Making the Right Decision: Intensifying the Worth of a Chosen Option

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When people make decisions, they want the outcomes of their choice to be as positive as possible. But they also want the decision-making process itself to be conducted in the right way. Though this is often described as making decisions that are moral or ethical, it also includes making decisions that are appropriate—that are suitable and fitting. We focus on this latter, overlooked interpretation, and propose that making the right decision is about effectively establishing what is true and real. We discuss three factors that can lead people to experience their decision-making process as being *right*: (1) making a decision in the "right way"; (2) making a decision in a manner that "feels right" given the decision maker's current motivational orientation; and (3) making a decision based upon a "shared reality" with others. We review evidence that making the right decision in each of these ways intensifies the worth of a given chosen option.

Keywords decision making; regulatory fit; shared reality; truth motivation

I'd like to teach the world to sing
In perfect harmony
I'd like to buy the world a Coke
And keep it company
That's the real thing
                    - The Coca-Cola Company, 1971/2012

Humans are decision makers. We make choices. To understand what it means to be human, we need to understand the nature of these choices. There are two basic questions. First, among the options that we have, what factors determine which option we choose? Second, once we have selected an option, what factors determine our experience of the worth of that option? This paper is concerned with the second question. For a given chosen option, what determines the extent to which we feel that it is worthy? The classic answer is that the experienced worth of an option is determined by the perceived outcomes associated with that chosen option and the subjective probability that those outcomes will occur (e.g., subjective utility; expected value). From this perspective, the worth of a chosen option is about expected *outcomes*. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize an additional contributor to the

worth of a chosen option: how the decision-making *process* is experienced.

We argue that when the decision-making process feels "right," this feeling will intensify the evaluation of the chosen option—independent of the expected outcomes associated with the chosen option. We will review research on three factors that can lead people to experience their decision-making process as being *right*: (1) making a decision in the "right way"; (2) making a decision in a manner that "feels right" given the decision maker's current motivational orientation; and (3) making a decision based upon a "shared reality" with others. What the literature shows is that the worth of the same chosen option can be intensified through engaging in each of these kinds of "right" decision-making activities.

Making a Decision in the "Right Way"

Consider the following cultural maxims: "It is not enough to do good, one must do it the right way"; "What counts is not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." The message is that process matters and not just outcomes. Why does process matter? One interpretation is that the process is worthwhile independent of the worth of the

outcomes. For example, the process itself can be worthwhile if relates to a goal that is separate from the outcomes themselves (multifinality; see Kruglanski et al., 2002). Historically, for these maxims, this goal has been to behave in a moral and ethical manner. These maxims are interpreted as saying that it is not enough to choose a process that is instrumental for attaining the outcomes; the process itself must be moral and ethical as well. But what if these maxims about process mean something even more? What if the process has motivational effects that impact the worth of the outcomes *themselves*? The implications of this other possible interpretation of these maxims are quite different. The outcomes remain the same, but the process intensifies or diminishes the worth of those outcomes. And this intensification can stem from an underlying mechanism that is separate from whether the process is ethical or not. It is this additional interpretation that is the focus of this paper.

Two basic decision-making processes have been distinguished in the literature. One is to make a decision in order to select the best option among the available options. This is the classic "best choice" process. There are different models of how people do this, but what the models have in common is that people consider the positive consequences (benefits) and negative consequences (costs) of selecting each option and then compare the options (for a review, see Higgins, 2012). The perceived consequences are subjective for each decision maker and relate to the extent to which selecting an option would support and/or hinder satisfying the decision maker's goals, and the perceived likelihood that it would do so. A decision maker can have more than one goal, and the goals can vary broadly in their content. The best choice is the option whose likely outcomes constitute the best benefits to costs ratio. The best choice decision-making process focuses on determining this option.

We know that people often do not perform this process fully, in part because they have information processing limitations. When a decision maker is faced with multiple options and has multiple goals to satisfy, it is difficult to calculate accurately the benefits to costs ratios of all of the options and compare them accurately. As Herbert Simon pointed out (1956), it is difficult to maximize. To simplify the demands on decision making, satisficing often becomes the strategy, such as identifying an outcome aspiration threshold that is good enough and selecting the first option that meets that threshold. But, notably, the process is still an outcome-focused process—a simplified version of the "best choice" process. The focus is on ending with (satisfactory) desired outcomes.

Another decision-making process focuses on the process itself rather than on ending with the "best choice" or desired outcomes. A well-known example of this is James March's (1994) discussion of how people find it worthwhile to use established decision rules (i.e., rules about how a decision should be made) that are appropriate to his or her situation—worth from the use of proper means. Note that using proper means need not involve ethical behavior. It can involve simply making a decision in a manner that is appropriate for the kind of decision that is being made—the "right way" to do it. "Appropriate" means suitable, proper, fitting, and congruous. It is this meaning of "right" as appropriate that is the focus of this paper, rather than "right" as moral or ethical.

When people experience their decision-making process as being conducted in the right way—the appropriate way—they experience that they are on the right path, the true path, in making the decision. Furthermore, making a decision in this right way contributes to the feeling that the selected option is *truly* the correct option—thereby intensifying its worth. How precisely does this work? By following this right path, decision makers are being effective in *truth* (Higgins, 2012). This is important because decision making is essentially a *truth-seeking activity*. While you are in the process of making a decision, you are working to establish the truth about the choice options. And because decision making is about truth—what is right and appropriate—the experience of making a decision in the "right way" is intrinsically a better fit with the activity of decision making itself (as compared to making a decision that is focused on making the "best choice"). And, importantly, fit *strengthens engagement* in what you are doing (Higgins, 2006). Engagement refers to one's level of absorption in a process: When highly engaged, a person is deeply involved, engrossed, or interested. Engagement strength does not determine whether something is positive or negative. It does not impact the valence of outcomes. However, stronger engagement does intensify the evaluation of outcomes. It makes positive evaluations of an object more positive and negative evaluations of an object more negative (Higgins, 2006).

Let us turn now to some research that was inspired by the above distinctions. We begin with a study that directly compares what happens when a decision-making activity is experienced as being about "the best choice" versus as being about "the right way" (Higgins et al., 2008). All participants

were given the same two options to choose between (a Columbia coffee mug and an inexpensive pen) to ensure that everyone would end up with the same outcome (the mug). The means for making the choice between these options were also the same for all participants. They were all told: *Think of the positive and negative consequences of choosing the mug. Think of the positive and negative consequences of choosing the pen. Please write down your thoughts on the lines below.* What was experimentally manipulated was participants' experience when they used these means to make their choice.

The "Right Way" emphasis condition began with the title, "Making Your Decision in the RIGHT WAY!" and then continued as follows:

> You need to make your decision in the right way. The right way to make a decision is to think about which choice has the better consequences. Think of the positive and negative consequences of choosing the mug. Think of the positive and negative consequences of choosing the pen. Please write down your thoughts on the lines below.

The "Best Choice" emphasis condition began with the title, "The BEST CHOICE!" and then continued as follows:

> The best choice is the choice with the better consequences. Think of the positive and negative consequences of owning the mug. Think of the positive and negative consequences of owning the pen. Please write down your thoughts on the lines below.

It needs to be noted that what Higgins et al. (2008) meant by the "Right Way" was similar to what March (1994) had in mind. It meant individuals' perception that the way they are making a decision is not solely based on instrumentality but also based on appropriateness given the current circumstances. Thus, the same decision process, such as considering the positive and negative consequences of choosing one option over another, could be framed as being purely instrumental with a focus on future desired outcomes ("Best Choice" value) or as being the appropriate way to make the decision to find the truth ("Right Way" truth).

