A regulatory-focused perspective on philanthropy: Promotion focus motivates giving to prevention-framed causes

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\section*{1. Introduction}

The United States of America and Canada are among the most generous nations in the world when it comes to philanthropic giving, with 63% and 65% of the population, respectively, donating money to charity in 2015 (\textit{World Giving Index}, 2016). Moreover, the United States of America and Canada ranked second and sixth, respectively, in terms of percentage of adults participating in giving behaviors, such as helping a stranger, donating to charity, and/or volunteering time (\textit{World Giving Index}, 2016). The non-profit sector accounts for approximately 5.3\% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the United States (US Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2014) and 8\% in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2009). According to Giving USA (2016), 80\% of the $373 billion donated to American non-profits in 2015 was contributed by individual donors. Given the considerable contributions of individuals to the non-profit sector, it is essential to understand what motivates individuals to participate in philanthropic behavior and how we can best motivate or affect this behavior.

The extant literature has examined a variety of factors that influence the willingness of donors to support a cause (e.g., Aaker & Akutsu, 2009; Shang, Reed, & Croson, 2008; Winterich & Zhang, 2014) and the effectiveness of donation appeals (e.g., Bennett, 2003; Duclos & Barasch, 2014; Fisher & Ma, 2014; Small & Simonsohn, 2008). Yet, the existing research is relatively limited when it comes to understanding philanthropic behaviors in relation to individuals' goals and motivations, how these influence the persuasiveness of donation appeals, and the managerial implications that follow. The current research attempts to enrich the existing understanding of the goals and motivations that drive philanthropic giving. We employ the framework of Higgins' (1997) regulatory focus theory that distinguishes between two motivational orientations that co-exist in every individual: promotion focus, a motivational orientation characterized by a focus on hopes, aspirations, and the attainment of positive outcomes, and prevention focus, a motivational orientation characterized by a focus on responsibilities, duties, and the avoidance of negative outcomes (Higgins, 1997).

Our findings indicate that philanthropic giving is motivated by individuals' promotion focus. In addition, we find that philanthropic causes that are framed with a prevention focus (i.e., emphasize avoidance of negative outcomes) yield greater support than causes that are framed with a promotion focus (i.e., emphasize attainment of positive outcomes). As such, we document a counter-intuitive phenomenon that cannot be easily deduced from existing regulatory focus research. It is generally believed that to enhance persuasiveness of communication messages, marketers should match message framing to the regulatory focus of their audience. Known as the 'regulatory-fit effect', this technique makes information easier to process and yields greater persuasion (Higgins, 2000; Lee & Aaker, 2004). Here we demonstrate that when it...
comes to crafting donation appeals, the logic of ‘regulatory fit’ should not be applied. Instead, non-profit managers should frame their appeals with a prevention focus and target prospective donors who are dominant in promotion focus (either chronically or situationally). These practical implications offered to managers of non-profits do not intuitively flow from previously published regulatory focus and fit research; as such they represent an important contribution from a managerial perspective. In addition, the current investigation offers several theoretical insights. One, we identify philanthropic giving as an outcome of promotion focus, thus contributing to regulatory focus theory. Two, we demonstrate that prevention-focused giving is a message element that can enhance the persuasiveness of donation appeals, thus contributing to philanthropy literature. Three, we identify the context of donation appeals as a boundary condition to the ‘persuasion through regulatory fit’ paradigm and offer suggestions for future research based on this finding.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Perceived impact as a driver of philanthropic giving

Existing research offers several definitions of charitable/philanthropic behavior. Some have defined it as behavior that enhances the welfare of needy others without receiving a reward in return (Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996), while others defined it as “actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself” (Batson, 1998, p. 282), or simply as actions that intend to benefit others (Tuine & Mcquitty, 2004). Consistent with these definitions, we argue that philanthropic giving involves making an impact in the lives of others (i.e., help and contribute to the needs of others) by giving up one’s own personal resources (e.g., money, time). Making an impact thus represents the reason for supporting philanthropy, while giving up resources represents the means by which this occurs.

Whereas contributing to the well-being of others and impacting their lives is desirable (e.g., Duncan, 2004; Erlandsson, Björklund, & Backström, 2015; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007), economic theory of maximizing behavior and rational choice would tell us that giving up resources is not desirable (Crocker & Lindem, 1998). Relatedly, perceived impact has been identified as a psychological mechanism that promotes charitable giving (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013; Cryder, Loewenstein, & Selman, 2013; Duncan, 2004; Erlandsson et al., 2015; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007); that is, individuals are more willing to support a cause if they perceive that they can make a greater impact with their donation. To this end, those individuals who focus on the “making an impact” side of philanthropic giving will be more likely to contribute than those who focus on the “giving up resources” aspect of the transaction.

