The Role of Regulatory Focus in Social Comparisons with Online News Personae

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The appeal of personae in news is investigated based on social comparison and regulatory focus theory. High-school students (N=252) browsed through online news while selective exposure was unobtrusively logged. Manipulated headlines focused on individuals and varied along three within factors: the positive or negative valence of the headline, the sex of the portrayed individuals, and their economic status. After browsing news, participants completed a questionnaire including a self-esteem and a chronic regulatory focus scale. Although there could not be detected the role of regulatory focus as main effect, the number of selected headlines about the poor and the rich was largely determined by the interaction between it, their sex, self-esteem, and the way in which headlines were grouped together based on valence. The valence of the news played a significant role as main effect on headlines preferences.

Keywords: social comparison; regulatory focus; selective exposure, self-esteem; gender

Discussion

The current study looked at selective news consumption based on a sample with young. We applied social comparison and regulatory focus theories to identify the factors that guide selective exposure to portrayals of the very rich and the very poor individuals in the news. The advantage of such an empirical investigation is that “unlike much psychological research in this area, did not make comparisons salient and did not threaten participants’ self-esteem with allegedly poor performance results.” (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006, 278-279)

By one of our research question we tried to find out whether the regulatory focus plays a determinant role in searching information about the very poor and the very rich even if the news do not depict persons trying to prevent failure or succeed in his or her object. (Is this information searching pattern also valid presented by Higgins and Tykocinski also in these conditions?) Although there could not be detected the role of regulatory focus as main effect, it
plays a major role through the interactions detected between it and other factors in the preferences of headlines about the very rich or the very poor among Hungarian-speaking high school students in Szeklerland. The number of selected headlines about the poor and the rich is largely determined by the interaction between their sex, self-esteem, regulatory focus and the way in which headlines were grouped together based on valence. Such an interaction could be detected in group K3, in which the headlines about the rich were negative, while those about the poor were positive, promotion-oriented participants selected significantly more headlines about the rich than about the poor. Unlike the regulatory focus the way how the headlines were grouped in different experimental groups based on their valence played a significant role as main effect.

By our second, more specific research question, we were going to test whether the interaction between self-esteem and promotion focus shown up by Morf and Horvath (2010), respectively by Vohs and Heathertons’ (2001) determine the news preference about the rich and the poor in different conditions. Consistent with the Morf and Horvaths’ (their) finding, namely that high-self esteem people are more promotion-focused, we shown up that in news preference they could be characterized with a consistent information searching pattern: they chose significantly more headlines about the very rich in the group where negative headlines about the very rich were associated with the positive ones about the very poor.

Not in line with the results of the existing literature in the field, participants did not prefer news about members of their own sex. This result may be due to the different exposure task: while in the Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall (2006) experiment news readers were exposed only to the sex of depicted personae without referring to their economic status like in ours.

Neither the main effect of the participants’ sex, nor the interaction between it and that of the portrayed individuals (az ábrázolt személyek neme) was not significant. The number of selected headlines about men and about women is largely determined by the interaction between their sex, the regulatory focus and the way in which headlines were grouped together based on valence. Regardless whether the positive news about poor were associated with the positive (K1) or with negative (K3) news about rich, prevention-focused women chose significantly more news about the poor. Prevention focused women with low self-esteem preferred in K1 significantly more news about the poor than about the rich ones. Unfortunately, due to the small number of promotion oriented women with high self-esteem (N = 3) we were not able to run a valid paired-sample t-test for testing the difference between the averages of different experimental groups.

We find out that promotion oriented men with high self-esteem chose significantly more headlines in K1 about the rich than about the poor. It worth mentioning that in third experimental group (K3) the simple effect was very close to reaching statistical significance (0.0125), promotion oriented high self-esteem men preferring negative news about the rich men when they are associated with positive ones about the poor men.

Except the information searching pattern of the promotion oriented women with high self-esteem, where due to the small number of participants we were not able to run the t-test, it could be concluded that have arose two different information searching pattern. While prevention-focused women, as well as prevention-focused women
with low self-esteem seek information about the poor, promotion-focused men with high self-esteem prefer information related to the rich. These results seem to legitimate/support Morf and Horvaths' finding (2010), namely that promotion focus goes hand in hand with the high self-esteem, prevention focus with the low-self esteem. At the same time, these results seem to complete Madson’ (1997), as well as Hutson-Comeaux and Kelly’ findings (2002) showing up the role of the self-esteem besides the gender. On the one hand, their assumption/finding, namely that women may be primarily concerned with social relationships could be completed with the prevention-focus and low self-esteem, at least concerning news consumption. On the other hand, their second assumption whereas males may seek to compare themselves on dimensions related to performance and achievement with the promotion-focus and high self-esteem.