Higgins et al. (2008) tested how these two different ways of framing the decision-making process influenced people's evaluations of the choice options. Both the "Best Choice" and the "Right Way" conditions involved the very same option selection outcomes and instrumental means of

making a choice between them. What varied was how the decision-making activity was experienced; respectively, an activity focused on future desired outcomes versus an activity using the right process to find the truth about the options. As intended, almost everyone chose the mug over the pen (and only the results for these participants were included in the analyses). The study was about the evaluation of that *same* chosen option—the mug—as reflected in how much money participants offered to buy the mug. (After debriefing, the mug was given for free to the participants.)

The study found that participants in the "Right Way" condition offered substantially more money for the chosen mug (M = $4.84) than participants in the "Best Choice" condition (M = $2.91). And this effect was especially strong for those participants who expressed strong beliefs in the importance of following proper procedures (as measured on a separate questionnaire with everyday maxims that included focal items such as, "It is not enough to do good, one must do it the right way"; "What counts is not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game"). This study also found further evidence that the "Right Way" condition differed from the "Best Choice" condition regarding the extent to which the worth of the chosen mug was based solely on the positive outcomes from choosing the mug versus the worth of the decision-making process itself. In the "Best Choice" condition, the worth of the chosen mug was almost entirely based on the positive outcomes from choosing the mug, as evident by a highly positive correlation between the number of positive attributes of the mug listed by participants and the monetary value they assigned to the mug, r = .79, p = .002. As expected, there was a weaker correlation in the Right Way condition, r = .37, p > .20, because the worth of the mug was derived from the process of choosing the mug in the right way.

Higgins et al. (2008) examined the difference between the "Best Choice" and the "Right Way" decision process in another way as well. To experience the choice as the "Right Way" to make the choice, it is necessary that the manipulation of having made a decision in the "right way" occurs *during* the decision process and *before* making the choice. To examine this, another study manipulated attention to process versus outcome both before and after the choice. A subtle manipulation was used to create conditions varying in what the deliberation process was *about*. A "Reasons" condition directed participants' attention to the outcome facts underlying the choice; that is, reasons are "about" the outcomes attributes of the mug or the pen:

"What would be the reasons for your choice?" (Reasons *Before*); "What are the reasons for your choice?" (Reasons *After*). In contrast, a "Justifications" condition directed participants' attention to the decision process underlying the choice; that is, as defined (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971)—justify by *how* you made your choice. Justifications are "about" showing the decision process to be right and proper: "How would you justify whatever choice you make?" (Justification *Before*); "How do you justify your choice?" (Justification *After*). The dependent measure was again how much money participants offered to buy the chosen mug. The money offered was significantly higher in the Justification Before condition (*M* = $4.69) than in both the Justification After condition (*M* = $2.58) and, importantly, the Reasons Before condition (*M* = $2.78). (There was no significant difference between the two After conditions.) Thus, only in the Justification Before condition did participants experience the option as more worthwhile.

Experiencing the decision-making process as being conducted in the right way is one source of experiencing a decision-making process as being "right." In such cases, as described above, experiencing this activity as "right" has a relatively direct relation to experiencing the process as being the right way to make the decision. Although this experience of a "right" or proper process can be derived from an explicit description, as in Higgins and colleagues' (2008) study, even subtle cues can implicitly activate concepts relating to a proper process. For example, when consumers are purchasing organic or environmentally friendly "prosocial" products, encountering normative gestures—for example, a right-handed (versus left-handed) handshake offered by a salesperson—increases the perceived worth of the products (Mathmann et al., 2019). Following a normative (i.e., "right") sales process, prosocial products are perceived as having greater monetary value. Interestingly, these effects are not seen among nonprosocial products, suggesting the importance of the *fit* between the product and process.

Summary and Future Directions: Making a Decision in the "Right Way"

The research reviewed above indicates that when people experience their decision-making process as the appropriate way of making the choice (as opposed to a "best choice" process that involves weighing the consequences of each option), they perceive the selected option as more worthy. We suggest that this increase in worth is derived from the

alignment between the activity of decision making—a process involving the establishment of truth—and the experience of a process that is "right." Importantly, as revealed by Mathmann and colleagues' (2019) research, implicit cues can contribute to this sense of a "right" process and, thus, evaluations of the chosen outcome's worth. As such, scholars of consumer behavior and marketers alike would benefit from additional research that establishes these subtle indicators of a proper process at each stage of the consumer decision funnel. For instance, at the beginning of a decision-making journey, when a person is searching for information about alternatives, what characterizes the *right* way to go about this process? Later in the journey, how does one *appropriately* form, and subsequently narrow down, a consideration set? Future research should investigate each of these phases of the consumer decision-making process to pinpoint the aspects of these journeys that impart a sense of rightness.

Making a Decision in a Manner that "Feels Right"

Mathmann et al.'s (2019) work on prosocial products exemplifies a subtle and indirect source of feeling "right," perhaps even more pervasive than processes that are "proper" or right in and of themselves. It highlights that when people engage in a decision-making process where aspects of the process, such as the choice options encountered, align with and sustain their current motivational orientation, they experience a state of regulatory fit that makes them "feel right" about their decision, irrespective of the decision's outcomes (Higgins, 2000). What happens here is that the decision maker experiences the decision-making activity as *being right* even though it simply *feels right* from regulatory fit: "If it feels right, then it *is* right." Let's begin by exploring this psychological phenomenon.

One early study on this topic investigated the association between regulatory fit and perceptions of correct procedures—a concept closely related to the *rightness* of a decision-making process. In particular, Camacho et al. (2003) focused on instances of conflict resolution, hypothesizing that participants who experienced a regulatory fit between their own motivational orientation and the manner of conflict resolution (i.e., the conflict resolution process) would experience a sense of "rightness" that would contribute worth to the resolution, independent of the resolution's actual content (i.e., the conflict resolution outcomes). In this study, regulatory fit was

examined in terms of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998), which posits the existence of two distinct self-regulatory systems: a promotion system motivated by the fundamental need for nurturance and a prevention system motivated by the fundamental need for security. A person with a *promotion*-focused motivational orientation tends to prefer processes characterized by *eager* strategies; in contrast, a person with a *prevention*-focused motivational orientation tends to prefer processes characterized by *vigilant* strategies (Crowe & Higgins, 1997).

In Camacho et al.'s (2003) examination of procedural justice, researchers examined the fit between participants' measured promotion versus prevention focus and their use of eager versus vigilant means in resolving a past conflict, as well as their judgments of the "rightness" of the resolution. As predicted, participants who experienced regulatory fit (versus non-fit) judged these resolutions to be more right. Specifically, participants with a stronger promotion focus judged eager (versus vigilant) resolution processes as more right, and participants with a prevention focus judged vigilant (versus eager) resolution processes as more right. Importantly, these effects did not vary based upon the valence of the resolution (i.e., whether it was positive or negative for the participant), again indicating that the additional worth created by regulatory fit is related to the process of judgment rather than its outcomes. Further research by Camacho et al. (2003) indicated that this effect is not limited to the object of evaluation itself having moral characteristics; a follow-up study found a similar effect of regulatory fit on moral evaluations even in a case when the object of evaluation (i.e., a public policy proposal) had no explicit moral character. These results provided early evidence that regulatory fit produces a *feeling* of "rightness" that intensifies judgments of the *actual* rightness of a decision-making activity.

