

## Master Thesis

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### Achievement Goal Adoption: The Interplay between Strategic Task Framing and Regulatory Focus

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## Abstract

In the present study, I investigate whether employees' achievement goal adoption (mastery goal on skill development versus performance goal on outperforming others) can be predicted based on the regulatory fit or misfit between the means required by strategic task framing (eagerness versus vigilance) and individuals' regulatory focus (promotion focus on gains versus prevention focus on non-losses). Specifically, I argue that mastery goals will be more strongly pursued for tasks framed in a fitting, relative to misfitting way, mainly as a result of the autonomous feeling one experiences when executing a task with a preferred strategy. In contrast, performance goals are expected to be pursued in case of tasks that are framed in a misfitting, relative to fitting way, mainly due to the externally controlled feeling one perceives when executing a task with an assigned strategy that would not be one's preferred strategy. These expectations are tested in an experiment in which I measured individuals' ( $N = 186$ ) regulatory focus, after which they engaged in an eager-framed or vigilant-framed task, in relation to which their achievement goals were assessed (prior to the task). Results indicated the existence of a fitting effect, since prevention focus is positively related to mastery goals when tasks required vigilance, but negatively when tasks required eagerness. In addition, prevention focus was found to be positively related to performance goals when tasks required eagerness, and negatively when tasks required vigilance. However, no significant findings occurred for promotion focus. These findings provide initial support for the notion that managers can predict and influence employees' achievement goal adoption.

**Keywords** Achievement goals, motivation, goal orientation, strategic task framing, regulatory focus, regulatory fit.

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## 1. Introduction

Achievement situations are highly prevalent within organizations, and the adoption of specific achievement goals influences employees' motivation, behaviour, and performance within those situations (Elliot, 2005; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum Jr, 1999; Van Yperen, Elliot, & Anseel, 2009; Van Yperen & Orehek, 2013). Achievements goals refer to individuals' aims, motivation and competence standards (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot, 2005). These achievement goals can be divided into mastery goals and performance goals (e.g. Elliot, 2005). Mastery goals entail that individuals strive to develop task and competence mastery, whereas performance goals entail that individuals seek to demonstrate competence relative to others (Ames & Archer, 1987; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot, 2005). However, not every individual has the same goals. Hence, individuals might approach achievement situations in different ways (Ames & Archer, 1987; Elliot, 2005). An example of the consequences of these differences is that individuals who adopt mastery goals tend consider other people to be partners, while individuals who adopt performance goals may consider other people to be threats (Elliot, 2005; Poortvliet & Darnon, 2010). Consequently, a better understanding of the reasons why employees adopt specific achievement goals might help organizations to steer their organizational processes (Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Sassenberg, 2014a).

Although 85 percent of individuals have a dominant achievement goal, it seems that achievement goal adoption is, in fact, situation specific (Van Yperen, 2006; Van Yperen, Hamstra, & Van der Klauw, 2011). That is, external factors influence individuals' achievement goals and individuals have different goals in different situations (Elliot, 2005). More specifically, the adoption of achievement goals might depend on instructions prior to a task, the presence of evaluation focus, and the style of the responsible leader (Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001; Nicholls, 1984; Hamstra et al., 2014a). The former is rather intuitive. That is,

if an individual is presented with a task, this creates the reason to adopt goals in the first place. Hence, this creates the achievement situation. Nevertheless, tasks can be presented in various ways, which refers to strategic task framing. For example, when framing a task, leaders might emphasize potential positive outcomes to strive for, or potential negative outcomes to avoid. As a result, addressed individuals might focus on the presence of positive results or the absence of negative results (Arbuthnott & Scerbe, 2016; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Meyerowitz & Chaiken, 1987).

Recognizing that task framing can affect individuals' goals emphasizes the importance of how addressed employees perceive their task. This is in line with the theory of regulatory focus by Higgins (1997, 1998, 2000), stating that the required means to execute a task might fit an individual's preferred strategy to execute a task or conflict with it, which constitutes a regulatory fit or misfit, respectively. Hence, while some employees may prefer a strategy that fits a positive framing (eagerness), other employees may perceive a misfit with a positively-framed task. Similarly, negatively framed tasks might fit certain employees' preferred strategy (vigilance), but might misfit others'.

Perceiving a regulatory fit or misfit, I propose, may be influential for individuals' perception of feeling autonomy and controlled. That is, if an individual can execute a task by his or her preferred means, this individual perceives a relatively more autonomous feeling. In contrast, if an individual cannot execute a task by his or her preferred means, this individual feels relatively controlled. Notably, this might also be the case if the required means to execute a task are part of the task instructions, since this merely prohibits individuals from making autonomous decisions regarding the means to execute the task. This suggests that in case of a regulatory misfit (i.e. one cannot execute the task by his or her preferred means), individuals feel less autonomous, but more controlled.

Partially through the feeling of autonomy or external control, the consequences of a regulatory fit or misfit, I propose, are influential for the adoption of achievement goals. In general, in case of a regulatory fit, individuals perceive task enjoyment, engagement, and subjective value increase (Higgins, 2000). In addition, if individuals can undertake activities autonomously (rather than externally controlled), this increases their intrinsic motivation and self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981). In contrast, if individuals perceive external control (rather than autonomy), this may reduce their intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). More importantly, autonomy is positively related to the adoption of mastery goals, whereas control is positively related to the adoption of performance goals (Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003; Nicholls, 1984). Consequently, I propose that experiencing a regulatory fit is related to the adoption of mastery goals, while experiencing a regulatory misfit is related to the adoption of performance goals. In order to study this proposition, my thesis is based on the following research question: How does a regulatory fit or misfit between the means required by a strategically framed task and the addressed employee's preferred strategy affect that employee's achievement goal adoption?

Using this research question, I combine two theories that have, to the best of my knowledge, never been linked directly. That is, multiple antecedents and consequences of achievement goal adoption (e.g. Elliot, 2005; Elliot & McGregor, 2001) and perceiving a regulatory fit (e.g. Higgins, 2000; Freitas & Higgins, 2002) have been studied by a variety of scholars before. However, these scholars present both theories separately. Nevertheless, achievement goal adoption has been linked to other variables, such as leadership style (Hamstra et al., 2014a). In fact, several scholars have stressed the situation-specificity of achievement goal adoption, but have not examined task-related factors that might affect individuals' achievement goal adoption in different ways (Elliot, 2005; Van Yperen, 2006;

Van Yperen et al., 2011). In addition to this previous research, I propose that regulatory focus is a determining element in achievement goal adoption. In other words, employees' regulatory focus influences their achievement goal adoption, in interplay with strategic task framing. Thus, I contribute to the literature by demonstrating the combination of achievement goal theory and regulatory focus theory.

Finding the answer to my research question also provides initial directions that, if supported in future studies, have multiple practical implications for organizations and (HR) managers. Firstly, considering the far-reaching consequences of achievement goal adoption, ultimately in terms of performance (e.g. Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001), it stands to reason that it would be valuable to know what leads individuals to adopt achievement goals in the first place, especially since doing so might allow managers to constructively influence this, in order to support desired outcomes. In addition, based on these insights on achievement goal adoption, organizations / (HR) managers could evaluate and consider the development of certain organizational processes such as hiring processes, task allocation and framing, and appraisal interviews. I discuss these possibilities in detail in the general discussion.



## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 The Achievement Goal Paradigm

Over the course of three decades, multiple researchers have studied achievement goals (for a meta-analysis see Van Yperen, Blaga, & Postmes, 2015). This period of research has yielded several new insights and an evolving conceptualization over time (for a development overview see Elliot, 2005). This accumulated research conceptualizes achievement goals as individuals' aims and competence standards, which form a framework of cognitions, emotions, and behaviours that people experience during the pursuit of achievements in achievement settings (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot & Church, 1997; Hamstra et al., 2014a; Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006). Hence, when an individual decides to pursue a goal, this activates a cognitive framework that structures (e.g. directs) this individual's cognitions, emotions and behaviour.

Ever since the establishment of the concept achievement goals, two distinct approaches of defining competence have been delineated (Elliot, 2005). Firstly, individuals pursuing *mastery goals* rely on an intrapersonal, task-based competence standard (Elliot & Trash, 2001; Freyer & Elliot, 2007). They aim to improve their own performance, task and competence mastery (Ames & Archer, 1987; Dweck, 1986; Van Yperen et al., 2015; Van Yperen & Orehek, 2013). Hence, these individuals have a relatively self-focused perspective, and strive to improve and develop their own skills. Secondly, individuals pursuing *performance goals* rely on a normative (hence, interpersonal) competence standard (Freyer & Elliot, 2007; Van Yperen & Orehek, 2013). They aim to outperform others (Elliot, 2005; Dweck, 1986; Van Yperen et al., 2015; Van Yperen & Orehek, 2013). Hence, these individuals have a relatively outside-focused perspective and want to perform superior relative to others.

Although the achievement goal concepts seem rather clear, three decades of research has resulted in a variety of terms to indicate mastery and performance goals (Hulleman, Schragger, Bodmann, Harackiewicz, 2010). Indeed, mastery goals have also been termed task goals and learning goals (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Mehmood, Nawab, & Hamstra, 2016). Similarly, performance goals have also been termed ego goals, ability goals, and prove goals (Butler, 1992; 1993; VandeWalle, 1997). Consequently, specificity regarding the terms of concepts within the field of achievement goal research is vital. Therefore, this thesis uses the mastery versus performance distinction of the achievement goal theory, in line with foundational work by Dweck (1986) and Nichols (1984) and more recent work by Elliot and McGregor (2001) and Van Yperen and Orehek (2013).

### **2.1.1 Approach versus Avoidance**

In order to incorporate the necessary specificity and relevant developments in the field, it is crucial to recognize the approach and avoidance motivational differentiation. That is, the mastery versus performance perspective is not the only distinction within the achievement goal literature. As early as 1944, Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, and Sears presented the approach versus avoidance distinction (Elliot, 2005). Yet, it was only in 1994 that Elliot further developed the dichotomous (mastery versus performance) achievement goal framework by adding the approach versus avoidance perspective (Elliot, 2005). This development led to the introduction of the trichotomous achievement goal framework, which distinguishes mastery goals, performance approach goals, and performance avoidance goals (Elliot, 2005; Elliot & Church, 1997). Here, performance *approach* goals refer to attaining positive competence or judgement in comparison to others' performance, while performance *avoidance* goals refer to avoiding negative competence and judgement relative to others' performance (Elliot, 2005; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996).

The trichotomous framework has been developed further into the 2 by 2 framework, by Elliot and McGregor (2001; Huang, 2011). This 2 by 2 framework is built on two key elements: definition and valence (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Definition is based on three distinct comparison standards of how people define competence for themselves (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Firstly, the absolute standard, refers to mastery of the core task itself. Secondly, the intrapersonal standard, entails maximizing one's own level (e.g. improving over time). Thirdly, the normative, which entails comparison to others' performance. However, since learning entails both task mastery and personal level maximization, the absolute and the intrapersonal standard are merged into one standard (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Hence, the definition factor in this model refers to the intrapersonal (mastery) versus interpersonal (performance) goals distinction. Furthermore, valence refers to the approach versus avoidance distinction. In essence, the approach versus avoidance distinction is still the same as in the trichotomous framework. That is, Elliot and McGregor (2001) agree that approach refers to the positive possibilities (i.e. pursuing success), while avoidance refers to the negative possibilities (i.e. avoiding failure). However, mastery goals have been separated in terms of approach and avoidance as well (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Consequently, these factor accumulated form the 2 by 2 framework, in Figure 1, which represents four possible achievement goals.

		<b>Definition</b>	
		Absolute/ intrapersonal (mastery)	Normative (performance)
<b>Valence</b>	Positive (approaching success)	Mastery- approach goal	Performance- approach goal
	Negative (avoiding failure)	Mastery- avoidance goal	Performance- avoidance goal

Figure 1. The 2 by 2 Achievement Goal Framework (Elliot & McGregor, 2001, p. 502).

### **2.1.2 Definitions**

Based on the definition (mastery versus performance) and valence (approach versus avoidance) dimensions of the 2 by 2 framework (Elliot & McGregor, 2001), the four achievement goals have distinct definitions. First, adopting a *mastery approach* goal entails that individuals strive to learn and "attain task mastery or improvement" (Elliot & Trash, 2001, p.145; Pintrich, 2000). Secondly, *performance approach* goals refer to the aim to be superior and outperform others (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 2000). Thirdly, adopting a *performance avoidance* goal entails that individuals aim to not perform worse than others (Elliot, 2005; Elliot & Trash, 2001). Finally, *mastery avoidance goals* are defined as striving to avoid the loss of skills, capacities, and knowledge, and, thus, to avoid incompetence compared to one's previous level (Elliot, 2005; Elliot & Trash, 2001; Van Yperen et al., 2009).

### **2.1.3 Consequences**

The adoption of a specific achievement goal has distinct consequences (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). The adoption of mastery approach goals results in a deep understanding and processing of a task (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 2000) and is therefore positively related to performance (Yeo, Loft, Xiao, & Kiewitz, 2009) and performance improvement (Van Yperen et al., 2009). Consequently, scholars on achievement goals traditionally find mastery approach goals to be the "ideal type of competence-based regulation" (Van Yperen, 2006, p.1433).

Secondly, performance approach goals have a positive effect on performance because they support focussing on a high standard of desired competitive results (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Notably, this positive effect is merely measured by short term performance, such as exams (e.g. Elliot & Church, 1997). However, in spite of findings

by Van Yperen et al. (2009) suggesting that performance improvement is similar for individuals adopting mastery approach and performance approach goals, it seems unlikely that performance approach goals lead to improved performance on the long term. That is, performance approach goals are linked to surface, rather than deep processing, and are expected to decrease long term interest and subjective well-being (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

Thirdly, performance avoidance goals are mainly associated with the negative consequences of performance goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). That is, consequences of the adoption of performance avoidance goals are surface processing, disorganization, and worrying (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). In fact, the adoption of this type of achievement goal is negatively related to performance (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

Finally, the adoption of mastery avoidance goals results in disorganization, worrying, anxiety, and emotionality (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Van Yperen et al., 2009). Furthermore, these goals are negatively related to performance and performance improvement (Baranik, Stanley, Bynum, & Lance, 2010; Van Yperen et al., 2009). Thus, the varying consequences of adopting a certain achievement goal emphasize the value for companies of being able to predict and influence their employees' achievement goal adoption.