2.2. Promotion focus as a driver of charitable giving

Understanding the drivers of philanthropic behavior has gained research momentum in recent years. For example, donation levels were found to increase with age, educational level, and empathetic inclination (Bennett, 2003). Strength of an individual’s moral identity has also been identified as an important driver of philanthropic giving (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Winterich, Mittal, & Aquino, 2013). Being low in power distance—the extent of acceptance of unequal distribution of power—also increases propensity for charitable giving behavior (Winterich & Zhang, 2014). In this research, we contribute to the understanding of factors that motivate philanthropic behavior by identifying promotion focus of Higgins (1997) regulatory focus theory as a robust predictor of charitable behavior overlooked by previous research.

Regulatory focus theory distinguishes between two independent self-regulatory systems that co-exist in every individual: a promotion focus and a prevention focus (Higgins, 1997). Promotion focus is a system that originates from individuals’ nurturance needs, providing the motivation to pursue hopes and aspirations and to strive for positive outcomes. Prevention focus is a system that originates from individuals’ security needs, and it is a motivator for the fulfillment of obligations and duties and the avoidance of negative outcomes (Higgins, 1997). Every individual has either promotion or prevention as their dominant motivational system, and, based on this difference, individuals are commonly categorized into promotion-focused and prevention-focused people, respectively. Additionally, momentary situations can temporarily activate a promotion or prevention focus and cause individuals to behave in accordance with the activated motivational system.

Promotion-focused people tend to focus on positive outcomes and to think abstractly (Lee, Keller, & Sterntahl, 2010). This implies that they focus on primary aspects of any action by attending to pros over cons, to desirability over feasibility, and to reasons (i.e., why) an action is undertaken over the means (i.e., how) by which it takes place (Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). In the case of charitable behavior, this suggests that promotion-focused individuals will focus on the primary aspect of charitable giving and view it as an opportunity to make an impact in the lives of beneficiaries. Prevention-focused people, by contrast, tend to focus on negative outcomes and think concretely (Lee et al., 2010). This implies that they focus on secondary aspects of any action—i.e., cons, feasibility, and the means by which an action is undertaken (Eyal et al., 2004; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Prevention-focused individuals, therefore, will focus on the secondary aspect of charitable giving and view it in terms of the means that it requires to take place—i.e., giving up resources.

H1a. Promotion focus will be a better predictor of philanthropic giving than prevention focus.
H1b. Promotion (vs. prevention) focus will lead individuals to view philanthropy as “making an impact” (vs. “giving up resources”).
H1c. The “making an impact” view of philanthropy will explain the relationship between promotion focus and philanthropic giving.

2.3. Prevention (vs. promotion) framing increases perceived impact

Through the lens of regulatory focus theory, product, service, and communication messages can be framed with promotion focus, by emphasizing gains and attainment of positive outcomes, or with prevention focus, by emphasizing avoidance of losses and prevention of negative outcomes (e.g., Lee & Aaker, 2004). Likewise, a charitable cause can be framed with promotion or prevention focus. For example, a charity that provides health care to children can be framed as providing services to “promote better health” or to “prevent disease”, with these two types of framing corresponding to promotion and prevention focus, respectively. We argue that if a cause is framed with prevention focus, perceived impact of supporting the cause will be greater than if it is framed with promotion focus.

The appeal of philanthropy is to give to those in need. Whether the cause is related to providing food and shelter or to funding arts, we give to reduce beneficiaries’ insufficiency in some area (not to contribute to abundance). As such, some unmet need is at the center of every charitable cause. Consumer behavior literature suggests that unmet prevention-focused goals and needs cause more pain than unmet promotion-focused goals and needs (Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000; Liberman, Idson, & Higgins, 2005). Therefore, if a cause is framed with prevention (vs. promotion) focus, it will generate the perception of causing more pain and distress if it is not supported. In other words, a prevention-framed cause will seem more severe and urgent than an equivalent cause framed with promotion focus. As such, supporting a prevention-framed (vs. promotion-framed) cause should be perceived to make greater impact, because the contribution goes to a more severe
need (e.g., a dollar given to a very poor person makes more difference/impact for him or her than a dollar given to a person who is not in that much need). In economics, this is explained by the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility, and in psychology, the Weber-Fechner Law accounts for such perception of difference made.

**H2a.** Perceived impact of supporting a cause will be greater if the cause is framed with prevention focus than if it is framed with promotion focus.

Previous research has repeatedly shown that donors are more likely to support causes and make greater contributions if they perceive their support to deliver greater impact (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013; Cryder, Loewenstein, & Seltsman, 2013; Duncan, 2004; Erlandsson et al., 2015; Sargeant & Woodliff, 2007). Accordingly, we suggest that framing a cause with prevention (vs. promotion) focus will yield greater support because it will generate the perception of a greater impact.

**H2b.** Prevention-framed causes yield greater support compared to promotion-framed causes.

**H2c.** Perceived impact will explain the relationship between prevention (vs. promotion) framing of a cause and willingness to support that cause.