Importantly, this early work by Camacho and colleagues established these effects on an individual level, as these studies examined regulatory fit between a person's motivational orientation and his or her strategic decision-making process. More recent research has identified parallel effects of regulatory fit at levels beyond the individual. For example, evaluations of procedural justice are similarly affected by regulatory fit at the person-organizational level (Roczniewska et al., 2018). Across three studies, Roczniewska and colleagues (2018) examined regulatory fit between individual employees' regulatory focus (promotion versus prevention) and the regulatory focus of their organization. Results indicated that people with a motivational orientation that fit (versus did not fit) their organization's motivational orientation perceived the organization's procedures as being more *right*.

Collectively, this work by Camacho et al. (2003) and Roczniewska et al. (2018) reveals that when the decision-making process "feels right," the decision itself (i.e., the outcome) is experienced as "*being right*." Furthermore, although regulatory fit makes all kinds of activities feel right, this experience of rightness itself creates a special, second-order fit with *decision-making* activities in particular because these activities are fundamentally about truth-seeking. As a result, this higher-level experience of fit should strengthen individuals' engagement in decision-making activities, thus intensifying their evaluations of the options from which they are choosing (Higgins, 2006). Importantly, this intensification from fit will produce stronger reactions to both positively and negatively valenced choice options. In a decision-making process involving the selection of the *right* option among positively valenced choices, this intensification from fit will enhance the positivity of the selected positive option. Conversely, when the decision-making process involves rejecting the *wrong* option among negatively valenced choices, this intensification from fit will intensify the negativity of the rejected negative option. In both cases, by strengthening people's engagement in the decision-making process, the experience of a right process will intensify their evaluations of each option's worth.

Since the inception of regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2000), regulatory fit has been shown to intensify evaluations of a wide range of targets relevant to consumer decision making. Because it would not be possible to provide a comprehensive review of this research within the present article, in the paragraphs that follow, we have chosen to highlight select examples that showcase three different kinds of evaluations that are intensified by regulatory fit making the decision process "feel right": persuasive message evaluations, activity evaluations, and monetary evaluations. (For a fuller review of regulatory fit effects as they relate to marketing and consumer behavior, see Higgins et al., 2020; for a review of regulatory fit effects in the domain of management, see Higgins & Pinelli, 2020.)

Intensifying Evaluations of Persuasive Messages

When engaged in the process of making a decision, people often encounter messages designed to

persuade them for or against certain options. For instance, advertising messages are crafted to entice consumers to choose a particular brand; sales pitches are intended to sway a customer to decide to make a purchase. When people experience regulatory fit in the process of evaluating such a message, the resulting experience of "feeling right" has been shown to intensify the message's influence. One early study demonstrated this effect by testing messages advocating fruits and vegetables (Cesario et al., 2004). Like the studies described above, researchers created conditions of regulatory fit versus non-fit with respect to participants' regulatory focus by manipulating the motivational concerns and strategic means highlighted in the message. Promotion-focused messages highlighted how eating fruits and vegetables can contribute to one's accomplishment (i.e., "increased energy, better moods, and a general sense of happiness and fulfillment"), whereas prevention-focused messages highlighted how it can contribute to one's safety (i.e., "buffer . . . from the physical demands of the world we live in (pollution, daily stress, bad weather, etc."). Eager means—a fit with promotion—highlighted that if one ate these foods, one could obtain overall good health. Vigilant means—a fit with prevention—highlighted that if one did *not* eat these foods, one would *not* obtain overall good health. The study's findings confirmed that participants who experienced regulatory fit found these messages to be more persuasive (Cesario et al., 2004). Similar results have also been found when examining brand attitudes more broadly (Lee & Aaker, 2004).

Importantly, these effects can involve motivational factors in addition to regulatory focus. For example, one set of studies presented participants with ad messaging that varied with respect to construal level (Lee et al., 2010). Construal-level theory proposes that people tend to construe objects and events in concrete and low-level terms when these objects are psychologically close, whereas they construe objects and events in more abstract, high-level terms when psychologically distant (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope et al., 2007). Lee et al. (2010) proposed that a promotion focus tends to fit abstract, high-level construals and a prevention focus tends to fit concrete, low-level construals (see also Semin et al., 2005). They tested this proposal by examining the impact on brand attitudes of ad messaging that was abstract ("The Ultimate Aerobic Machine for a Great Workout!") versus concrete ("The Ultimate Aerobic Machine with the Right Features!") among promotion- versus prevention-focused participants. As predicted, participants who experienced a "regulatory-construal fit" (versus non-fit) reported intensified (i.e., more favorable) brand attitudes. A follow-up study indicated that these effects of regulatory-construal fit were mediated by engagement strength.

Furthermore, the effects of regulatory fit on persuasion are not limited to situations of fit within the message itself; even nonverbal cues accompanying a message can affect its persuasiveness. For instance, promotion-focused consumers tend to "feel right" and evaluate messages more positively when messages are delivered in an eager style, with broad and outward-facing hand movements, a quick rate of speech and a forward-leaning body position. In contrast, prevention-focused consumers tend to "feel right" and evaluate messages more positively when delivered in a vigilant style, with inward-facing gestures, slower speech, and a backward-leaning body position (Cesario & Higgins, 2008).

These are just a few of the studies that have demonstrated that regulatory fit can intensify evaluations of persuasive messages and narratives (for more thorough reviews, see Cesario et al., 2008; Lee & Higgins, 2009). Although regulatory fit provides marketers and managers with a unique mechanism for enhancing the persuasiveness of their appeals, they should take note of two caveats. First, when people's attention is consciously drawn to the source of the "feeling right" experience, the effect of regulatory fit on persuasion is eliminated (Cesario et al., 2004). Second, the "feeling right" effect that results from regulatory fit is general and can transfer to other objects and experiences. As a result, people who experience fit (versus non-fit) are also more vulnerable to counter-persuasion. In a study by Koenig et al. (2009), for example, participants read a persuasive message arguing *for* a fictitious after-school program followed by a measure of their attitude toward the program, and then, they read a second persuasive appeal arguing *against* the same program followed by a second measure of their attitude toward the program. Regulatory fit (versus non-fit) was manipulated in the standard way (listing either a promotion or prevention goal, then describing how the goal might be achieved using either eager or vigilant strategies). Koenig et al. (2009) found that participants in the regulatory fit (versus non-fit) condition showed greater attitude change between the first and second attitude ratings, indicating that participants in the fit condition were more susceptible to counter-appeals. Based on these findings, marketers might

benefit from strategically creating conditions for fit within environments in their full control (e.g., a company-owned retail space where there is no opportunity for competitive counter-messaging), while choosing a different strategy in spaces shared with rival brands (e.g., in a block of television commercials).

Despite these additional factors, there is substantial evidence that creating an experience of "rightness" in response to messages advocating particular choices can influence the perceived worth of those choices. These results raise the question: Can the experience of "rightness" affect decisions about activities and organizations as a whole beyond specific, narrow messaging?

Intensifying Evaluations of Activities

The experience of "rightness" produced by regulatory fit also influences activity choices by intensifying people's evaluations of those choices. For example, people are known to experience a regulatory fit when a *fun* activity (e.g., partying) is framed as "enjoyable or for fun" and when an *important* activity (e.g., household chores) is framed as "important or personally relevant" (Bianco et al., 2003). Building on this initial finding, researchers examined how decisions to engage in fun versus important activities during a free-choice period are affected by the free-choice period's framing (Higgins et al., 2010). In one of these studies, after completing an activity that was either fun (a Shoot-the-Moon game) or important (a financial duties task), participants were given a five-minute free-choice period described as either enjoyable ("This is your free time! So please feel free to do anything you want") or serious ("It's important that you use this time wisely and manage it in an appropriate and prudent manner"). Results revealed that participants chose to engage in more activity trials when the activity type fit the framing of the free-choice period.