#### **2.1.4 Antecedents**

In addition to consequences, another relatively known element of achievement goal adoption is the association with antecedents. Several scholars have studied antecedents such as task enjoyment, fear of failure, and competence, within the dichotomous mastery versus performance framework (e.g. Daniels, Stupnisky, Pekrun, Haynes, Perry, & Newall, 2009; Elliot & Church, 1997). Furthermore, self-determination seems to be influential as well. That is, goals can be based on intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In other words, individuals might pursue goals while perceiving autonomy or control, respectively

(Deci & Ryan, 1985). Perceiving autonomy is positively related to intrinsic motivation and self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al., 1981). In contrast, perceive external control is negatively related to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lepper et al., 1973). Thus, when individuals pursue goals because they were assigned or suggested by another individual, their perceived autonomy and self-determination decreases (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This is relevant within the achievement goal context because autonomy is positively related to the adoption of mastery goals, and control is positively related to the adoption of performance goals (Lee et al., 2003; Nicholls, 1984; Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999).

Antecedents of the four more specific achievement goals have been studied as well, showing distinct antecedents per achievement goal (e.g. Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Murayama, 2008). Firstly, mastery approach goals are mainly predicted by positively valenced antecedents (Van Yperen, 2006). Indeed, mastery approach goals stem from a need for achievement, high intrinsic motivation, pride, work mastery, self-determination, and competence valuation (Brophy, 2005; Ciani, Sherldon, Hilpert, & Easter, 2011; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pekrun et al., 2006; Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999).

Secondly, performance approach goals might be associated with both negatively and positively valenced antecedents (Van Yperen, 2006). That is, these goals stem from a combination of high competence valuation, competence expectancies, pride, and the need for achievement (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006). However, they also stem from fear from failure, competitiveness, and problems regarding interpersonal relationships (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004).

Thirdly, performance avoidance goals are mainly predicted by negatively valenced antecedents (Van Yperen, 2006). Indeed, the adoption of these goals stems from anxiety, fear of failure hopelessness, low competence expectancies, and shame (Elliot & Church, 1997;

Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pekrun et al., 2006). In contrast, individuals with a high level of intrinsic motivation and self-determination are less likely to adopt performance avoidance goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999).

Finally, mastery avoidance goals cannot be predicted by either negatively or positively valenced antecedents (Van Yperen, 2006). Moreover, individuals within this category may be uninterested in both interpersonal and intrapersonal comparison and development (Van Yperen, 2006). Consequently, the antecedents for this achievement goal seem contradicting. For example, while mastery avoidance goals stem from competitiveness, achievement motivation, and competence valuation, they also stem from fear of failure (Baranik et al., 2010; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Moreover, even though it was expected based on Cury, Elliot, Da Fonseca, & Moller's (2006) work, individuals with a high level of intrinsic motivation and self-determination are not less likely to adopt mastery avoidance goals (Ciana et al., 2011; Elliot & Murayama, 2008). In practise, older individuals who focus on preventing to lose their skills or "not performing worse than before" are examples of individuals who could adopt mastery avoidance goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001, p.502).

## **2.2 The Leader's Influence**

Achievement goal adoption is also linked to interpersonal, situational, antecedents (e.g. Hamstra et al., 2014a). For example, a performance climate can be created by external elements, such as feedback, goal-setting, and rewards systems (Van Yperen et al., 2011). These elements imply an important role for the leader, who could provide feedback, set goals, and manage rewards. Indeed, within the school domain, the capabilities of the instructor are suggested to influence students' adoption of achievement goals (Ames, 1990; Urdan & Turner, 2005). More specifically, students' adoption of achievement goals is influenced by the

instructor's ability to affect the classroom experience, set goals, and provide feedback (Ames, 1990; Ames & Ames, 1984; Church et al., 2001; Senko & Harachiewicz, 2005).

Leaders influence achievement goal adoption within the work domain as well (e.g. Hamstra et al., 2014a). That is, leaders can affect multiple goal adoption elements. Firstly, previous research demonstrated that leaders are able to influence employees' goal clarity (e.g. Caillier, 2016). Yet, this influence might depend on the style of the leader, since transformational leaders specifically are considered to positively affect goal clarity (Caillier, 2016; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Rich, 2001). Furthermore, leaders are suggested to be capable of influencing followers' motivation (e.g. House, 1971; House & Mitchell, 1974). In fact, both mastery and performance goal adoption can be influenced by leadership style (Hamstra et al., 2014a; Yperen et al., 2011). For example, the aforementioned section on self-determination shows that autonomy or self control may influence achievement goal adoption (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In turn, leaders might have the power to create these circumstances. Nevertheless, in their article on the influence of leadership style, Hamstra et al. (2014a) argue that mastery goal adoption is a social learning process, while performance goals can be externally incentivized, leading to competition.

Rather than having a direct influence, leaders' influence might lie within their ability to use the situation-specific foundation of achievement goals adoption. That is, although a vast majority of approximately 85 percent of the individuals has a dominant achievement goal, it seems that achievement goals are situation specific (Van Yperen, 2006; Van Yperen et al. 2011). In fact, Elliot's (2005) conceptualization of achievement goals indicates the influence of external factors. Moreover, while early research may have considered achievement goals to be predominant, current scholars acknowledge the situation specific nature, which allows achievement goals to be adapted (Elliot, 2005; Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Hamstra et al., 2014a; Van Yperen et al., 2011). I propose that one element of this situation-specificity is the task.



That is, individuals set achievement goals in achievement situations (Elliot & McGregor, 2001), hence, when they are presented with a task. Thus, I propose that leaders can address employees with a task, which creates the achievement situation in which employees adopt achievement goals. More specifically, I propose that *strategic task framing* influences individuals' achievement goal adoption in interaction with individuals' chronic strategic preferences.

### **2.2.1 Strategic Task Framing**

Strategically framed tasks are based on a specific goal strategy that the leader emphasizes. For example, a leader might provide employees with a strategically framed task that involves a gain (and a non-attention to loss) emphasis or a loss (and a non-attention to gains) framing. Pursuing gains or non-losses affects individuals within various contexts, as was demonstrated by Arbuthnott and Scerbe (2016), and Meyerowitz and Chaiken (1987). Emphasizing *gains* (focusing on the presence of positive results) might elicit other feelings and thoughts than emphasizing *non-losses* (focusing on the absence of negative results). Specifically, gain framing and a non-attention to loss leads to eagerness, which entails that individuals are willing to take risks and make mistakes in order to seize opportunities, based on the desire not to miss out on opportunities and the relative unimportance of losses (Hamstra, Rietzschel, & Groeneveld, 2015). In contrast, loss framing and a non-attention to gains leads to vigilance, which entails that individuals are unwilling to take risks and make mistakes in order to seize opportunities, based on the desire not to incur losses (Hamstra et al., 2015).

