no other significant effects on reactions to the prevention-oriented headline, with more favorable reactions under a prevention than promotion focus ($M_{promotion} = 3.88$, $M_{prevention} = 4.71$). Thus, the regulatory focus manipulation was successful.

Brand attitude and perceived quality. H3 suggests an interaction effect between regulatory focus and suspicion priming on brand evaluations. A 2 X 2 ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect on both brand attitude ($F(1, 78) = 14.03, p < .001$) and perceived quality ($F(1, 78) = 11.02, p < .001$). In addition, there was a significant main effect of regulatory focus on the two measures (Brand attitude: $F(1, 78) = 12.51, p < .001$; perceived quality: $F(1, 78) = 7.45, p < .01$) as well as a significant main effect of suspicion priming on perceived quality ($F(1, 78) = 13.04, p < .001$). Since the main effects were qualified by the significant interaction effect, we will not dwell on them.

As predicted in H3, when suspicion was not primed, brand evaluations were significantly less favorable under a prevention than promotion focus (Brand attitude: $M_{promotion} = 3.55$, $M_{prevention} = 2.03$; $F(1, 78) = 26.52, p < .001$; perceived quality: $M_{promotion} = 3.93$, $M_{prevention} = 2.74$, $F = 18.29, p < .001$). This replicated the results in the ambiguous cue condition of study 1. When suspicion was externally primed, however, brand evaluations were equivalent under the
two foci (Brand attitude: $M_{\text{promotion}} = 2.42$, $M_{\text{prevention}} = 2.46$; $F < 1$; perceived quality: $M_{\text{promotion}} = 2.57$, $M_{\text{prevention}} = 2.69$, $F < 1$). Thus, H3 is supported.

Seen differently, under a promotion focus, brand evaluations were less favorable when suspicion was primed than when it was not primed (Brand attitude: $M_{\text{prime}} = 2.42$, $M_{\text{no prime}} = 3.55$; $F(1, 78) = 14.43$, $p < .001$; perceived quality: $M_{\text{prime}} = 2.57$, $M_{\text{no prime}} = 3.93$, $F(1, 78) = 23.44$, $p < .001$). Under a prevention focus, brand evaluations were not significantly different across primes (Brand attitude: $M_{\text{prime}} = 2.46$, $M_{\text{no prime}} = 2.03$; $F(1, 78) = 2.17$, $p > .15$; perceived quality: $M_{\text{prime}} = 2.69$, $M_{\text{no prime}} = 2.74$, $F < 1$).

**Persuasion knowledge.** H2 predicts that persuasion knowledge will mediate these effects. Separate ANOVAs on perceived ad deceptiveness and on persuasion knowledge thoughts (PK thoughts) revealed a significant interaction effect (ad deceptiveness: $F(1, 78) = 9.20$, $p < .01$; PK thoughts: $F(1, 78) = 4.00$, $p < .05$). Mirroring the brand evaluation results, when suspicion was not primed, persuasion knowledge was more likely to be used under a prevention than promotion focus (ad deceptiveness: $M_{\text{promotion}} = 3.43$, $M_{\text{prevention}} = 4.73$; $F(1, 78) = 11.64$, $p < .001$; PK thoughts: $M_{\text{promotion}} = .30$, $M_{\text{prevention}} = 1.19$, $F(1, 78) = 9.03$, $p < .01$). When suspicion was primed, however, persuasion knowledge was equivalent under the two foci (ad deceptiveness: $M_{\text{promotion}} = 4.68$, $M_{\text{prevention}} = 4.35$; $F < 1$; PK thoughts: $M_{\text{promotion}} = .90$, $M_{\text{prevention}} = .95$; $F < 1$).