These findings on activity choice have important implications for marketers of services and branded experiences, as they suggest that consumers will choose to engage in a service when its positioning aligns with consumers' framing of their free time in a given situation. For instance, consider a spa within a high-end resort hotel that hosts both business conference attendees (who are primarily visiting the hotel for an important reason) and leisure travelers (who are visiting for pleasure). Higgins et al.'s (2010) work suggests that travelers may be more likely to engage in a spa activity when the activity's orientation fits how they conceptualize their time spent at the hotel. As such, the spa may benefit from a targeted messaging campaign. Among hotel guests booked within a corporate block, in-room marketing materials such as the spa menu might advocate services using serious messaging (e.g., "Decompress so you can come back stronger tomorrow"). In contrast, among hotel guests with rooms booked on leisure travel websites, in-room marketing might advocate spa services using enjoyment-oriented messaging (e.g., "You're on holiday—pamper yourself!"). Based on this research, we would predict that this kind of strategically targeted marketing would help to drive bookings for spa services.

Not only are people more likely to *choose* to engage in an activity that is a regulatory fit (versus non-fit); they are also more likely to explicitly *evaluate* the activity as being enjoyable (Freitas & Higgins, 2002) and satisfying (Dimotakis et al., 2012). This research has notable implications for marketers, particularly given the recent proliferation of consumer review websites. Because consumers' evaluations of product and service usage experiences are now widely accessible, brands that facilitate regulatory fit within the process of consumption will be poised to benefit from improved evaluations. These regulatory fit effects also have important workplace consequences. For instance, in the context of a hiring process, interviewers' experience of regulatory fit in the interview process influences how they evaluate the impression management tactics used by the interviewee (Bian et al., 2020). Furthermore, within an organization, employees whose regulatory focus fits their supervisor's leadership style show decreased turnover intentions (Hamstra et al., 2011).

Fit effects even appear to impact job satisfaction as a whole. One such example is grounded in theorizing by Trope and Liberman (2010) on construal level and psychological distance. These scholars have proposed that people mentally construe objects and events differently depending on their psychological distance from the self on any number of dimensions, including time, space, and social distance. Berson and Halevy (2014) applied this theory to social distance in the workplace by investigating the impact of a "construal fit" between two factors: the distance between a given employee and his or her leader in the company's hierarchy (close versus distant) and the leader's communication behavior (concrete versus abstract). They found that employees reported greater satisfaction with their pay, the social environment at work, and their company's

infrastructure when leaders' hierarchical distance fit their communications. More specifically, employees experienced these benefits of regulatory fit when hierarchically distant (versus close) leaders communicated a broad, high-level vision (i.e., abstract behavior), and when hierarchically close (versus distant) leaders provided individualized feedback and mentoring (i.e., concrete behavior). Similar effects were also detected on employees' organizational commitment. In each of these cases, regulatory fit produced a feeling of "rightness" that intensified evaluations of different activities.

Importantly, we expect that these insights about the workplace would also apply to the domain of consumer behavior. For instance, Berson and Halevy's (2014) findings might translate to a branded context involving a long-term relationship between a company representative and the consumer (e.g., financial advisors and their clients). Given the results of their research, we predict that consumers will report greater satisfaction when working with brand representatives who communicate a vision for the client that fits the client's own construal level (e.g., a detailed and concrete plan for clients with low-level construal, and a lofty, more abstract plan for clients with high-level construal).

Just like the research on persuasive messaging reviewed above, the effects of regulatory fit on activity choice have been documented across several motivational systems including fun versus importance (Higgins et al., 2010), regulatory focus (e.g., Dimotakis et al., 2012; Freitas & Higgins, 2002), and construal level (e.g., Berson & Halevy, 2014; Etkin & Ratner, 2013). Furthermore, regulatory fit also influences evaluations of the activities involved in the consumption of a product or service. For instance, based on Trope and Liberman's (2010) work on construal level and psychological distance, Etkin and Ratner (2013) proposed that consumers' motivation to use a set of products or services within goal pursuit would depend on the fit between two factors: the temporal distance of the goal pursuit (near future versus far future) and the degree of variety of the products or services (different versus similar). In particular, they hypothesized that people who planned to use a product or service in the *near* future would construe the options in concrete terms, which would contribute to processing the differences between them. As a result, this group would be more motivated to use products or services that involve a variety of different branded activity options (e.g., a variety pack of protein bars or a gym pass with a range of exercise class options). In contrast, they hypothesized that people who planned to use a product or service in the *far* future would construe the options in abstract terms, which would contribute to processing the similarities among them. As a result, this group would be motivated to use products or services involving similar options (e.g., a single-flavor pack of the same bars or a gym pass with multiple sessions from the same trainer). These predictions were confirmed: Participants were more motivated to engage in activities that fit their temporal construal of their goal pursuit process.

The increase in engagement strength that produces these intensified activity evaluations also has important downstream consequences for performance. At an individual level, not only do participants who experience regulatory fit (versus non-fit) report intensified attitudes toward activities; they also perform better on unrelated activities immediately afterward (Lee et al., 2010). While Lee and colleagues (2010) detected such a performance improvement using a cognitive task (i.e., anagram completion), parallel effects of regulatory fit have been demonstrated on physical performance through the use of a handgrip endurance task (Hong & Lee, 2008). Similar performance effects have been found in an organizational context. For instance, Dimotakis et al. (2012) found that teams whose structure fit (versus did not fit) the regulatory focus of an assigned task performed better on the task. In each of these examples, the increased engagement that results from regulatory fit enhances activity performance.

On the whole, these findings highlight that regulatory fit enhances individuals' decisions about the worth of activities: If it feels right, it *is* right. One important question about this increase in worth is whether it translates to the actual, explicit value people assign to these choices. Does regulatory fit intensify monetary evaluations? A range of studies has suggested that the answer is Yes, as we discuss next.

Intensifying Evaluations of Monetary Value

The experience of a "right" and worthwhile process produced by regulatory fit *also* transfers to the monetary value people assign to choice options. An early set of studies on this topic (Higgins et al., 2003) manipulated regulatory fit (versus non-fit) by directing participants to choose between a desirable mug and undesirable pen in an eager manner (i.e., thinking about what they would gain by choosing the mug versus choosing the pen) versus vigilant manner (i.e., thinking about what they

would lose by not choosing the mug versus not choosing the pen). As planned, the overwhelming majority of participants chose the mug, which controlled for the object chosen. (Only these participants were included in the analyses.) As predicted, participants assigned a greater monetary value to the mug when the decision strategy fit their own regulatory focus. Furthermore, in a follow-up study, participants offered more of their own money for the mug in conditions of regulatory fit ($M_{promotion-eager}$ = \$4.76; $M_{prevention-vigilant}$ = \$4.68) than in conditions of regulatory non-fit ($M_{promotion-vigilant}$ = \$3.11; $M_{prevention-eager}$ = \$2.49).