## 2.4. Prevention (vs. promotion) framed causes appeal to individuals’ promotion focus: the role of perceived impact

One of the key practical implications of regulatory focus theory is that it can be applied to enhance the effectiveness of marketing efforts. Traditionally, it is suggested that it is most effective to match the regulatory focus or framing of the marketing message to the regulatory focus of a person for whom the message is intended. This creates ‘regulatory fit’—a feeling right experience that enhances the ease of message processing and thus enhances persuasion (Higgins, 2000; Lee & Aaker, 2004). Here we suggest that when it comes to crafting donation appeals, the regulatory-fit approach should not be followed. Rather, we argue that persuasion of philanthropy is enhanced by targeting promotion-focused individuals with prevention-framed donation appeals. We further suggest that perception of impact is the key variable linking individuals’ promotion focus to prevention framing of the appeal in creating persuasion. Promotion-focused individuals, who view philanthropy as “making an impact”, will be persuaded by prevention (vs. promotion) framed appeals because they are perceived to make greater impact.

**H3a.** Prevention-framed causes will appeal to individuals’ promotion focus more so than promotion-framed causes.

**H3b.** Perceived impact will explain why prevention (vs. promotion) framed causes appeal to individuals’ promotion focus.

Previous research identified ease of message processing (i.e., processing fluency) as an underlying mechanism of regulatory fit (Lee & Aaker, 2004) and engagement with the message as a mechanism underlying the effects of both regulatory fit and non-fit on persuasion (Harding, Lisjak, & Lee, 2010; Lee et al., 2010). We consider both of these mechanisms as potential alternative explanations of our proposed effect.

**H3c.** Processing fluency will explain the appeal of prevention (vs. promotion) framed causes to individuals’ promotion focus.

**H3d.** Engagement will explain the appeal of prevention (vs. promotion) framed causes to individuals’ promotion focus.

## 3. Study 1

The purpose of this study was to test Hypothesis 1. We predicted that promotion versus prevention focus would influence the view of philanthropy as “making an impact” versus “giving up resources”; thus, promotion focus will be a better predictor of philanthropic giving than prevention focus. One hundred ninety-one participants (38% male; mean age 48 years) were recruited through Qualtrics research panel in exchange for monetary compensation. Participants were surveyed about their actual donation behaviors and their interpretation of philanthropy as making an impact and giving up resources. We also measured income level and self-perceived socio-economic status (SES) as potential confounds.

### 3.1. Measures

#### 3.1.1. Attitude

Participants were asked how they felt, overall, about supporting philanthropic causes: Negative 1/Positive 7; Bad 1/Good 7; Unfavorable 1/Favorable 7 (Cronbach’s α = 0.967).

#### 3.1.2. Philanthropic behaviors

To assess participants’ actual philanthropic behaviors, we asked them: “How often do you support non-profit organizations with donations, including donations of money, time, and in-kind contributions?” (Not often at all 1/Very often 7); “When you make a donation to a non-profit organization, how small or large is your typical contribution?” (Very small 1/Very large 7); and “If you made any charitable gifts in the past year, what was the total of all charitable contributions that you made?” This measure was log-transformed for analysis.

#### 3.1.3. Impact

To assess a “making an impact” interpretation on philanthropy, participants rated the extent to which supporting philanthropy represented the following to them (Erlandsson et al., 2015): “Making an impact”; “Contributing to change”; “Making a difference”; and “Doing good” in the lives of the beneficiaries (Not at all 1/Very much so 7) (Cronbach’s α = 0.971).

#### 3.1.4. Giving up resources

The “giving up resources” interpretation was measured by asking participants to rate the extent to which supporting philanthropy represented: “Giving away money”, “Parting with resources”, “Spending money” (Not at all 1/Very much so 7) (Cronbach’s α = 0.904).

#### 3.1.5. Income level and SES

Participants indicated their household income by selecting one of the five categories: 1 = “Less than $25,000”; 2 = “$25,000–$49,999”; 3 = “$50,000–$74,999”; 4 = “$75,000–$99,999”; 5 = “$100,000 or more”. To measure SES, participants saw a picture of a ladder representing where people stand in the community, with those who are best (vs. worst) off being at the very top (vs. bottom). The steps of the ladder were lettered from A at the bottom to J at the top and participants selected the letter representing where they sit on the ladder (1 = A; 10 = J).

#### 3.1.6. Regulatory focus

Regulatory focus was measured using Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda’s (2002) regulatory focus scale. Please see online appendix for scale items.

### 3.2. Results and discussion

Promotion (Cronbach’s α = 0.916) and prevention (Cronbach’s α = 0.858) subscales (Pearson’s r = 0.311) were created by taking averages of the corresponding items and treated orthogonally for analyses (Haws, Bearden, & Dholakia, 2012).