Further tests revealed that persuasion knowledge mediated the treatment effects on brand attitude and perceived quality. We first examine perceived ad deceptiveness as a mediator. The regulatory focus X suspicion prime interaction was significant on brand evaluations (brand attitude: $b = 1.56$, $p < .001$; perceived quality: $b = 1.30$, $p < .001$) and perceived ad deceptiveness ($b = 1.63$, $p < .01$). However, ad deceptiveness mediated the interaction effect on brand evaluation (brand attitude: $b_{\text{interaction}} = .92$, $p < .02$, $b_{\text{ad deceptiveness}} = .40$, $p < .001$, Sobel: $Z = 2.62$,
perceived quality: \( b_{\text{interaction}} = .69, p < .06, b_{\text{ad deceptiveness}} = .38, p < .001, \) Sobel: \( Z = 2.63, p < .01 \). Similarly, PK thoughts marginally mediated the treatment effects on brand evaluations. The interaction effect was significant on PK thoughts \( (b = -.84, p < .05) \), and PK thoughts marginally mediated the interaction effect on brand evaluation (brand attitude: \( b_{\text{interaction}} = 1.25, p < .01, b_{PK \text{thoughts}} = -.37, p < .001, \) Sobel: \( Z = 1.84, p < .08; \) perceived quality: \( b_{\text{interaction}} = 1.07, p < .01, b_{PK \text{thoughts}} = -.28, p < .10, \) Sobel: \( Z = 1.62, p < .10 \)).

*Diagnosticity vs. desirability.* To assess whether desirability or diagnosticity drove the treatment effects, we examined the results on the diagnosticity and desirability measures. A 2 X 2 ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect on diagnosticity of manipulative intent \( (F(1, 78) = 5.63, p < .02) \). When suspicion was not primed, prevention focused individuals considered the ad claim to be more diagnostic of manipulative intent than did promotion focus individuals \( (M_{\text{promotion}} = 3.30, M_{\text{prevention}} = 4.57; F(1, 78) = 8.25, p < .01) \). When suspicion was primed, however, there was no difference across the two foci in terms of diagnosticity \( (M_{\text{promotion}} = 4.50, M_{\text{prevention}} = 4.29; F < 1) \). Moreover, diagnosticity mediated the treatment effects on brand evaluations. Specifically, the regulatory focus X prime interaction was significant on the diagnosticity measure \( (b = -1.49, p < .02) \), and diagnosticity mediated the interaction effect on brand evaluation (brand attitude: \( b_{\text{interaction}} = 1.06, p < .01, b_{\text{diagnosticity}} = -.34, p < .001, \) Sobel: \( Z = 2.16, p < .05; \) perceived quality: \( b_{\text{interaction}} = .82, p < .03, b_{\text{diagnosticity}} = -.33, p < .001, \) Sobel: \( Z = 2.17, p < .05 \)).

In contrast, there were no significant treatment effects on the desirability measure \( (all ps > .39) \), suggesting that individuals in a promotion or prevention focus had equivalent ratings of desirability \( (M_{\text{promotion}} = 5.10, M_{\text{prevention}} = 4.74, F < 1) \). Thus, the underlying mechanism appears to be based on differences in diagnosticity, rather than desirability, of manipulative intent.
Discussion

Study 2 replicated the results from the ambiguous claim condition of study 1 by showing that when suspicion was not externally primed, a promotion focus led to more favorable brand evaluations than did a prevention focus. The study also shed light on the underlying process mechanism. When generalized suspicion was primed through an article about corporate accounting fraud, the two regulatory foci led to similar brand evaluations. This suggests that whereas a prevention focus naturally generates vigilance, a promotion focus generates vigilance only when suspicion is made externally salient. Once again, persuasion knowledge ratings and thoughts were shown to underlie these effects. Finally, differences in perceived diagnosticity, rather than desirability, of manipulative intent drove the results.

One issue raised by study 2 is whether the suspicion manipulation may have triggered a prevention focus. If this were the case, the suspicion manipulation would have just been an alternative manipulation of regulatory focus. However, this is unlikely, given that the manipulation check on regulatory focus revealed a successful manipulation that was unaffected by the suspicion prime. Nevertheless, in the next study we examine formally whether a prevention focus is indeed distinct from suspicion.

We expect that while a prevention focus and suspicion may lead to similar results on tasks that trigger suspicion (e.g., the processing of ambiguous ad claims), they are likely to have different effects on other, non-suspicious tasks. The reason is that regulatory focus entails aspects other than suspicion, such as the use of different strategies to achieve goals and the preference for different product attributes. Prevention focused individuals prefer to use avoiding mismatch strategies to achieve their goals, whereas promotion focused individuals prefer to use approaching match strategies to attain goals (Higgins 1997). Thus, prevention focused
individuals should prefer brands that offer prevention benefits, such as cavity prevention or safety, while promotion focused individuals should prefer brands that offer promotion benefits, such as teeth whitening or energy. In contrast, individuals primed with suspicion are unlikely to exhibit differences in preference for product attributes; a suspicious person should be indifferent to whether a brand has promotion or prevention benefits. Therefore, we predict that individuals primed with a prevention focus and those primed with suspicion should respond similarly when processing ambiguous ad claims. However, they may behave differently when responding to non-suspicion related tasks.