Like other kinds of fit effects, the intensification of monetary value has been documented across different motivational systems. One such example involves regulatory mode theory, which posits that two distinct and independent functions are involved in self-regulation: *assessment*, which involves the critical evaluation of all alternatives, and *locomotion*, which involves managing to effect change through movement from state to state (Higgins et al., 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2000). Avnet and Higgins (2003) tested how a regulatory fit between a person's regulatory mode and their decision-making strategies influences the monetary value of choice options. In this study, after completing an experimental induction of either an assessment or locomotion orientation, participants were asked to evaluate five different book-lights for five different attributes using one of two strategies. A "full evaluation" strategy fit an assessment orientation because it instructed participants to thoroughly compare all brands and all attributes. In contrast, a "progressive elimination" strategy fit a locomotion orientation because it instructed participants to make continual progress in the evaluation task by eliminating one of the book-lights after reviewing each attribute (whichever book-light was worst on that attribute). The book-lights were chosen so that one would be the clear favorite. Like Higgins, Idson, et al. (2003) work testing regulatory fit as it pertains to promotion versus prevention, Avnet and Higgins (2003) found that, at the end of the study, participants in the regulatory fit (versus non-fit) conditions offered more of their own money to purchase the same chosen book-light.

Similar effects have also been documented using a range of outcome measures related to monetary value. For instance, price estimations are intensified by regulatory-construal fit (Förster & Higgins, 2005) and by a fit between regulatory focus and the size and structure of one's consideration set (Pham & Chang, 2010). Willingness to pay is enhanced by fit

in the domains of regulatory focus (Higgins, Idson, et al., 2003), regulatory mode (Avnet & Higgins, 2003), and construal level (Etkin & Ratner, 2013). Even opening offers in a negotiation context are intensified by a fit between an individual's regulatory focus and his or her role as a buyer versus seller (Appelt et al., 2009). Across all of these examples, regulatory fit produces a sense that the decision-making process feels *right*, and this rightness transfers to evaluations of their choices, including monetary worth.

Summary and Future Directions: Making a Decision in a Manner that "Feels Right"

People experience a sense of regulatory fit when their motivational orientation aligns with their manner of goal pursuit (e.g., when a promotion-focused person engages in decision making eagerly, or an assessment-oriented person evaluates choice options using a process of full evaluation). Research investigating regulatory fit theory indicates that when consumers experience a sense of fit in their decision-making process, they *feel* right about the process, which lends a sense that the process *is* right. In this section, we reviewed work indicating that this sense of rightness intensifies evaluations of worth: People who experience regulatory fit in the process of decision making tend to evaluate positive outcomes more positively, and negative outcomes more negatively. This research has examined the effects of regulatory fit on evaluations of a range of different targets relevant to consumer marketing, including marketing messages, products, and branded activities. It has also examined different kinds of evaluations, from ratings of message persuasiveness to monetary evaluations. Importantly, although some aspects of the regulatory fit literature have been established with an eye toward consumer marketing (e.g., examinations of persuasive advertising messaging; the bundling of products and services), other aspects have only been examined by scholars primarily interested in basic psychology (e.g., fun versus important activity framing) or organizational behavior (e.g., relationships with individuals with a high versus low construal level). To establish how such effects translate to a marketing context, future research should apply these insights to study consumer behavior explicitly, examining how regulatory fit contributes a sense of rightness and intensifies consumers' evaluations of the worth of outcomes at each step of the decision journey.

The Role Of Shared Reality In Making The Right Decision

We have seen that making a decision in the "right way" and that "feels right" intensifies evaluations of chosen options, independent of the outcomes associated with the chosen option. Yet, there is more to this story. Humans rarely make decisions in isolation—instead, decision making is often an *interpersonal* process. Whether consulting a roommate when picking out a shirt color, choosing a household product with one's spouse, or listening to a song recommended by a friend, making the "right" decision is often done in tandem with others, especially close others. In this section, we review evidence suggesting that making the "right" decision is particularly influenced by the experience of shared reality—the perceived commonality of feelings, beliefs, or concerns (inner states) with another person about some target (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins, 2019). Together, this research suggests that shared reality intensifies the experience of making the right decision.

Shared reality is especially relevant to consumer psychology in today's world, where consumers communicate among themselves by Word Of Mouth (WOM), through channels such as forums, blogs, and social media. As consumers turn to each other for information and advice, firms now "listen in" on consumers for new marketing opportunities (Urban & Hauser, 2004). Past influential models of persuasive communication had emphasized the role of the persuaders (e.g., how to use opinion leaders or celebrities in an ad, how to craft messages to increase consumer involvement; Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). More recent papers have described the significant effect of WOM marketing on consumer behavior and, in turn, sales (Akpinar & Berger, 2017; Netzer et al., 2012). New marketing strategies increasingly incorporate an understanding of how consumers have evolved into *active* participants in brands' persuasion attempts—moving fluidly between the roles of target and agent of persuasion. Accordingly, we review evidence suggesting that the sense of shared reality *between consumers* can influence the experience of making the right decision.

Prior work on shared reality has shown that people are especially likely to create a shared reality with those they trust *epistemically* (as a source of information about the world—see Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017 for a review) and with whom they feel *connected* (e.g., in-group members; Echterhoff

et al., 2005; Echterhoff et al., 2008; Sinclair et al., 2005; or close relationship partners, Rossignac-Milon et al., 2020; Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018). They are also more likely to create shared reality with a group of people with a common feeling or belief (versus with an individual; Echterhoff et al., 2017; Higgins et al., 2007). Thus, the presence of epistemic and relational motives, by enhancing the creation of shared reality, should intensify the experience of making the "right" decision. In this section, we review evidence from four different types of situations in which shared reality influences consumers: receiving verification from others, persuading others, being persuaded, and sharing experiences and decisions with others.

Receiving Verification from Others

Hardin and Higgins (1996) theorized that, when socially verified, our inner states come to feel more objectively "true" and "right." Even when individuals' judgments are simply preferences, like their favorite flavor of ice cream, they want others to agree with them, to verify that this flavor is truly special. They want their preference to be more than personal and subjective: They want their judgment of the worth of the flavor to be the objective truth (Higgins, 2019). And this objective truth is conferred when others verify their judgment (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). In this sense, when a decision is verified by others, we may come to feel that this decision is *truly* the *right* choice. Thus, experiencing a commonality of inner states (thoughts, feelings, beliefs) with another person about something should influence the feeling of making the "right" decision. However, as explained above, not all sources of verification are equally influential: As predicted by shared reality theory, the feeling of making the "right decision" is especially powerful when verified by a group of people with a common feeling or belief or by a close other.

The social–psychological literature is replete with evidence that perceived social consensus enhances certainty that one's attitude is appropriate (Petrocelli et al., 2007; Visser & Mirabile, 2004) and that one's behaviors are warranted (Park et al., 2011; Schultz et al., 2007). Believing that one's attitude is widely held enhances the conviction that it is the "right" attitude.

Evidence from consumer psychology also suggests that people use information about the number of reviews to feel more "right" about a product. Within e-commerce platforms (e.g., Amazon), product pages commonly include rating and review

systems highlighting the average rating score (review *valence*; e.g., 4/5) as well as the number of ratings or reviews submitted by consumers (review *volume*). Although research indicates that sales are associated with both review valence (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006) and review volume (e.g., Duan et al., 2008), follow-up work suggests that review volume is more influential (Lin, 2014). We propose that review volume may play this special role because a rating based only on a handful of reviews is more likely to be biased, given the size of the sample. In contrast, the average rating across many different consumers will be more likely to reflect a general consensus and, thus, the *truth* about the product.

Research also suggests that verification from *close others* intensifies the experience of feeling "right" about a decision. In particular, recommendations from close others (versus acquaintances) are particularly useful when shoppers approach making their ultimate decision about a product (Song et al., 2014). Sites often show custom recommendations and reviews based on one's social network (e.g., showing Facebook friends who have partaken in a particular activity on TripAdvisor). This practice is probably effective because people are more likely to purchase a product that close others agree is the right choice.