The benefit of considering strategic task framing as an influential element in the adoption of achievement goals, theoretically, is that it allows for a prediction of situational antecedents of achievement goal adoption that is better-aligned with the known theoretical

antecedents of achievement goals. As such, it enables me to test findings based on previous research and achievement goal literature on antecedents such as enjoyment, fear of failure, and autonomy versus control (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Elliot, 2005; Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

### **2.3 Regulatory Focus & Regulatory Fit**

While strategic task framing (eager or vigilant) might influence how employees are ordered to undertake a task, dispositional regulatory focus determines individuals' preferred way to undertake a task. That is, regulatory focus theory holds that individuals have a regulatory orientation, which can be categorized as promotion or prevention focus (Higgins, 2000). In fact, virtually every goal might be regarded with either a promotion or a prevention focus (Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, & Higgins, 2004). A *promotion focus* refers to an individual's concerns regarding the absence or presence of positive outcomes, pursuing goals in terms of ambitions and hopes (ideals), and focusing on advancement (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000). In contrast, a *prevention focus* involves the considering the presence and absence of negative outcomes, while pursuing goals in terms of obligation and responsibility (oughts), and focusing on security (Cesario et al., 2004; Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000). Moreover, regulatory focus is an individual's self-regulation system (Higgins, 1997). Hence, an individual's regulatory focus does not depend on the assigned task, but is rather a personally preferred strategy (Higgins, 2000).

An individual's regulatory focus (promotion versus prevention), combined with actions (strategic means) that fit this focus are the basis of experiencing regulatory fit. That is, *regulatory fit* occurs when individuals pursue goals with strategies that fit their personal regulatory focus (Higgins, 2000). These strategies entail behavioural expressions that form the means to fit the corresponding regulatory focus (Higgins, 2000). These means are conceptualized as the aforementioned eagerness and vigilance (Higgins, 2000). Specifically,

promotion focus is linked to *eagerness*, which involves behaviours based on valuing dreams, development, and accomplishment (Cesario et al., 2004; Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 2000). Again, this entails that individuals are likely (willing) to take risks, without the fear of making mistakes or incur losses, because they want to seize opportunities (Hamstra et al., 2015). In contrast, prevention focus is linked with *vigilance*, which involves behaviours based on valuing security, responsibility, and protection (Cesario et al., 2004; Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 2000). Again, this entails that individuals are unlikely (unwilling) to take risks, because they do not want to make mistakes or incur losses (Hamstra et al., 2015). Consequently, an individual who is assigned a task that can be executed by his or her preferred means, which fits the individual's regulatory focus, will experience a regulatory fit, whereas an individual who is assigned a task that cannot be executed by his or her preferred means, which does not fit the individual's regulatory focus, will experience a regulatory misfit.

I propose that regulatory focus and regulatory (mis)fit can be linked to the adoption of achievement goals, through several arguments. That is, I propose that regulatory focus is related to achievement goal valence, and that regulatory (mis)fit is related to achievement goal definition. In order to explain these arguments, I firstly combine regulatory focus and approach / avoidance goals, and secondly, combine regulatory (mis)fit to mastery / performance goals, based on the aforementioned antecedents of the four distinct achievement goals.

In essence, every combination of an individual's regulatory focus and valence preference is possible. That is, promotion and prevention involve both approach and avoidance motivation. Again, a promotion focus entails that an individual focuses on potentially positive outcomes (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Van Yperen, Anseel, & Elliot, 2009). This is in line with the focus on positive possibilities of *approach* goals (Cesario et al.,

2004; Higgins, 2000). However, striving for advancement also entails the desire to *avoid* the status quo. Similarly, a prevention focus refers to the consideration of potential negative outcomes (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Van Yperen et al., 2009). This is in line with the focus on negative possibilities of *avoidance* goals (Cesario et al., 2004; Higgins, 2000). However, valuing safety also entails the desire to *approach* the status quo.

Fundamentally, setting goals involves (un)desired end states that affect individuals' behaviour (e.g. Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Hulleman et al., 2010). Higgins' (2000) explanation of regulatory focus implies that these (un)desired end states may differ among individuals. Indeed, promotion focused individuals' preferred strategy is striving to approach a match with their desired end state, whereas prevention focused individuals' preferred strategy is striving to avoid a mismatch with their desired end state (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1997). Therefore, I propose that there is a positive relation between a promotion focus and approach goal adoption. Similarly, I propose that there is a positive relation between a prevention focus and avoidance goal adoption.

In addition, regulatory fit affects the definition element of achievement goal adoption. That is, the value-from-fit theory proposes that regulatory fit leads to task enjoyment, engagement, and value increase (Higgins, 2000). Hence, when individuals can execute tasks by their preferred means, this increases task enjoyment. In turn, task enjoyment is positively related to mastery goals (e.g. Dweck, 1986). In contrast, individuals with a fear of failure are concerned with competence evaluation (Freyer & Elliot, 2007). Consequently, when individuals cannot execute tasks by their preferred means, this increases their fear of failure. In turn, fear of failure is positively related to performance goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1993; Van Yperen, 2006).

Moreover, I propose that self-determination can be, theoretically, linked to regulatory fit. That is, I propose that when individuals execute a task in their preferred way (with means

that fit their regulatory focus), they feel autonomous. Hence, they experience a regulatory fit. In contrast, I propose that when individuals have to execute a task by means other than their preferred means (that do not fit their regulatory focus), they feel (externally) controlled. Hence, they experience a misfit. Notably, previous research showed that autonomy is positively related to the adoption of mastery goals, and control to the adoption of performance goals (Lee et al., 2003; Nicholls, 1984).

Consequently, I propose that if employees are presented with strategically framed tasks that require means in line with the employees' regulatory focus (hence, the employees experience a regulatory fit), this leads to the adoption of a mastery goals. In contrast, I propose that if employees are presented with strategically framed tasks that require means that are not in line with the employees' regulatory focus (hence, the employees experience a regulatory misfit), this leads to the adoption of performance goals.

## **2.4 Hypotheses**

In summary, in this thesis I propose a set of relationships that makes the adoption of achievement goals more specific, predictable, and allows for external influence. That is, achievement goals are a combination of definition (mastery versus performance) and valence (approach versus avoidance). Considering the valence, I propose that a promotion focus leads to the adoption of approach goals, whereas a prevention focus leads to the adoption of avoidance goals. Considering the definition, I involve strategic task framing and regulatory focus theory. That is, the means to execute a task required by strategic task framing, in combination with employees' regulatory focus, constitute a regulatory fit or regulatory misfit. Specifically, I propose that such a regulatory fit is linked to the adoption of mastery goals, whereas a misfit is linked to the adoption of performance goals. As a result of the combination of these propositions, I hypothesize that:

*H1: There is a positive relation between a promotion focus and the adoption of mastery approach goals a) when the task requires eagerness, b) but not when the task requires vigilance.*

*H2: There is a positive relation between a promotion focus and the adoption of performance approach goals a) when the task requires vigilance, b) but not when the task requires eagerness.*

*H3: There is a positive relation between a prevention focus and the adoption of mastery avoidance goals a) when the task requires vigilance, b) but not when the task requires eagerness.*

*H4: There is a positive relation between a prevention focus and the adoption of performance avoidance goals a) when the task requires eagerness, b) but not when the task requires vigilance.*

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants were 186 students and (young)professionals. However, not all participants fully completed the survey. Therefore, participants' characteristics and demographic information are based on the 140 participants who fully completed the survey. These participants (51.4% female) ranged in age between 18 and 36 ( $M = 23.76$ ,  $SD = 3.24$ ) years old. Participants predominantly considered Dutch (82.9%) to be their native language, and nearly a third (29.29%) of the student participants were enrolled in educational programs in the field of (international) business/management.