**STUDY 3**

The objective of the study was to assess whether a prevention focus and suspicion have unique effects. The study was a between subjects design with four conditions (promotion, prevention, suspicion, no suspicion). Respondents were 115 undergraduate students at a large eastern university who participated for extra credit and were randomly assigned to conditions.

Respondents participated in a study that included several tasks. The first task entailed receiving one of the four manipulations (promotion, prevention, suspicion, no suspicion). One group (promotion focus) was asked to describe their hopes and ideals, as in study 1; the second group (prevention focus) was asked to describe their duties and obligations, as in study 1; the third group (suspicion primed) was asked to read and evaluate the corporate fraud newspaper article from study 2; and the fourth group (suspicion not primed) was asked to read and evaluate the VW concept car article from study 2.

To maintain consistency with the previous studies, respondents saw an ad for Calan camera after completing the first task. The ad was the same as that in study 2 (Appendix A), with the exception that the critical ambiguous claim (paragraph 2) was deleted. Thus, the ad did not
contain any mention of study results. This was done intentionally to provide a neutral ad seen by all respondents. Then, respondents were asked to complete a purportedly different task about brand preferences (Zhou and Pham 2004). They read descriptions of three pairs of brands and reported their preferences along a scale from 1 (prefer Brand A) to 7 (prefer Brand B). In the first pair (grape juices), Brand A was rich in vitamin C and iron, thus promoting high energy (promotion benefit), and Brand B was rich in antioxidants, thus reducing the risk of cancer and heart diseases (prevention benefit). In the second pair (toothpastes), Brand A was particularly good for cavity prevention (prevention benefit) and Brand B was particularly good for tooth whitening (promotion benefit). In the third pair (snacks), Brand A was a rich and tasty chocolate cake (promotion benefit) and Brand B was a healthy and fresh fruit salad (prevention benefit). The three sets of brand choices were taken directly from Zhou and Pham (2004). Responses to the items were coded so that higher ratings indicated greater prevention rather than promotion benefits, and then averaged to form a composite measure. We expected that regulatory focus, but not suspicion, would affect these choices.

The second set of questions concerned evaluating the manipulative intent of six ad claims. Respondents were asked to indicate whether each claim reflected an attempt to persuade by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means, on a seven-point scale (1 = not at all manipulative, 7 = extremely manipulative). Three of the claims (the third, fifth and sixth claims they saw) were intended to be ambiguous with respect to manipulative intent, while the other three claims were intended to make manipulative intent less salient. The three ambiguous claims included the ambiguous claim from the earlier studies (“In a recent study by Consumer Reports, consumers rated Calan as producing better quality pictures than the leading brand”) plus two more claims (“If you buy the Calan camera in the next two weeks, we’ll send you a free carrying
case” and “Calan’s better than the rest”). These claims were combined to create an index of ambiguous claims (α = .70). We expected differences across both regulatory focus and suspicion priming for this index. The other three claims were expected to be low in salience of manipulative intent (“This camera gives you 4 megapixel effective resolution and 3x optical zoom;” “Precision metering systems enable effortless shooting and provide sharp results;” “The camera is stylish, light, and packed with the latest in user-friendly technology”). These claims were combined to create an index of unambiguous claims (α = .74). We expected no treatment effects on this index.

Results

Brand preference. A one-way ANOVA on the brand preference task showed a significant main effect (F(3, 111) = 2.69, p < .05). Planned contrasts revealed that as expected, regulatory focus affected brand preference, while suspicion priming did not. Across the three pairs of brands, a promotion (prevention) focus led to greater preference for the brand featuring promotion (prevention) benefits (M_{promotion} = 4.20, M_{prevention} = 5.07; t (111) = -2.63, p < .01). Moreover, there were no significant differences on brand preference between the suspicion and non suspicion conditions (M_{suspicion} = 4.64, M_{no suspicion} = 4.37; t (111) = .86, p > .39). Thus, regulatory focus affected brand preference, while suspicion did not. Table 3 shows the cell means.