Future research in consumer psychology could leverage these effects to intensify the feeling that one's decision is "right." For example, sites could consider adding a "consensus rating" to e-commerce product pages that indicates the variability of the ratings received (i.e., low variability = high consensus; high variability = low consensus). Based on social consensus effects, we would expect that purchase intent and sales will be higher when an icon representing high consensus is presented (versus a low-consensus icon; and versus the status quo of no consensus information). Similarly, linking product evaluations to participants' social media friends who also selected the product could intensify the "rightness" of the product. Researchers could even manipulate the specific others highlighted on such a page (e.g., Facebook friends versus strangers) to demonstrate the effect of close others (versus verification from anyone). In these ways, feeling that close others or groups of people have verified one's decision could intensify feeling "right" about this choice.

One open question is whether the effects of experiencing a sense of shared reality about a decision differ if the other person is verifying the outcome of the decision or the decision-making process.

Even without verification that one's ultimate choice was the right one, there could be effects from receiving verification that one has gone about the decision-making process in the right way (e.g., another person verifying that is was right to make the decision by using a process of progressive elimination rather than conducting a comprehensive evaluation of all choice options; see Avnet & Higgins, 2003). Perhaps experiencing a shared reality about the decision-making process could suffice in creating the experience of making the right decision.

Verifying Others: Social Tuning

In addition to *receiving* verification *from* others, the greater use of WOM marketing makes the process of *verifying others* increasingly relevant. Tuning to others' feelings and beliefs contributes to experiencing that one has made the "right" decision. In this section, we consider social–psychological evidence showing that creating a shared reality when describing something to another person, through verifying that person's feelings or beliefs, may also enhance the experience of making the right decision. We then link this research to recent work in the field of consumer psychology.

Research on communication and self-persuasion has examined how communicators tailor not only what they *say*, but also what they subsequently *remember*, to fit with their communication partner's attitude (social tuning; Higgins & Rholes, 1978; for reviews, see Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009, and Higgins, 2019). For example, when describing a movie to a friend whom they know likes (or dislikes) this movie, people choose to describe it more positively (or negatively). In turn, their memory of the movie will shift to align with their description (i.e., they will remember it more positively or negatively). Their memory changes because their tuned message about the movie becomes the appropriate way to describe the movie—the *truth* about the movie. Thus, the process of social tuning to verify an audience's feelings or beliefs about something can intensify our own feelings and beliefs about that thing—having the "right" attitude about something.

Critically, this effect is moderated by communicators' relationship with their audience—specifically, how connected they feel to the audience and how much they trust the audience as a source of truth. Participants exhibit a stronger recall bias (audience-tuned memory) when the audience is a group of individuals with a common view about

something (Hausmann et al., 2008; Higgins et al., 2007) and when they feel connected to the audience because the audience is a member of their in-group (Echterhoff et al., 2005, 2013), or has the same status (Echterhoff, Lang, et al., 2009). Participants also exhibit stronger recall bias when their audience is an expert on the topic (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017; Knausenberger et al., 2019). This research suggests that when describing a product or an experience to another person or a group of people, consumers may adopt their communication partner's attitude about the product into their description and memory of this product. Importantly, the extent of this phenomenon will depend on their trust in the audience.

This work is especially relevant given the general rise of WOM and user-generated content. Recent work in consumer psychology has recognized a new phenomenon in which ordinary consumers grab hold of a "megaphone" online ("megaphone effect"; McQuarrie et al., 2013) and acquire a mass audience that historically was only available to professionals with institutional mediation. Beyond just posting reviews, ordinary consumers can now consume *publicly* by posting accounts of their consumption (e.g., haul videos or "unboxing" on YouTube), and keep ongoing communications with a large audience of strangers. Some of these consumers become "influencers," similar to opinion leaders (Kozinets et al., 2010). Future research could harness the lens of shared reality theory to examine how influencers' perceptions of their audience's attitude affect the content of *their* posts. Are they engaging in social tuning?

For example, researchers could test a brand ambassador program in which influencers are provided with either brief survey data collected from their follower base indicating existing positive views of the brand/product (experimental condition) versus no survey data (control condition). The branded content that they subsequently produce for recommendation could be coded for positivity. Shared reality theory would predict that in the condition where ambassadors see that their audience likes the brand, the branded content they generate will be even more positive.

Beyond influencers themselves, social network structures suggest that attitudes about products and experiences may be rapidly transmitted through networks of consumers. Through each of these consumer-to-consumer links, the process of describing a product or experience to another consumer (whom one believes has a generally favorable view toward the product) should intensify

one's own conviction that this product or experience is positive. The potential for this rapid transmission is evidenced by the grounding model of cultural transmission (Kashima et al., 2007). Socially shared information is grounded; that is, its meaning becomes mutually understood and accepted among parties and becomes a shared reality "tagged" as a verified fact (Kashima et al., 2018). This socially constructed reality is more likely to spread through social networks (Bratanova & Kashima, 2014). Furthermore, its repetition to multiple audiences makes it a collective shared reality and this iterative process facilitates the diffusion of group-level shared reality (Kashima et al., 2018). This work shows the potential for the effect of persuading others on attitudes to spread through a network of people.

Future research could also move beyond one-way audience-tuning to examine *dyadic* tuning. Though research has mainly examined tuning as a one-way process, tuning often happens mutually. To give a real-world example, if influencers post about a product on social media, and then followers comment on this post, these followers will tune to the influencer's attitude about the product. In turn, the influencer will comment back, tuning to their followers—creating a cyclical process of *sharing-is-believing* (Higgins, 2019). This cyclical process is even more salient in real-world conversations, in which interactants engage in a rapid process of reciprocal tuning. Thus, when dyads or networks of consumers discuss a product that they generally view positively, then they should ultimately emerge with an even more evaluatively biased view, and feel more certain that their evaluation of the product is appropriate or right.

Being Persuaded By Others

Research also suggests that people are more easily persuaded by those with whom they have a sense of shared reality. As originally put forward by Higgins (1992), attitude formation is a fundamentally social process. Attitude formation cannot be explained simply by pure cognitive processes—instead, it is driven by the motivated process of creating a shared reality. Critically, shared reality theory predicts that people will be more persuaded by those they feel connected to and trust as a source of truth. Close partners and trusted others are more persuasive—in other words, people are more likely to believe their recommendations are "right."

Prior work from social psychology has shown that, as a *listener*, one's relationship to the communicator matters. A large body of work has

established that one's recollection of something is fundamentally shaped by what one's communication partner said—and, importantly, *did not say*—about it (see Hirst & Coman, 2018, for a review). Specifically, through a process called socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting, listeners come to forget related aspects of something that the speaker left unmentioned (versus mentioned memories and versus unrelated, unmentioned memories). For example, imagine two people experience an event together. If later on, Person A is describing that event to Person B and omits negative aspects of the experience, then Person B will selectively forget those negative aspects (compared to aspects of the experience that were mentioned, and also compared to negative aspects of a different, unrelated experience).

Notably, as shared reality theory would predict, this effect is especially strong when the listener feels relationally connected to the speaker (Coman & Hirst, 2015). Importantly, this effect can occur in large-scale social networks, especially if these are clustered (Coman et al., 2016). This research suggests that consumers might "selectively forget" downsides of a product when they hear someone describe that product without mentioning these downsides, or even when they see posts in their social media network about a product that omit these elements.