### 3.2 Procedure

Participants were approached online and asked to voluntarily participate in an online experiment (Qualtrics survey). It was decided not to appeal to participants with the opportunity to receive a prize as a reward for their participation, because external factors might influence achievement goal adoption (e.g. Elliot, 2005), and a potential prize might provoke high performance eagerness / performance goals. Furthermore, instructions on the first screen of the survey urged participants to complete the study in one sitting without breaks or distractions. On the same screen participants were provided with the informed consent information, and a button to confirm their participation.

Participants started the study by completing a measure of their regulatory focus. Then, they received information about the task, which was based on Crowe and Higgins' (1997) anagram approach. Whereas they asked participants to complete anagrams, my study asked participants to complete 10 numerical series. In Appendix 1, these numerical series are presented. In order not to cause stress, and thus limit this potential bias, participants' time to complete the series was not restricted, nor did the level of all numerical series evoke 'all-correct' responses. A pre-test with eight participants showed that even without a time limitation participants would predominantly complete at least two numerical series incorrectly, which supported these decisions. In addition, participants received an example of a numerical series task, to which the answer was provided on the next screen. Subsequently, participants were randomly assigned to receive either vigilant or eager task framing instructions, after which they completed the achievement goal questionnaire.

Then, participants completed the numerical series task, after which they saw a screen asking them to imagine that they would have the chance to do a very similar task with different numbers. This hypothetical situation was followed by a second achievement goal questionnaire, used to measure participants' self-goals. This was necessary because self-goal

questions require at least two tasks in order to be measured. Subsequently, participants received multiple control questions on their engagement and self-determination.

Finally, participants completed several demographic questions, after which they had the opportunity to indicate whether their responses should be included in the study, and whether they would like to receive information about the results of the study. Only after having submitted their responses, participants were provided with the correct answers to the tasks, accompanied by the instruction not to share these answers or other information about the study.

### 3.3 Measures and Manipulations

*Regulatory focus* was assessed using the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) by Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, Ayduk, and Taylor (2001). All 11 items were completed on a 5-point scale. Prevention ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = .75$ ;  $\alpha = .60$ ) was assessed using five items, such as, "How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?". Promotion ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = .57$ ;  $\alpha = .45$ ) was assessed using six items, such as, "How often have you accomplished things that got you ``psyched" to work even harder?".

*Task framing* instructions, advocating eager or vigilant means to execute the task, were based on prior framing / regulatory fit research (Cesario et al., 2004; Higgins, 2000; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Shah & Higgins, 1997; Spiegel et al., 2004). In practise, participants in the eagerness condition received instructions stating that "You start with 0 points and there are a total of 10 points that you can gain. For each correct answer, you gain one point. The goal for this task is to **correctly complete 7 or more numerical series**. With this type of goal, research suggests that the most effective way to attain it is to **go about it very enthusiastically**, and try to **correctly complete as many series as possible**". In contrast, participants in the vigilance condition received instructions stating that "You start with 10



points and there are a total of 10 points that you can lose. For each *incorrect* answer, you *lose one point*. The goal for this task is to **not incorrectly complete more than 3 numerical series**. With this type of goal, research suggests that the most effective way to attain it is to **go about it very carefully, and try to not incorrectly complete any series**".

**Achievement goals** were assessed before the task, using a 12 items questionnaire, containing 3 items per achievement goal, based on Elliot and Murayama (2008). After the task, the second achievement goal questionnaire was used to measure participants' self-goals<sup>1</sup>. All items were completed on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Mastery approach goals ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = .77$ ;  $\alpha = .74$ ) were assessed by items such as "My aim is to be skilled at the task", whereas mastery avoidance goals ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = .78$ ;  $\alpha = .80$ ) were assessed by items such as "My aim is to not be unskilled at the task". Furthermore, performance approach goals ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ;  $\alpha = .91$ ) were assessed by items such as "My goal is to do better on the task than others", whereas performance avoidance goals ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = .91$ ;  $\alpha = .87$ ) were assessed by items such as "My goal is to not do poorly on the task relative to others". Moreover, mastery approach self-goals ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = .93$ ;  $\alpha = .90$ ) using items such as "My goal is to do better on the second task than I did on the first task", whereas mastery avoidance self-goals ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = .89$ ;  $\alpha = .83$ ) were assessed using items such as "My goal is to not do worse on the second task than I have done on the first task".

**Self-determination** was assessed as a manipulation check, since the underlying reasoning of perceiving an autonomous or externally controlled feeling was an important foundational element of the hypotheses. Self determination was assessed using a 10 items

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<sup>1</sup> In the second achievement goal measure, I also included another set of items to assess the four main achievement goals. The reasoning was that the effect of regulatory fit on achievement goals might require individuals to experience the task first. If, however, the effect of regulatory fit obtains already on the first measurement of achievement goals (and the second measurement), it renders the second measurement somewhat less reliable. As the effect *did* obtain on the first measure, as I describe in the results, I decided not to report the analyses of the second set of achievement goal measures in the main text. Nonetheless, these analyses show exactly the same pattern of results as was found on the pre-task achievement goal measures.

questionnaire, based on Deci and Ryan (2000) and Gagné (2003). Six items were used to assess participants' perception of feeling autonomous, and four items were used to assess participants' perception of feeling controlled, all ten using a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Autonomy ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = .90$ ;  $\alpha = .88$ ) was assessed by items such as "During the task, I felt free", whereas external control ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .87$ ;  $\alpha = .74$ ) was assessed by items such as "During the task, I felt restricted".

#### **4. Results**

For my hypotheses testing, regression analyses were performed. In every analysis, the tested achievement goal was the dependent variable. The predictor variables in each analysis were standardized regulatory focus variables (promotion and prevention), a dummy variable for the task framing conditions, and the interactions between the regulatory foci and the conditions variable. Both interaction variables of regulatory focus and task framing condition were included in the model in order to test both the promotion and the prevention element, because a fit should have an effect in one condition, not in the other (or opposite in the other). In other words, if the interaction is going in the same direction for both promotion and prevention, then it is likely related to a general (achievement) motivation effect, and not a fit effect. Similarly, in every analysis the standardized opposite achievement goal was included. For example, when testing mastery approach goals as dependent variable, standardized performance approach goals was included as a covariate in the model, and vice versa. These goals are likely to be correlated, since they are based on similar underlying motivation, achievement/competence. Thus, in order to ensure a unique effect on mastery or performance goals, rather than a general achievement motivation effect, the opposite achievement goal was controlled for.

First, I tested hypothesis 1: There is a positive relation between a promotion focus and the adoption of mastery approach goals a) when the task requires eagerness, b) but not when the task requires vigilance. Results showed no significant interaction between promotion focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.112, t = -1.191, p = .235$ ). Thus, hypothesis 1 was not supported. However, results showed a significant interaction between prevention focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.366, t = -3.958, p < 0.001$ ). Indeed, as is presented in Figure 2, prevention focus is positively related to mastery approach goals in the vigilant condition ( $B = .184, t = 2.802, p = .006$ ), and negatively in the eager condition ( $B = -.182, t = -2.807, p = .006$ ). Thus, results showed that individuals with a high prevention focus more strongly adopt mastery approach goals (than individuals with a low prevention focus) when the task requires vigilance, and less strongly to adopt mastery approach goals (than individuals with a low prevention focus) when the task requires eagerness.