Claims. Factor analysis confirmed that the six claims fell into the anticipated two factors. Thus, analyses were performed on the two claim indices. A one-way ANOVA on the ambiguous
claims index revealed a significant treatment effect \( (F(3, 111) = 3.20, p < .03) \). Planned contrasts revealed that both regulatory focus and suspicion priming affected perceived manipulative intent of the claims. Specifically, a prevention focus led to perceptions of the claims as more manipulative than did a promotion focus \( (M_{promotion} = 4.29, M_{prevention} = 4.99; t \ (111) = -2.17, p < .05) \). In addition, the claims were perceived as more manipulative when suspicion was primed than when it was not primed \( (M_{suspicion} = 4.80, M_{no \ suspicion} = 4.16; t \ (111) = 2.04, p < .05) \). Thus, both suspicion priming and a prevention focus led to greater sensitivity to manipulative intent.

A one-way ANOVA on the index of unambiguous claims revealed no significant treatment effects \( (F < 1) \). As expected, the claims were perceived as equally nonmanipulative under all four conditions: \( (M_{promotion} = 3.19, M_{prevention} = 3.68; M_{suspicion} = 3.76, M_{no \ suspicion} = 3.49) \). Thus, consistent with our expectations, neither suspicion priming nor regulatory focus affected the evaluation of unambiguous claims.

Discussion

Results from this study offer important insights about the difference between a prevention focus and suspicion. They demonstrate that suspicion is just one aspect of a prevention regulatory focus. When presented with ambiguous ad claims, prevention focused individuals perceived the claims to be more manipulative than did individuals in a promotion focus; and those primed with suspicion perceived the claims to be more manipulative than did those not primed with suspicion. In terms of ambiguous claims, therefore, a prevention focus and suspicion priming led to the same results. However, a prevention focus was distinct from suspicion in other aspects, such as preferred product attributes. Specifically, in a brand preference task, while prevention (promotion) focused individuals exhibited a preference for brands featuring prevention (promotion) benefits, suspicion primed individuals were not expected nor found to
differ from unprimed individuals. This suggests that although a prevention regulatory focus may lead to suspicion, suspicion does not necessarily lead to a prevention focus.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The objective of the paper was to determine the conditions under which regulatory focus affected the activation and use of persuasion knowledge. The data supported our basic premise that a prevention focus leads to greater sensitivity to the advertiser’s manipulative intent than does a promotion focus. Study 1 demonstrated that compared to individuals with a promotion focus, prevention focused individuals were more likely to activate persuasion knowledge and give less favorable brand evaluations when ad cues made manipulative intent moderately salient. In contrast, promotion focused individuals activated persuasion knowledge only when message cues made manipulative intent highly salient. Study 2 replicated and extended these findings to show that the effects were due to differences in perceived diagnosticity, rather than desirability, of manipulative intent. Finally, study 3 demonstrated that whereas a prevention focus may lead to suspicion, suspicion does not necessarily imply a prevention focus.

Our results support the notion that regulatory focus affected the direction rather than the depth of processing (Pham and Avnet 2004). Message elaboration (i.e., involvement and total number of relevant thoughts) was equivalent across foci, suggesting the same depth of processing. However, prevention focused individuals were more sensitive to being unduly manipulated than were those with a promotion focus, indicating differences in direction of processing. These findings have both theoretical and managerial implications.

Implications for Research and Practice

The paper contributes to research on both persuasion knowledge and regulatory focus. One major contribution is to identify direction of processing, as indicated by regulatory focus,
an antecedent of persuasion knowledge activation. Prior research suggests that cognitive capacity (depth of processing) is required to activate persuasion knowledge (Campbell and Kirmani 2000), since inferences of ulterior motives involve higher order inferential processing. Our results indicate that even when depth of processing is constant, a prevention focus is more likely to lead to the activation of persuasion knowledge than is a promotion focus. The reason is that individuals in a prevention focus, who want to avoid being unduly persuaded, are more sensitive to manipulative intent than are individuals in a promotion focus. This enriches our understanding of the antecedents of persuasion knowledge, adding regulatory focus to other antecedents, such as cognitive resources, accessibility of motives, and persuasion expertise (cf. Campbell and Kirmani 2006).