Evidence has accrued in consumer psychology that people trust the opinions and recommendations of their close others more than systems or brands. Consumers trust earned media (online WOM) more than paid media (Nielsen, 2015). For example, 83% of respondents reported trusting recommendations from people they know, whereas trust in different types of paid ads ranged from 54% (radio) to 63% (TV). People report that everyday consumers like family and friends are more impactful on their consumer behavior than every other kind of influencer except mainstream journalists (Cision, 2019). Marketers are increasingly shifting toward spending their budgets on earned media (Cision & Demand Gen, 2017; Cision, 2019). Compared to system recommendations, recommendations by other consumers are more likely to increase consumers' trust in, as well as consumers' perceptions of, the product's potential affective impact (Benlian et al., 2012).

Indeed, one key element of shared reality is epistemic and relational trust (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009)—trusting one's communication partner as a source of connection and truth. This perspective has important implications for the way consumers approach and respond to brands' persuasion attempts. Consumers often have intuitive theories about marketers' motives and tactics, and specifically, theories about the *appropriateness* of a marketer's tactic (Friestad & Wright, 1994). If consumers have the sense that they are being manipulated by the brand, this should lower their relational and epistemic trust in the brand and could backfire. This is exactly what consumer psychology has found: When consumers are suspicious of a brand's persuasion attempts and successfully resist this attempt, they become even more convinced of their *original* attitudes, which may not be in favor of a product (Tormala & Petty, 2002).

Given the impact of trust on persuasion, future research could investigate whether influencer campaigns would benefit from featuring people at the same "level" and status as the target audience—someone the target audience can trust and relate to, rather than people they aspire to be like, such as celebrities or social media stars. Prior work in shared reality research has specifically shown that people are *less* likely to create a shared reality with someone of a higher (versus similar) status (Echterhoff, Lang, et al., 2009). Perhaps brands should downplay the traditional image of glamour and aloofness expected of a spokesperson because the inability for consumers to relate to this person could undermine their shared reality, thereby compromising the extent to which consumers feel "right" about the product.

A real-world example of this is the phenomenon of "fake Instagram" or "finsta" accounts, in which celebrities post content, such as unflattering photos or disclosing vulnerabilities, that is experienced as being more "real," authentic, and less highly curated than their official social media accounts. Future research could test how consumers react to promotional content from these influencers' official versus "finsta" accounts. Do celebrities' "finsta" accounts change their perceived status (i.e., do consumers perceive them as more similar in status to themselves)? If so, do consumers find messages from "finstas" to be more persuasive and trustworthy? Does purchase intent increase?

Joint Decision Making and Consumption

People often make decisions with others—a process that can depend on successfully creating a shared reality. Moreover, they often consume products and engage in experiences *together*. In such cases of joint decision making and consumption, the experience of "rightness" can be influenced by

shared reality creation during the decision-making process and during consumption itself.

Social–psychological evidence supports the idea that experiencing a shared reality during a decision-making process enhances the experience of making the "right" decision. As a classic example, small groups of people converge on a normative judgment about the distance a light moves even when the light does not, in fact, move at all (Sherif, 1936). Despite the normative judgment being inaccurate, participants experience this judgment as the truth, even when subsequently making a private judgment. The shared judgment is experienced as the "right" judgment.

In a recent study, participants jointly interpreted ambiguous images with an online chat partner. Participants who experienced a greater shared reality with their online partner felt more certain that they knew what was *really* going on in the images—in other words, they felt that their interpretation of the images was "right" (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2020). In another study in this paper, romantic dyads were given the opportunity to select a product together—an image print to take home. As coded by observers, couples who appeared to create a greater shared reality during this decision by developing a joint perspective ultimately appeared more satisfied with their decision (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2020). This finding suggests that the process of creating a shared reality with a close partner increases the worth of the selected option. Together, these studies point to the importance of the process of *creating* a shared reality in enhancing the experience of having made the "right" decision or interpreting things in the "right" way.

Shared reality may also enhance the intensity of consumption experiences. Jointly consuming a good or service can imbue arbitrary behaviors with meaning (Vohs et al., 2013). Objects are experienced more intensely when experienced simultaneously with others. As examples, tastes (both pleasant and unpleasant) are accentuated when consumed with others (Boothby et al., 2014), emotions are intensified when experienced with others (Shteynberg, 2015), pleasant activities are more fun when engaged in with others (Reis et al., 2017), and messages are more persuasive when attended to with others (Shteynberg et al., 2016). Furthermore, these effects extend to memory: Objects attended to with others are more accurately recalled (Shteynberg et al., 2016) and are more conducive to social learning (Shteynberg, 2015).

Critically, these effects are especially pronounced between co-experiencers who feel closer, such as familiar partners, similar others, or in-group members (Boothby et al., 2016, 2017; Shteynberg, 2015). Several researchers have theorized that shared reality may underlie these effects—in other words, perceiving that a co-experiencer is experiencing the stimuli *in the same way* may amplify one's perceptions of it (Boothby et al., 2017; Shteynberg, 2018; Steinmetz & Pfattheicher, 2017). This research suggests that, given a baseline level of positivity about an experience (which is often the case when a product or experience has been selected), experiencing a sense of shared reality with one's co-experiencer should intensify feeling "right" about the product or experience.

Beyond isolated moments and experiences, *repeated* co-experience may play an even larger role in intensifying the degree to which a person feels "right" about an experience or product being consumed. Shared practices—ways of thinking, behaving, interacting, and talking that are unique and special to their relationship—form an important component of the development of shared reality in interpersonal relationships (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018). Indeed, research has shown that couples benefit from perceiving their joint consumption behaviors (e.g., paying for a weekly date night, or consuming coffee together) as meaningful "rituals" (versus "routines"): They report more positive emotions and greater relationship satisfaction and commitment (Garcia-Rada et al., 2019). Importantly, consistent with shared reality theory, this work found that these benefits are enhanced when couples *mutually agree* that the experience is a ritual.

These benefits extend to groups: Family-specific rituals and traditions amplify holiday enjoyment (Sezer et al., 2016). The importance of shared practices can even be seen in early child development. Learning shared cultural practices from one's caregiver, such as learning the names of things and other shared customs, forms an important stage of shared reality development (Higgins, 2016). Children perpetuate these ritualistic actions and conventions, even when ineffective (Nielsen et al., 2015), and these group rituals play a key role in group cohesion and shared identity (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016). Critically, rituals surrounding an object enhance the desirability and significance of that object (Kapitány & Nielsen, 2015). Thus, shared practices form an important component of everyday life and relationships and can enhance the experience of feeling "right" about products and experiences.

Various lines of work in consumer psychology suggest that engaging in shared practices can play

an important role in fostering a common identity between members of a consumer base, and that consumption brings people together (Woolley & Fishbach, 2017). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) argued that consumers create a "consciousness of kind"; that is, a sense of common identity that sets off members from others, has "shared rituals and traditions" that carry specific meaning systems among them, and involves a "sense of moral obligation" that motivates contributions to the brand community. Similarly, concepts like consumer tribes (Cova et al., 2007) and subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) point to the importance of this shared reality among consumers. The concept of brand community has provided a useful framework for understanding how consumers create value from forming enduring social bonds and sustaining a shared experience around brands.