In addition to regular mastery approach goals, I also conducted a specific analysis for the mastery approach self-goals. Results, however, showed no significant interaction between promotion focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.184, t = -1.226, p = .222$ ), or between prevention focus and task framing condition ( $B = .008, t = .058, p = .954$ ).

The second hypothesis entailed the expectation that there is a positive relation between promotion focus and performance approach goals when the task requires vigilance, but not when the task requires eagerness. Results showed no significant interaction between promotion focus and task framing condition ( $B = .064, t = .482, p = .630$ ). Thus, hypothesis 2 was not supported. Nonetheless, results showed a significant interaction between prevention focus and task framing condition ( $B = .449, t = 3.429, p = .001$ ). In fact, as is presented in Figure 3, prevention focus is positively related to performance approach goals in the eager condition ( $B = .212, t = 2.317, p = .022$ ), and negatively related to performance approach goals in the vigilant condition ( $B = -.238, t = -2.567, p = .011$ ). Thus, results showed that

individuals with a high prevention focus more strongly adopt performance approach goals (than individuals with a low prevention focus) when the task requires eagerness, and less strongly adopt performance approach goals (than individuals with a low prevention focus) when the task requires vigilance.

Subsequently, I tested hypothesis 3: There is a positive relation between a prevention focus and the adoption of mastery avoidance goals a) when the task requires vigilance, b) but not when the task requires eagerness. Results showed a significant interaction between prevention focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.188, t = -2.038, p = .043$ ). Thus, hypothesis 3 seems to be supported. As is presented in Figure 4, prevention focus is positively, but not significantly, related to mastery avoidance goals in the vigilant condition ( $B = .117, t = -1.786, p = .076$ ), and negatively in the eager condition ( $B = -.071, t = -1.092, p = .276$ ). However, coefficients for the interaction between promotion focus and task framing condition yielded similar, yet not significant, results ( $B = -.185, t = -1.961, p = .052$ ). Hence, the similar interaction effects for the prevention interaction and the promotion interaction suggest that the effect found in these results might have an additional cause beyond the pure framing and fit effect.

In addition to regular mastery avoidance goals, I also conducted a specific analysis for the mastery avoidance self-goals. Results, however, showed no significant interaction between promotion focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.189, t = -1.375, p = .171$ ), or between prevention focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.115, t = -.875, p = .383$ ).

The final hypothesis that was tested (H4) entailed the expectation that there is a positive relation between prevention focus and performance avoidance goals when the task requires eagerness, but not when the task requires vigilance. Although, just like the interaction for performance approach goals, the interaction term for performance avoidance goals is positive, results showed no significant interaction between prevention focus and task framing

condition ( $B = .188, t = 1.725, p = .086$ ). Thus, hypothesis 4 is not supported. Results also did not show a significant interaction between promotion focus and task framing condition ( $B = .148, t = 1.320, p = .189$ ).

In addition, regression analyses were performed in order to test whether participants' self-determination (perception of feeling autonomous or controlled) was caused by being in a regulatory fit or misfit situation. Therefore, the perception of feeling autonomous or the perception of feeling controlled was the dependent variable, and the predictors were again the main effects of regulatory focus and task framing conditions, and their interaction.

Results for autonomy showed no significant interaction between prevention focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.265, t = -1.711, p = .089$ ), nor did they show a significant interaction between promotion focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.047, t = -.290, p = .772$ ). However, while not significant, the first of these interactions showed the same directional pattern as the interaction for prevention focus and framing conditions on mastery approach goals. In addition, results for controlled did not show a significant interaction between prevention focus and task framing condition ( $B = .046, t = .303, p = .762$ ), or between promotion focus and task framing condition ( $B = -.002, t = .159, p = .991$ ).

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to study achievement goal adoption across varying situations in terms of individuals' regulatory focus and strategic task framing. More specifically, I predicted (*hypothesis 1*) a positive relation between promotion focus and mastery approach goals, when the task requires vigilance, but not when the task requires eagerness. *Hypothesis 2* predicted a positive relation between promotion focus and performance approach goals when the task requires vigilance, but not when the task requires

eagerness. Taking the prevention perspective, I predicted (*hypothesis 3*) a positive relation between prevention focus and mastery avoidance goals when the task requires vigilance, but not when the task requires eagerness. Finally, in *hypothesis 4*, I predicted a positive relation between prevention focus and performance avoidance goals when the task requires eagerness, but not when the task requires vigilance.

While I hypothesized that promotion fit versus misfit would be mainly relevant to the *approach* variants of the achievement goals, and I did not make specific predictions about promotion fit and misfit and the *avoidance* variants of the goals, no promotion effects were observed at all. In contrast, I hypothesized that prevention fit and misfit would be mainly relevant to the *avoidance* variants of the goals. Although the results of the experiment pointed in that direction, the prevention fit and misfit predicted, in fact, the *approach* variants of the goals. This implies that my hypotheses are not supported, but provide a clear indication of an alternative model that does closely align with the argumentation provided.

That is, results showed multiple significant prevention-related elements of the regulatory fit-achievement goal relationship. More specifically, highly prevention focused individuals adopt mastery approach more strongly when the task requires vigilance compared to when the task requires eagerness, but adopt performance approach goals more strongly when the task requires eagerness compared to when the task requires vigilance.

Furthermore, results showed a significant interaction for prevention focus and task framing condition on the adoption of mastery avoidance goals. However, in this case, the specific prevention effect was not significant. Moreover, a very similar, yet not significant, interaction effect was found for promotion focus and task framing condition on the adoption of mastery avoidance goals. This suggests that a cause beyond the pure fit effect might have contributed to the mastery avoidance goals results. A potential explanation for this might be a general achievement motivation effect. That is, achievement motivation in vigilant situations

might be fairly avoidance oriented, in general. Moreover, mastery avoidance goals cannot be predicted by either negatively or positively valenced antecedents (Van Yperen, 2006).

Consequently, both promotion and prevention focus might not have a clear effect on mastery avoidance goals, which makes it more difficult to find a clear fit effect.

This study's findings emphasize the important role that the combination of regulatory focus and strategic task framing plays in prevention focused individuals' achievement goal adoption. Prevention focused individuals who were addressed with tasks framed to require means that fit with their preferred strategy, set goals aiming to master the task and associated necessary skills, whereas addressing these prevention focused individuals with tasks framed to require means that form a misfit with their preferred strategy, resulted in goals aiming to outperform others. Hypotheses regarding promotion focused individuals, however, were not supported.