The notion that prevention focused individuals may try to avoid being unduly persuaded by an ad suggests that a prevention focus may lead to greater use of sentry coping strategies (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). In a study of consumers’ persuasion coping behaviors, Kirmani and Campbell described two general approaches by consumer targets for dealing with interpersonal persuasion agents: targets behaving as goal seekers attempted to use the persuasion agent to achieve their own purchase-related goals, while targets behaving as persuasion sentries attempted to achieve their purchase-related goals by guarding against unwanted persuasion. Sentry strategies, reflecting the desire to avoid being unduly persuaded, included forestalling, deception, assertive resistance, confrontation, punishment, withdrawal, preparation, and enlisting a companion. Our research suggests that sentry strategies may be more likely to be used in a prevention focus, while seeker strategies may be more likely to be used in a promotion focus. This would extend our findings beyond the advertising context to interpersonal persuasion. Future research may examine the link between regulatory focus and persuasion coping strategies.
Another contribution of the paper is to demonstrate that general suspicion of companies can affect processing of advertising. Darke and Ritchie (forthcoming) show that when people learn that they have been personally deceived by an ad, their distrust spills over to ads from other advertisers. Our paper describes a much more general phenomenon. Our suspicion manipulation was different from theirs in two important ways: 1) people were not personally deceived by the suspicion-arousing stimulus; and 2) the suspicion-arousing stimulus was an article that mentioned corporate financial fraud and was thus unrelated to advertising. Our studies show that simply learning that a company’s CEO lied about profitability can make individuals suspicious about ambiguous ad claims from a different company. This suggests that consumers may respond negatively to advertising or other persuasion attempts when corporate fraud is salient, as in a television news show describing deceptive financial practices. From a managerial point of view, placing ads in movies or TV shows that make corporate fraud salient (e.g., “The Smartest Guys in the Room,” Dateline or 60 Minutes segments on the Enron fraud) might trigger suspicion of advertisements or even product placements in the movie or TV show environment. It would be useful to examine the boundaries of this phenomenon. For instance, we speculate that consumers may be suspicious of advertising claims when suspicion is triggered even in a non-business context, such as a movie about political fraud (e.g., “Wag the Dog”).

The paper also contributes to the regulatory focus literature. First, it identifies suspicious processing of marketing stimuli as a potential outcome of a prevention focus. This adds suspicion to other possible outcomes identified by prior research, such as sensitivity to gains and losses (Aaker and Lee 2001). More broadly, our research suggests that regulatory focus leads to differential activation of persuasion knowledge. Because prevention versus promotion focused individuals are more vigilant again manipulation, they are more likely to perceive ambiguous ad
claims as diagnostic of manipulative intent, and consequently activate persuasion knowledge and form less favorable brand evaluations. Note that it is possible that manipulative intent is more accessible to prevention versus promotion focused individuals, and this greater accessibility leads to greater perceived diagnosticity. Future research could explore this relationship in detail.

From a managerial point of view, this suggests that using ad headlines that might trigger a prevention focus (e.g., a headline for CIT Group Inc. stating, “Help you avoid hazards”) might also make readers more suspicious of ambiguous ad claims. Consequently, consumers may be more vigilant or skeptical when processing the ad, particularly if the ad contains information about test results or negative comparisons. In other words, although a prevention focus may be useful for certain types of effects (e.g., encouraging processing of detailed or unique information, Zhu and Meyers-Levy 2007), it may backfire if the ad contains ambiguous claims. Advertisers must be cautious in inducing a prevention focus in the presence of copy that might be interpreted negatively.

Further, results from study 2 suggest external priming can activate suspicion among promotion focused individuals, and therefore cause them to behave similarly as prevention focused individuals. Future research may examine whether it is possible to suppress the suspicion of prevention focused individuals when processing ads with ambiguous claims, so that they might behave similarly as promotion focused individuals. For example, if prevention focused individuals are highly suspicious, it may be possible to design ads to reduce the suspicion by including reassuring information. In fact, we speculate that first presenting an ambiguous claim and then qualifying that claim in a reassuring fashion may be a particularly successful ad strategy for individuals in a prevention focus.

Limitations
As with any lab study, caution must be exercised before generalizing these results to situations beyond those studied. In all our studies, regulatory focus was primed before presenting respondents with the target ad, which might not be feasible or realistic in the marketplace. Thus, it would be interesting to explore whether regulatory focus induced through ad exposure, such as message framing, might have similar effects to those observed here.