First, we regressed attitude and philanthropic-behavior measures on promotion and prevention subscales in a step-wise linear regression;
age (log-transformed), income level, and SES were included in the model as covariates. Promotion focus positively predicted attitude ($\beta = 0.180$, $SE = 0.088$; $t(182) = 2.038$, $p = 0.043$), donation frequency ($\beta = 0.267$, $SE = 0.113$; $t(183) = 2.370$, $p = 0.019$), size of typical contribution ($\beta = 0.244$, $SE = 0.093$; $t(183) = 2.620$, $p = 0.010$), and the past year's total amount of philanthropic contributions ($\beta = 0.287$, $SE = 0.116$; $t(159) = 2.478$, $p = 0.014$). Promotion focus did not significantly predict attitude ($\beta = -0.003$, $SE = 0.092$; $t(182) = -0.030$, $p = 0.976$), frequency of giving ($\beta = -0.048$, $SE = 0.117$; $t(183) = -0.412$, $p = 0.681$), size of typical contribution ($\beta = 0.063$, $SE = 0.096$; $t(183) = 0.659$, $p = 0.511$), or the amount contributed to non-profits in the previous year ($\beta = 0.099$, $SE = 0.117$; $t(159) = 0.853$, $p = 0.395$). Hypothesis 1a was supported.

In terms of covariates, age was significant for frequency of giving ($\beta = 0.731$, $SE = 0.336$; $t(183) = 2.176$, $p = 0.031$), SES—for the size of a typical contribution ($\beta = 0.141$, $SE = 0.055$; $t(183) = 2.552$, $p = 0.012$), and household income—for the amount contributed in the previous year ($\beta = 0.401$, $SE = 0.113$; $t(159) = 3.561$, $p < 0.001$).

Next, we performed a spotlight analysis on the amount donated to non-profits in the previous year. At the mean level of promotion focus ($Prom_{mean}$ = 4.84), participants on average donated $440 to charitable causes; at the 1.5 SDs below the mean ($Prom_{1.5 SDs, below mean}$ = 3.56), participants on average donated $174; and at the level 1.5 SDs above the mean ($Prom_{1.5 SDs, above mean}$ = 5.98), participants on average donated $706. The spotlight difference of $532 in the previous year's contributions was significantly different from zero ($t(186) = 4.482$, $p < 0.001$).

Second, we regressed “making an impact” and “giving up resources” on promotion and prevention subscales controlling for age, income level, and SES. Promotion focus significantly predicted the interpretation of philanthropy as “making an impact” ($\beta = 0.251$, $SE = 0.093$; $t(182) = 2.688$, $p = 0.008$), while prevention focus did not ($\beta = 0.140$, $SE = 0.097$; $t(182) = 1.446$, $p = 0.150$). In contrast, promotion focus did not significantly predict the interpretation of philanthropy as “giving up resources” ($\beta = 0.107$, $SE = 0.105$; $t(182) = 1.016$, $p = 0.311$), while prevention focus did ($\beta = 0.314$, $SE = 0.110$; $t(182) = 2.870$, $p = 0.005$). Hypothesis 1b was supported.

Finally, we employed Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro single-mediator model controlling for income level, SES, and age as covariates. The “making an impact” view of philanthropy mediated the effect of promotion focus on attitude ($\beta = 0.2007$, $SE = 0.0635$; bootstrapped 95% LLCI, ULCI: 0.0786, 0.3275), frequency of giving ($\beta = 0.2105$, $SE = 0.0431$; bootstrapped 95% LLCI, ULCI: 0.0495, 0.2279), and the amount contributed to non-profits in the previous year ($\beta = 0.0787$, $SE = 0.0417$; bootstrapped 95% LLCI, ULCI: 0.0169, 0.1840), but not on the average contribution size ($\beta = 0.0206$, $SE = 0.0249$; bootstrapped 95% LLCI, ULCI: −0.0284, 0.0762). Hypothesis 1c was mostly supported.

The results of this study support the notion that promotion focus is a better predictor of philanthropic behavior than prevention focus, because promotion and prevention orientations are differentially associated with views of philanthropy based on “making an impact” and “giving up resources”, respectively. Since promotion focus leads individuals to place emphasis on the impact that they can make in the lives of beneficiaries by donating, it generates the motivation to participate in philanthropic giving.

4. Study 2

The purpose of this study was to test Hypothesis 2, which predicted that promotion-framed causes would be perceived as more impactful and garner greater support than promotion-framed causes. One hundred and twelve Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (henceforth MTurk) participants (55% male; mean age 35 years) were recruited for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to read either a promotion-framed (n = 57) or a prevention-framed (n = 55) description of a charity that supported education-related causes. Promotion/ prevention framed non-profit was said to be currently:

raising money for an initiative designed to help underprivileged children improve their math and language skills/avoid falling behind in math and language skills. The money will go toward helping these children get high grades in math and language and realize their dreams/secure access to proven learning technologies designed to prevent children at risk from falling below minimal requirements.