Suggesting that the results of my experiment are based on the fit or misfit between the individuals' regulatory focus and task framing requires an explanation for the absence of significant results for promotion focused individuals. This explanation might be based on the notion that the nature of the task might pose an additional factor in the achievement goal adoption process. That is, as a result of their nature, certain tasks might be classified as more oriented towards promotion or prevention (Renkema & Van Yperen, 2008). For example, while eager means might be a more suitable approach for creative tasks such as creative idea generation, vigilant means may be better suitable for accuracy tasks such as proofreading (Förster, Higgins, & Bianco, 2003; Friedman & Förster, 2001). Accordingly, since my numerical series task predominantly targeted participants' accuracy in completing the series, the nature of the experiment might have been a better match for prevention focused participants. Moreover, although the design phase of the experiment suggested that time limits

would cause too much stress, the exclusion of this timing element could well have caused the absence of a promotion focus effect.

Nonetheless, though not significant, the results were in line with my expectations that in case of a regulatory fit, individuals feel autonomous, whereas in case of a regulatory misfit, they feel controlled. More specifically, results showed that highly prevention focused individuals that were provided with a task framed to require vigilant means (hence, regulatory fit) felt more autonomous. Although these self-determination results were not significant, they showed a similar directional pattern as the results for prevention focus and task framing conditions on mastery approach goal adoption.

With regard to the self-goals, an additional factor that might have biased participants' results is that data from the second achievement goal questionnaire were used to analyse these results. Within questionnaire-based research, response fatigue is a known potential bias among participants who feel that the questionnaire is too long, which might result in inaccurate and/or uniform answers (Choi & Pak, 2005). Though participants were merely asked to imagine that they would have the opportunity to do the task again, in combination with the relatively long questionnaire in total, this might have induced a sense of fatigue.

## **5.1 Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study contribute to the existing achievement goal literature in several ways. Firstly, this research contributes to the understanding of achievement goal adoption's situation-specificity. Although previous achievement goal literature conceptualized the concept as situation-specific (Elliot, 2005), and recognized that achievement goal adoption can be manipulated (e.g. Baron & Harackiewicz, 2001), there is still relatively limited empirical knowledge on this situation-specificity of achievement goal adoption (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Van Yperen et al., 2011). Notably, previous research did not incorporate



achievement goals' theoretical antecedents (Hamstra et al., 2014a), or merely studied the presence or absence of antecedents such as the perception of classroom environment variables (Church et al., 2001). However, they did not research the question: What creates these antecedents for a specific individual? For example, why is a classroom engaging for one individual, but not for another? According to regulatory fit theory, this should not be the same for every individual. As such, my study deviates from and contributes to previous achievement goal research by focussing on individuals' specific antecedents, such as regulatory focus and regulatory fit.

Secondly, this research makes a theoretical combination that has, to the best of my knowledge, never been made before. More specifically, achievement goal adoption (e.g. Elliot, 2005) and regulatory focus theory (e.g. Higgins, 2000) have been studied extensively, but have never been integrated. Combining these theories allows for a more comprehensive theoretical framework, rather than isolated knowledge, of the complex achievement goal adoption process. Thus, by showing the predictive and influencing power of regulatory focus (certainly regarding prevention), in combination with strategic task framing, on achievement goal adoption, an initial step has been set towards deeper exploration of the combination of achievement goal theory and regulatory focus theory as a theoretical foundation of achievement goal adoption

The current findings also have implications for leadership literature. Previous research has studied the influence of leadership style of achievement goal adoption directly (Hamstra et al., 2014a), whereas my research found support for leaders' indirect influence, via strategic task framing (in combination with regulatory focus). Consequently, as leaders often assign and explain tasks to their followers, this study contributes to the leadership literature by suggesting that leaders can influence their followers' achievement goal adoption not only by their leadership style per se, but also based on the way they frame tasks towards followers.

For example, previous research showed that transformational and transactional leaders encourage distinct strategies (promotion and prevention, respectively) that constitute a regulatory fit with promotion focused and prevention focused followers, respectively (Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Sassenberg, 2014b). Based on my research, it can be suggested that such a regulatory fit between prevention strategies encouraged by a transactional leader when framing tasks, might strengthen prevention focused followers' mastery approach goal adoption.

In addition to previous self-determination research, this study contributes by considering self-determination in relation to regulatory focus and achievement goal adoption theory. That is, Lee et al. (2003) and Nicholls (1984) already linked feeling autonomous and controlled to the adoption of mastery and performance goals respectively. Acknowledging this theory, and the fact that regulatory fit involves a fit between an individual's regulatory focus and the means required to execute a task (Higgins, 2000), I considered perceiving an autonomous feeling to be a consequence of regulatory fit, whereas perceiving a controlled feeling was considered to be a consequence of regulatory misfit. Although not significant, results indicated highly preliminary support for this expectation in case of prevention focused individuals, and thus provide a suggestion for future research into the relationship between regulatory fit and self-determination, potentially in relation to achievement goal adoption.

## **5.2 Managerial Implications**

The current findings imply that the combination of regulatory focus and strategic task framing can be instrumental in predicting and influencing employees' achievement goal adoption. Acknowledging that achievement goal adoption is situation specific (Elliot, 2005) and can be manipulated (e.g. Baron & Harackiewicz, 2001), for example by external factors such as the social environment or leadership style (e.g. Hamstra et al., 2014a; Poortvliet &

Darnon, 2010), indicates that managers might be able to influence their followers' achievement goal adoption. Notably, the antecedents and consequences associated with adopting certain achievement goals (e.g. Elliot and McGregor, 2001; Van Yperen et al., 2009) suggests that managers would greatly benefit from a better insight into the achievement goal adoption process, and especially in how to influence this. In particular, this study suggests that when managers want to predict their followers' achievement goal adoption, they should first of all determine their followers' regulatory focus. Subsequently, it is important to analyse the means that are required to execute a task. Combining these factors is likely to provide managers with insights regarding employees' achievement goal adoption. However, since my findings are based on one experiment, caution should be exercised. Rather than radically adopting these recommendations, they should be seen as initial directions that require additional support in future studies before conclusions should be implemented by practitioners.

In order to incorporate my study's findings, HR professionals should test employees, in order to establish and catalogue their regulatory focus. Higgins (1997, 2000) explained that the regulatory focus element is an individual, pre determined strategy. In other words, employees' regulatory focus can be tested at any point in time, yielding results that can be used over a longer period of time. In order to assure that relevant individuals within the organization have access to this information, an overview of this data should be created. Therefore, the first step for HR professionals would be to determine their employees' regulatory focus and create a database with this information.

Subsequently, organizations should determine which means are required to successfully execute jobs and tasks. That is, managers could predict whether employees' regulatory focus and the means required by jobs or tasks would fit or constitute a misfit. This allows (HR) managers to anticipate the outcomes of assigning jobs, in terms of achievement

goal adoption. More specifically, managers could assign certain tasks or jobs to employees, based on their regulatory focus and the required means, aiming to stimulate regulatory fit or misfit situations, and thus the adoption of associated achievement goals. For example, when managers want positive results in terms of performance and performance improvement, they might want to support the adoption of mastery approach goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Van Yperen et al., 2009), by assigning a task which requires vigilant means to prevention focused employees.