Finally, the paper does not examine the conceptual issue of what constitutes an ambiguous ad claim. We defined ambiguous claims as those with moderately salient manipulative intent and used a pretest to identify the target ambiguous claim. Prior literature suggests that ad claims differ in terms of consumer skepticism (Ford, Smith and Swasy 1990). Subjective claims generate greater skepticism than objective claims, while experience claims generate greater skepticism than search claims. This suggests that ambiguous claims are likely to be somewhat subjective and not immediately verifiable. Future research may more systematically examine which claims may make manipulative intent moderately accessible.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Study 1: Cell Means and Standard Deviations</th>
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<td>Low Salience of Manipulative Intent</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Promotion Focus</td>
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<td>Brand Attitude(^a)</td>
<td>4.33 (1.64)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Quality(^a)</td>
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<td>Perceived Ad Deceptiveness(^b)</td>
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<td>Total Number of Thoughts</td>
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<td>Number of Persuasion Knowledge Thoughts</td>
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<td>Involvement(^a)</td>
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Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.  
\(^a\) Measured on 7-point scales with higher numbers indicating more positive scores.  
\(^b\) Measured on 7-point scale with higher numbers indicating greater deceptiveness.
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<th>Suspicion not primed</th>
<th>Suspicion primed</th>
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<td>Prevention Focus</td>
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<td>2.03 (.81)</td>
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<td>Perceived Quality\textsuperscript{a}</td>
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<td>2.74 (.84)</td>
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<td>Perceived Ad Deceptiveness\textsuperscript{b}</td>
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<td>1.19 (1.08)</td>
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\textit{Note:} Standard deviations are in parentheses.
\textsuperscript{a}Measured on 7-point scales with higher numbers indicating more positive scores.
\textsuperscript{b}Measured on 7-point scale with higher numbers indicating greater deceptiveness.
\textsuperscript{c}Measured on 7-point scale with higher numbers indicating less desirability.
Table 3

Study 3: Cell Means and Standard Deviations

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<tr>
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<td>Brand Preference&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>5.07 (1.21)</td>
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<td>4.99 (1.14)</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses
<sup>a</sup>Measured on 7-point scales with higher numbers indicating preference for prevention focused brand.
<sup>b</sup>Measured on 7-point scale with higher numbers indicating greater perceived manipulative intent.
Figure 1

Study 1
Regulatory Focus (promotion vs. prevention) Interacts with Salience of Manipulative Intent (low vs. moderate vs. high) to Affect Brand Attitude

![Graph showing the interaction between regulatory focus and salience of manipulative intent on brand attitude. The graph indicates that promotion focus leads to higher brand attitude compared to prevention focus.](Image)
Appendix A

Sample Ad for Study 1: Moderately Salient Manipulative Intent

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**Introducing Calan Digital Camera**

Stylish, light, and packed with the latest in user-friendly technology, Calan gives you 4 megapixel effective resolution, 3x optical zoom, and precision metering systems that allow effortless shooting and provide sharp results.

In a recent study conducted by *Consumer Reports*, consumers rated Calan as producing better quality pictures than the leading brand.

Whether shooting in full-auto mode to capture the scene quickly or using one of the camera’s special scene modes, Calan will surely exceed your expectations.

For more information, visit us today at [www.calan.com](http://www.calan.com)
Appendix B

Study 2 Primes

Suspicion Primed

Company Found Fabricating Financial Data

A recent news article about Mintos, Inc, a producer of semi-conductor products used in the information technology industry, reported that the company was a success story. In the article, the CEO of the company was quoted as saying, “Mintos, Inc. has been extremely profitable…with profits increasing by $20 million over the last two quarter.” Accounting auditors have since then reviewed the financial statements of Mintos Inc. and found that the financial figures were fabricated. In fact, the company’s profits were actually down by approximately $37 million over the entire year. Company executives have declined to comment.

Suspicion Not Primed

VW Crossover Concept Combines Sports Car Design with SUV Elements

Volkswagen has revealed its latest design study, the Concept A, a crossover between a sports car and a compact SUV. The concept combines a sleek coupe-style silhouette with the raised stance of an SUV. Designed to respond to customer demand, the concept is powered by a 150 hp Twincharger, with a six gear transmission and an all wheel drive system. As one company executive put it, “We’re at the forefront of crossover technology. This concept is likely to find its way into production soon… design changes will certainly happen in response to consumer testing.”
References