Help us enrich/protect the lives of these children!

4.1. Measures

4.1.1. Willingness to support

Willingness to support the cause was measured using three items: “How likely would you be to support this cause?”, “How likely would you be to donate money to this cause?”, “How likely would you be to give to this cause?” (Not at all 1/Very much so 7) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.954$).

4.1.2. Impact

To measure perceived impact, participants rated the extent to which supporting the cause would: “Make an impact”, “Make a difference”, “Contribute to a change”, and “Do good” (Not at all 1/Very much so 7) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.960$).

4.1.3. Manipulation check

To check the success of the framing manipulation, participants indicated whether the cause focused on: Improving children’s math skills 1/Preventing children from falling below minimum math requirements 7.

4.1.4. Income level and SES

Income level and socio-economic status were measured using procedures described in Study 1.

4.2. Results and discussion

The framing manipulation was successful with participants in the promotion-framing ($M = 1.84$) versus prevention-framing ($M = 3.60$; $F(1, 110) = 22.612$, $p < 0.001$) condition indicating that the cause was focused on the improvement of skills versus on not falling behind.

Participants in the prevention-framing condition perceived the cause to be more impactful ($M = 6.15$) and expressed greater willingness to give support ($M = 5.08$) compared to participants in the promotion-framing condition who perceived the cause to be less impactful ($M = 5.41$; $F(1, 110) = 10.244$, $p = 0.002$) and expressed lower willingness to give support ($M = 4.39$; $F(1, 110) = 4.925$, $p = 0.029$). Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro single-mediator model revealed that perceived impact mediated the effect of regulatory framing of the cause on willingness to support ($\beta = 0.7356$, $SE = 0.2390$; bootstrapped 95% LLCI, ULCI: 0.3010, 1.1941). Including income-level, SES, and age as covariates neither changed these results nor yielded significant effects for the covariates. Hypothesis 2 was supported.

The results of this study confirm that prevention-framed causes are perceived to be more impactful and consequently garner greater donor support, than promotion-framed causes. This effect is not influenced by age, income level, or socio-economic status, suggesting that the superior persuasiveness of prevention (vs. promotion) framing generalizes across demographic, income and SES-based segments.
5. Study 3A

The purpose of this study was to test Hypothesis 3. We predicted that individuals’ promotion focus would predict giving to prevention (vs. promotion) framed causes, and that the perceived impact of the cause explains this relationship. We also considered processing fluency and/or engagement as possible alternative explanations. Two hundred and five MTurk participants (57% male; 34 years mean age) were recruited for monetary compensation. Regulatory framing of the cause was manipulated as in Study 2.

5.1. Measures

5.1.1. Willingness to support
Willingness to support (Cronbach’s α = 0.924) was measured using the same items as in Study 2.

5.1.2. Impact
Perceived impact (Cronbach’s α = 0.952) was measured using the same items as in Study 2.

5.1.3. Processing fluency and engagement
Processing fluency (Lee & Anker, 2004) was measured by asking to what extent “information was easy to process” and “judgment was difficult to make” (reverse-coded) (Pearson’s r = 0.316). To measure engagement (Lee et al., 2010), participants rated the extent to which they felt “Motivated”, “Right”, and “Wrong” (reverse-coded) (Cronbach’s α = 0.776). Scales were anchored by Not at all 1/Very much so 7.

5.1.4. Regulatory focus
Regulatory focus was measured as in Study 1.

5.1.5. Manipulation check
Regulatory-focused framing manipulation was checked by asking participants to indicate whether the cause focused on: Improving children’s math skills 1/Preventing children from falling below minimum math requirements 7.

5.1.6. Income level and SES
Income level and socio-economic status were measured using items outlined in prior studies.

5.2. Results and discussion

5.2.1. Manipulation check
Participants who read a promotion-framed (vs. prevention-framed) description of the cause rated it as focused on the improvement of children’s math skills versus prevention of falling below minimum requirements (Mpromotion = 1.81, Mprevention = 4.34 F(1, 203) = 91.338, p < 0.001).

5.2.2. Willingness to support
Promotion (Cronbach’s α = 0.906) and prevention (Cronbach’s α = 0.888) subscales (Pearson’s r = −0.194) were created by taking averages of the corresponding scale items and treated as independent orthogonal constructs (Haws et al., 2012). The dichotomous moderator was coded “0” (vs. “1”) in the prevention-framing (vs. promotion-framing) condition. With such coding, estimated regression coefficients revealed simple effects of independent variables in the “prevention frame” condition (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch, & McClelland, 2013).