Future work could leverage these shared practices and rituals, especially around jointly consuming products and experiences, to enhance the experience of feeling "right" about them. The success of commercials like Coca-Cola's (e.g., The Coca-Cola Company, 1971/2012), in which a group of people from around the world sing together, "I'd like to buy the world a Coke//And keep it company//That's the real thing," speak to the powerful effects of wanting to partake in a group practice of consuming or even holding/possessing a product. But especially as consumers' desire to maintain their sense of control in the marketplace increases (Faraji-Rad et al., 2017), new marketing campaigns have begun to allow consumers to actively *contribute* to campaigns rather than passively observing them. We propose that these campaigns will be especially powerful when consumers feel like they are partaking in a "shared practice" with the group. The success of viral social media challenges, such as the "Vans Challenge" or "ALS Ice Bucket Challenge," speak to the power of actively participating in the creation of collective shared reality with the larger consumer base.

Summary and Future Directions: The Role of Shared Reality in Making the Right Decision

In this section, we review evidence suggesting the experience of shared reality between consumers intensifies the experience of making the right decision. First, experiencing social verification of one's choice can intensify the perception that the decision is truly the right choice. This is especially the case when the social verification comes from a group of people or a close other. Future research in consumer psychology could leverage these effects to intensify the feeling that one's decision is right; for example, by providing a consensus rating or linking product evaluations to participants' social media friends. Second, creating a shared reality when describing something to another person, through verifying that person's feelings or beliefs, can also enhance the experience of making the right decision. Given the general rise of WOM and user-generated content, future research could examine how the process of describing a product or experience to another consumer with a favorable view toward the product intensifies one's own conviction that this product or experience is positive. Third, research has shown that as a listener, experiencing a shared reality as a result of being persuaded by others can influence the experience of making the right decision. Given the facility of creating a shared reality with someone of the same status, future research could investigate whether influencers of the same (versus higher) status as the target audience more effectively persuade potential customers. Finally, the process of co-constructing a shared reality and establishing shared practices together can influence how right a decision feels. Future work could leverage these shared practices and rituals, especially around jointly consuming products and experiences, to enhance the experience of feeling "right" about them.

General Discussions And Conclusions

Collectively, this research suggests that when making a decision, experiencing a choice option as worthy involves far more than a simple benefit–cost calculation. The experienced worth of a given choice option also depends on how *right* people feel during the decision-making process. When they feel right, their evaluations of choice options are intensified, with positive choices viewed as even more worthwhile, and negative choices viewed as even less. Sometimes, this feeling of "rightness" is derived from experience that the decision-making process itself is *the proper way to proceed*, whether explicitly stated (e.g., a heading that reads "THE RIGHT WAY!") or implicitly conveyed through social norms (e.g., a right-handed handshake). However, a less direct but more common route involves experiencing a *regulatory fit* between one's motivational orientation and one's manner of decision making. This experience contributes a sense of "feeling right" that similarly intensifies their

evaluations, even when those evaluations are unrelated to the conditions that produced such a fit in the first place.

In addition, research on shared reality suggests that understanding how humans come to feel "right" about a decision or experience is incomplete without considering the *interpersonal* nature of this process—specifically, the experience of *shared reality*. Experiencing a commonality of inner states about the world can influence feeling "right" in several ways. First, the social verification afforded by shared reality—social tuning to agree with another's choice—can enhance the experience of making the "right" choice. Through the creation of shared reality, simply describing a product positively to another person to suit their perceived positive attitude toward that product can subsequently bias one's own attitude toward a product to be even more favorable. Furthermore, people are more likely to be persuaded by those with whom they establish a sense of shared reality. And finally, the extent to which people experience a sense of shared reality when *jointly* making a decision or consuming a product can powerfully shape the experience of these products. Considering the effects of shared reality is extremely relevant in today's world, in which modern consumers increasingly communicate by word of mouth and play an active role in marketing. Thus, more than ever, shared reality is an important factor in understanding how people come to feel "right" about the ways in which they engage with the world.

We should also note that experiencing a shared reality could contribute to the experience of making the "right" choice from proceeding in the proper way or from using a decision-making strategy that fits one's motivational orientation if the proper process or fit process is experienced as a *shared practice* (Higgins, 2019). In some of the studies described earlier, for example, participants embraced a process for decision making that was suggested (at least implicitly) by the experimenter as being the "right" process to use, such as in the 'mug and pen' fit studies where some participants were told to make their decision in either an eager way (what they would gain from choosing each option) or a vigilant way (what they would lose by not choosing each option). When these ways of making the decision was a fit (i.e., eager with promotion; vigilant with prevention), the choice could not only "feel right," but, because of shared reality, it might also feel *really* "right." Conversely, if the experience of shared reality was weakened, then the "feeling right" from fit might be weakened. It is possible, for example, that "feeling right" from fit would be weakened if participants believed that they were assigned randomly to make their decision in either an eager or vigilant manner by a computer program.

In this paper, we propose that when the decision-making process feels "right," this feeling will intensify the evaluation of the chosen option—independent of the expected outcomes associated with the chosen option. Our purpose is to emphasize an additional contributor to the worth of a chosen option: how the decision-making *process* is experienced as being "right." We are not claiming that this "feeling right" experience is the only mechanism that contributes to the worth of a process. Another mechanism, for example, would be a process means that fulfills multiple ends—multifinality (see Kruglanski et al., 2002). For instance, the owner of a business could choose business methods that not only make the business profitable, but also reflect high moral character. Thus, using ethical methods as a type of "proper way" could enhance the worth of the goal pursuit process from multifinality. Notably, our "proper way" studies did not involve using methods as a means to fulfill an additional ethical end. There was only one end—to decide whether the mug or the pen was the better choice. Everyone used the same means for that same end (i.e., thinking about the benefits and costs of choosing each option), but participants in the "Right Way" condition focused on the process being suitable whereas those in the "Best Choice" condition focused on the end outcomes rather than the process of choosing.

Yet another mechanism that could contribute to the worth of a process would be to use a process strategy that is more efficient than alternative strategies to achieve the same end-state, thereby enhancing worth by having the same outcome benefits with less process costs. Something like this could also be happening in some "fit" studies given that there is evidence that fit can increase decision-making fluency (see Lee & Aaker, 2004). Notably, such a fit effect need not arise from one strategy having more instrumental value than another. In the "mug and pen" studies, for instance, the value of the chosen mug was *not* different between those who used an eager strategy to choose it and those who used a vigilant strategy. Instead, it was the relation between the strategy and the decision maker's motivational orientation (promotion or prevention) that made the decision-making process "feel right" and strengthened engagement, which intensified the positivity of the chosen mug.

Precisely how making the "right" decision intensifies the worth of a chosen option is not yet fully understood. We end this paper with a speculation, and begin with an analogy to what we think might be going on. What happens when we identify an object (or event)—when we decide "what" it is? The subjective experience is that we choose the identification category whose features best match the features of that object. Our identification is *about* the object. But, in fact, the knowledge activation literature has clearly shown that our identification is *not* just about the object. It is also about the relative accessibility of different stored identification categories, and this accessibility factor (from prior priming or prior chronic accessibility) can have a stronger effect on identification than the features of the object (for a review, see Higgins, 1996). Both the features of an object *and* the relative accessibility of stored identification categories join together to contribute to the object's identification. What is perceived is a "*member of an accessible category*" rather than just an "object" with its particular features.

We propose that an analogous "joining together" underlies the evaluation of a chosen object. Once again, the object that is chosen has its own particular (expected) outcomes associated with choosing it. But the evaluation of the object is not determined only by these outcomes. The choosing process itself, as a separate factor, also contributes to the evaluation of the object. In this paper, we have highlighted how engaging in a choosing process that feels "right" also contributes to the evaluation of the chosen object. Both an object's associated outcomes and the choosing process itself join together to contribute to evaluation of the chosen object. What is evaluated is the "*object as chosen*" rather than just an "object" with its outcomes.

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