Willingness to support was regressed on prevention and promotion subscales, the dichotomous moderator, and the interactions between each regulatory orientation and the moderator. Regression analysis revealed a significant positive effect of promotion focus (β = 0.653, SE = 0.142; t(199) = 4.595, p < 0.001) and a significant negative interaction between promotion focus and message framing (β = −0.470, SE = 0.199; t(199) = −2.355, p = 0.019), indicating that the influence of promotion focus on willingness to support was stronger for a prevention-framed cause than for a promotion-framed cause. Neither the effect of prevention focus (β = 0.180, SE = 0.116; t(199) = 1.560, p = 0.120) nor the interaction between prevention focus and message framing were significant (β = 0.064, SE = 0.167; t(199) = 0.383, p = 0.702).

When message framing was re-coded to “0” in the prevention-framing condition, to reveal the simple slope of promotion focus on willingness to support a promotion-framed cause, the effect became not significant (β = 0.184, SE = 0.140; t(199) = 1.316, p = 0.190).

5.2.3. Impact
Perceived impact was regressed on promotion and prevention subscales, the moderator (framing: promotion vs. prevention), and the interactions. The dummy variable was coded “0” in the “prevention frame” condition. Promotion focus significantly predicted perceived impact of a prevention-framed cause (β = 0.474, SE = 0.094; t(199) = 5.059, p < 0.001); and this effect was significantly reduced for a promotion-framed cause as indicated by the significant negative interaction (β = −0.366, SE = 0.131; t(199) = −2.783, p = 0.006). The effect of promotion focus (β = 0.086, SE = 0.076; t(199) = 1.125, p = 0.261) and the interaction between prevention focus and framing of the cause (β = −0.004, SE = 0.110; t(199) = −0.035, p = 0.972) were not significant.

Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro for the moderated-mediation model revealed a significant index of moderated mediation (β = −0.2946, SE = 0.1181; 95% bootstraped LLCI, ULCI: −0.5373, −0.0828), indicating that perceived impact explained the differential influence of promotion focus on willingness to support by message framing. Perceived impact was a significant mediator in the prevention-framing condition (β = 0.3624, SE = 0.0783; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCI: 0.2268, 0.5412), but not in the promotion-framing condition (β = 0.0678, SE = 0.0917; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCI: −0.0946, 0.2575).

5.2.4. Processing fluency and engagement
Processing fluency and engagement were regressed on the promotion and prevention subscales, the moderator (framing: promotion vs. prevention), and the interactions. The dummy variable was coded “0” in the “prevention frame” condition.

For processing fluency, the effect of promotion focus (β = 0.204, SE = 0.105; t(199) = 1.944, p = 0.053) was positive, while the effect of prevention focus (β = −0.179, SE = 0.086; t(199) = −2.088, p = 0.038) was negative. No interactions were significant. Hayes’ (2013) moderated-mediation model revealed that the indirect effect of promotion focus on willingness to support via processing fluency was not significant either for the promotion-framed (β = −0.0041, SE = 0.0140; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCI: −0.0587, 0.0086) or prevention-framed cause (β = −0.0123, SE = 0.0243; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCI: −0.0715, 0.0276). Hypothesis 3c was not supported.

For engagement, only the effect of promotion focus was significant (β = 0.404, SE = 0.101; t(199) = 3.994, p < 0.001). Hayes’ (2013) moderated-mediation model revealed that only the indirect effect of promotion focus on willingness to support a prevention-framed cause was significant (β = 0.2193, SE = 0.0596; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCI: 0.1112, 0.3589). However, the index of moderated mediation was not significant (β = −0.1058, SE = 0.0865; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCI: −0.2909, 0.0456) indicating that engagement was not able to explain the differential influence of a promotion focus on willingness to support by message framing. Hypothesis 3d was not supported.

Lastly, we re-ran the moderated-mediation model with perceived impact as the mediator holding processing fluency and engagement as covariates. The results for the explanatory role of perceived impact remained unchanged. The index of moderated mediation remained
significant ($\beta = -0.2022$, $SE = 0.0977$; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCLI: $-0.4075$, $-0.0221$); the indirect effect of perceived impact was significant in the prevention-framing ($\beta = 0.2013$, $SE = 0.0705$; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCLI: 0.0851, 0.3560), but not in the promotion-framing condition ($\beta = -0.0008$, $SE = 0.0778$; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCLI: $-0.1532$, 0.1534).

5.2.5. Age, Income level and SES

Income level ($\beta = 0.182$, $SE = 0.104$; $t(195) = 1.745$, $p = 0.082$) was marginally significant and SES was a significant covariate ($\beta = 0.168$, $SE = 0.067$; $t(195) = 2.501$, $p = 0.013$) for willingness to support a cause, age was not significant. Adding these covariates did not change the relationships between key constructs in the model.

The results of this study indicate that promotion focus motivates giving to prevention-framed (vs. promotion-framed) causes and that perceived impact explains this effect. Importantly, engagement and processing fluency both fall short of being able to explain why a prevention-framed (vs. promotion-framed) cause is more appealing to promotion focus and the explanatory role of perceived impact remains significant controlling for fluency and engagement. Examining age, income level and SES again led to the conclusion that our effect generalizes across demographic, income and SES-based segments.

6. Study 3B

Individuals' regulatory focus can be operationalized as a chronically dominant trait or as a situationally activated state (Higgins, 1997, 2000). In this study, we aim to boost internal validity and managerial relevance of our findings by manipulating (rather than measuring) individuals' regulatory focus. Two hundred seventeen MTurk participants (59% male; mean age 35 years) were recruited for monetary compensation. This study followed a 2 (individual regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) × 2 (message framing: gain vs. loss) between-subjects design. First, participants were randomly assigned to write either about their hopes and aspirations (promotion) or responsibilities and duties (prevention) to prime them with regulatory focus (Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2007). After that, participants read the following gain/loss framed description of a charity:

*Every child deserves access to clean drinking water/[No child deserves to go without access to clean drinking water].*

*Healthy Child Africa is an organization committed to providing health related services in impoverished African communities. Today we ask you to help us ensure that every child has access to safe drinking water/[no child goes without access to safe drinking water]. With your help, we will drill much needed water wells right in the communities where children live, play, and study/[Without your help, we will not be able to drill much needed water wells right in the communities where children live, play, and study]. Our experience over the past ten years proves that water wells save lives/[lack of water wells leads to loss of life].

Please donate to Healthy Child Africa! With your donation, we can make a difference/[Without your donation, we can't make a difference].

6.1. Measures

6.1.1. Manipulation checks

To check the regulatory focus manipulation, we asked participants to indicate whether they were focused on Aspirations and hopes 1/Responsibilities and duties 7. To check the gain/loss-framing manipulation, we asked whether the charity focused on Attaining a gain; and attaining something positive 1/Avoiding a loss; and avoiding something negative 7 (Pearson’s r = 0.776).

6.1.2. Willingness to support

Willingness to support (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.925$) was measured using the same items as in Studies 2 and 3A.

6.1.3. Impact

Perceived impact (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.959$) of the cause was measured using the same items as in Studies 2 and 3A.

6.2. Results and discussion

6.2.1. Manipulation checks

Participants who were primed with promotion ($M = 3.57$) versus prevention ($M = 5.65$; $F(1, 213) = 78.979$, $p < 0.001$) focus reported focusing more on aspirations and hopes than on responsibilities and duties.

Participants in the gain (vs. loss) framing condition rated the cause as focused on gain/positives versus loss/negatives ($M_{gain} = 2.42$, $M_{loss} = 3.33$; $F(1, 213) = 12.832$, $p < 0.001$).

6.2.2. Willingness to support

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between primed regulatory focus and message framing ($F(1, 213) = 4.789$, $p = 0.030$). Participants primed with a promotion focus were more willing to support a loss-framed ($M = 5.08$) than a gain-framed cause ($M = 4.39$; $F(1, 213) = 4.352$, $p = 0.038$). Participants primed with a prevention focus did not differ in their willingness to support a loss-framed ($M = 4.54$) or a gain-framed cause ($M = 4.85$; $F(1, 213) = 0.982$, $p = 0.323$).

6.2.3. Impact

There was a significant interaction between individual’s regulatory focus and message framing ($F(1, 213) = 6.908$, $p = 0.034$) on perceived impact. Promotion-focused participants perceived a greater impact for a loss-framed ($M = 6.12$) than for a gain-framed ($M = 5.59$; $F(1, 213) = 4.635$, $p = 0.032$) cause. Prevention-focused participants did not perceive a difference in impact ($M_{gain} = 6.00$, $M_{loss} = 5.68$; $F(1, 213) = 1.758$, $p = 0.186$).

The moderated-mediation model (Hayes, 2013) revealed a significant index of moderated mediation ($\beta = 0.5598$, $SE = 0.2451$; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCLI: 0.0735, 1.0500). Perceived impact explained the effect of gain/loss-framing on willingness to support among promotion-focused ($\beta = -0.3508$, $SE = 0.1775$; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCLI: $-0.6972$, $-0.0088$) but not among prevention-focused participants ($\beta = 0.2090$, $SE = 0.1562$; 95% bootstrapped LLCI, ULCLI: $-0.0899$, 0.5186).

7. Discussion

This research examined philanthropic giving through the lens of regulatory focus theory, advancing our theoretical knowledge and creating tangible managerial outcomes. Our findings indicate that promotion focus motivates philanthropic giving and does so for prevention-framed causes and appeals more so than for promotion-framed ones, due to the ability of prevention-framed causes to enhance the perception of impact.

7.1. Managerial implications

We focus on two fundamental insights for non-profit managers. The first pertains to the design of donation appeals, and the second to segmentation of prospective donors. With respect to the design of donation appeals, we recommend using the language that emphasizes how the cause helps to avoid negative outcomes in the lives of the beneficiaries (i.e., prevention framing).

With respect to targeting prospective donors, regulatory focus should be introduced as a variable into non-profits’ segmentation strategies. Promotion focus predicts philanthropic giving. Marketing managers may benefit from targeting individuals with a chronic dominant
promotion focus, identifying situations that may induce promotion focus, or priming promotion focus when approaching prospective donors. Mishra, Mishra, and Nayakankuppam (2010) demonstrated that recent salary receipt activates promotion focus; scheduling donation drives as close to “pay days” as possible is likely to capture targets when their promotion focus is dominant. It is also possible to prime individuals with a promotion focus by encouraging them to think about their hopes and aspirations (e.g., Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2007). Marketing managers could activate prospective donors’ promotion focus by asking them to think about their hopes and aspirations before making a prevention-framed donation appeal.

7.2. Theoretical contributions

Previous research offers valuable insights into the factors that drive charitable giving (e.g., identity, Aaker & Akuts, 2009; Shang et al., 2008; Winterich & Zhang, 2014; self-construal, Duclos & Barasch, 2014; power-distance, Winterich & Zhang, 2014). Our research makes a contribution by identifying a motivational factor that predicts charitable giving—regulatory focus—overlooked by prior philanthropy research. We demonstrate that promotion focus motivates charitable giving and support for philanthropy.

Another stream of research examined message elements that can enhance persuasiveness of donation appeals (e.g., empathy for the victim, Small & Simonsohn, 2008; perception of victim–donor similarity, McFarland, Webb, & Brown, 2012; Winterich, Mittal, & Ross, 2009; identifiable-victims effect, Small & Loewenstein, 2003; perception of neediness, Fisher & Ma, 2014; nostalgic appeals, Merchant, Ford, & Rose, 2011; Zhou, Wildschut, Sedikides, Shi, & Feng, 2012; negative emotional appeals, Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997; Marchand & Filatralt, 2002). We contribute to this body of literature by identifying prevention-framing as a message element that can increase willingness to support a cause.

This research contributes to regulatory focus theory by identifying philanthropic giving as a novel outcome of promotion focus overlooked by prior regulatory focus research, by identifying a context—i.e., donation appeals—in which prevention framing of a message is more persuasive than promotion framing, and by discovering a boundary condition to the “persuasion through regulatory fit” paradigm. Prior regulatory focus research suggests that persuasion of marketing messages can be enhanced through regulatory fit—a match between a person’s regulatory focus and the framing of the message—which enhances persuasion because it makes the message easier to process (e.g., Lee & Aaker, 2004). In the current research, however, we found that when it comes to crafting donation appeals, prevention-framed (vs. promotion-framed) appeals are motivating to promotion-focused individuals because they increase the perception of impact of the cause. Below we outline the conceptual distinctions between donation appeals and traditional consumer-marketing messages and suggest how our findings may generalize to other marketing contexts.

Traditional consumer-marketing contexts involve one set of goals—the goals of a consumer who is processing the message. A consumer considers how his/her goals will be met by what the message promises. When a promotion (vs. prevention) focused consumer reads a promotion (vs. prevention) framed message, s/he processes the message easily, “feels right”, and becomes persuaded by the appeal—persuasion happens through regulatory fit. Philanthropy involves two sets of goals: the goals of the donor that s/he is motivated to meet by donating, and the goals of a beneficiary that the donation appeal promises to meet. Since the motivation of the donor is to make an impact (guided by his/her promotion focus), it is the causes or appeals that maximize the perception of that impact (i.e., prevention-framed ones) that the donor finds attractive. It is possible that a similar pattern of effects may be observed in other contexts that involve other-oriented benefits of a person’s behavior (e.g., pro-environmental consumption, ethical consumption/behavior). Evidence from prior research supports the case for pro-environmental consumer behavior. Bullard and Manchanda (2013) find that marketing appeals for sustainable (i.e., “green”) products are more effective if they are framed with a prevention focus. However, Bhatnagar and McKay-Nesbitt (2016) find that it is an individual’s chronic promotion focus that predicts pro-environmental actions. As with charitable giving, a consumer’s pro-environmental behavior is motivated by the desire to create a benefit for someone other than just oneself—the society at large. Future research should continue to examine contexts where consumption behavior yields other-oriented benefits to better understand how these contexts may differ from traditional consumer-marketing situations and what these differences mean for marketing strategy.

8. Conclusions

Donation appeals differ from traditional consumer-marketing messages in that they try to persuade a person to give money to meet the needs and goals of others rather than to buy something to meet one’s own goals and needs. Consequently, effectiveness of regulatory fit for persuasion—found in the context of consumer-marketing messages—does not extend into the domain of donation appeals. Rather, prevention-framed donation appeals persuade prospective donors by fulfilling their promotion-focused goals. By carefully crafting donation appeals with an emphasis on the avoidance of negative outcomes and targeting promotion-focused individuals with these messages, non-profit managers may be able to enhance the effectiveness of their donation drives.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.06.013.

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