Specifically, my findings indicate that managers can influence their employees' achievement goal adoption by framing tasks towards eager or vigilant means. Previous research by Lee et al. (2003) and Nicholls (1984) linked perceiving an autonomous feeling to the adoption of mastery goals, and perceiving a controlled feeling to the adoption of performance goals. In addition, this study showed that the absence or presence of a regulatory fit is likely to influence individuals' achievement goal adoption, certainly for prevention focused individuals. More specifically, by emphasizing certain means when framing a task, managers may be able to create eager or vigilant requirements associated with a task, which constitute a fit or misfit with employees' regulatory focus. This regulatory fit or misfit, in turn, combined with employees' regulatory orientation, influences which achievement goals are adopted. For example, managers can address prevention focused employees with a task that is framed to require vigilant means, in order to support the adoption of mastery approach goals.

My findings could also be incorporated in annual appraisal interviews, feedback discussions, or other forms of performance evaluations and discussions. Whereas current appraisal interviews mainly focus on employees' task approach and results (Aguinis, 2013), it should be noted that task framing and achievement goals could be focussed on as well. Not only would (HR) managers be able to frame tasks within a formal setting, task framing and associated achievement goal adoption could also be considered as a cause of certain

behaviour. For example, an employee does not comply with his or her team's key value 'teamwork'. My study's findings suggest that this could have been caused by a combination of the employee's regulatory focus and the way his or her tasks were framed. Hypothetically, this prevention focused employee could have been addressed with tasks framed to require eager means, which led to the adoption of performance approach goals. The present study showed that this employee should, instead, be addressed with vigilant framed tasks, which would strengthen this employee's mastery approach goal adoption, and thus his team orientation.

In addition to present employees, (HR) managers should incorporate my findings in the application process of future employees. In practise, determining the fit between an individual (applicant) and the job is more frequently based on elements such as knowledge and skills, whereas the fit between an individual and the organization is more often based on personality traits (Kristof-Brown, 2000). However, considering the aforementioned consequences of adopting certain achievement goals, I recommend that regulatory fit should be incorporated in the application process as well. That is, organizations could determine applicants' regulatory focus, and determine whether this would constitute a fit or misfit with the means required to be successful in a certain job. Using this approach would allow for active selection on achievement goals. By selecting employees with a certain regulatory focus for a job that requires certain means, managers could actively influence the achievement goals their employees would adopt. For example, when (HR) managers are determined to hire applicants that would adopt performance approach goals, they might focus on prevention focused applicants for a job that requires eager means. Again, considering that only certain prevention oriented findings were significantly supported, findings of this study require support in future studies before recommendations should be implemented by practitioners.

### **5.3 Strengths and Limitations**

An important strength of this study is the experimental setting, which allowed for experimental manipulations and control of independent variables, and elimination of unwanted variables. Hence, it allowed me to manipulate framing while keeping other elements equal. Consequently, the experimental design enabled me to determine causal relationships between varying combinations of regulatory focus and task framing, and achievement goal adoption, which was crucial to my research. However, the experimental setting inevitably entails experimental, rather than real life, situations, especially in the hypothetical part with regard to the second achievement goal questionnaire. Therefore, generalization to real life situations should be approached with caution. Nevertheless, by having participants actually execute the numerical series task, this engagement limitation is addressed, as is confirmed by the engagement control data. Moreover, since the numerical series task is relevant to the participants in my sample, because it might be part of their (future) jobs application process, it is to some extent more realistic, which allowed me to interpret findings within a business context.

Additionally, homogeneity of the participants, both in terms of age and nationality, can be considered a strength of this research. The homogenous sample allowed me to study data that is particularly valid for the predetermined target group of this study, students and (young) professional between 18 en 36 years old, predominantly originating from The Netherlands. However, it should also be noted that this homogeneity entails a limitation. Even though it was a conscious decision to collect data from a homogeneous sample, generalizing this study's findings to other context, both related to individuals' age and native language, should be approach with due caution.

Another limitation of this study is the length of the questionnaire. Participants predominantly spent well over 10 minutes to fill out the questionnaire, which required

participants to perform 10 numerical series task and multiple self-rating questionnaires. Moreover, participants occasionally reported that they perceived to questionnaire as ‘too long’. Acknowledging that this could cause fatigue, which might bias the results (Choi & Pak, 2005), is a limitation to consider. Nonetheless, this lengthy questionnaire allowed for the study of all relevant variables, as well as a thorough task framing, and a serious task which allowed participants to set goals. Moreover, the engagement data did not support concerns regarding this limitation.

The self-report setup of the regulatory focus questionnaire may also be considered a limitation. Indeed, self-report measurements might suffer from social desirability bias, especially in organizational behaviour research. (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002; Van de Mortel, 2008). However, Donaldson and Grant-Vallone (2002) state that this is often due to employees’ fear of their boss having access to the reported information. As this does not seem to be a concern in my study, this self-report bias might be of less influence. Moreover, the regulatory focus questionnaire that was used is considered to yield adequate and predicatively valid representations of individuals’ regulatory focus (Higgins et al., 2001).

The reliability of the promotion and prevention scales is a limitation of this study as well, since the Cronbach's alpha for both regulatory foci was below the desirable value. The fact that the survey was conducted in English, while participants predominantly considered Dutch to be their native language provides a potential explanation for this. That is, participants may not have completely understood (the meaning of) certain items or words, which might have led to a lower correlation between items. Consequently, this implies that the items that are, all together, used to measure the regulatory foci might be less reliable than desired. Nonetheless, results showed clear directional effects for prevention, which might even be emphasized by the fact that they were found in spite of this limited correlation between the items.

## 5.4 Future Research

This study's findings provide a clear indication of a regulatory (mis)fit-achievement goal adoption model, which initiates directions for future research. Finding significant relationships between regulatory fit (prevention focus and vigilant means) and the adoption of mastery approach goals, and between regulatory misfit (prevention focus and eager means) and performance approach goals are initial findings, based on which future research should be conducted. However, the absence of significant findings should also be considered as a direction for further research. That is, future research should focus on further explanation for the fact that significant results were found for prevention elements of the hypotheses, whereas no significant results were found for promotion elements. For example, certain tasks might be classified as more oriented towards promotion or prevention as a result of their nature (Renkema & Van Yperen, 2008). Consequently, future studies should also focus on the means required by the task itself, beyond strategic task framing, as a potential mediating variable. Understanding such effects would complement the results found in this study and yield a more comprehensive understanding of the achievement goal adoption process.

Moreover, future research should consider the influence of real incentives or punishments on the effectiveness task framing. In practise, performance might determine employees' monetary reward or punishment. Furthermore, previous research already linked regulatory fit theory to monetary evaluation of objects, and task framing to specific attitudes towards risk (Hamstra et al., 2015; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003). Accordingly, the effect of promotion (eager) framing might be limited if participants do not really have the opportunity to win, or to get a reward. Similarly, prevention (vigilant) framing might be strengthened if participants could really lose something. Thus, future research should incorporate real win and loss opportunities in the research when studying regulatory focus, strategic task framing, and achievement goal adoption.



Furthermore, future research should complement this study's findings based on longitudinal research. Firstly, future studies could build on this study's initial steps towards exploring the regulatory focus, task framing, and achievement goal adoption relationship in terms of self-goals. The absence of significant results in studying self-goals might be caused by the fact that self-goals, per definition, entail a period of time that would enable a certain level of development. Therefore, future research should involve a longitudinal study, in order to improve the knowledge on self-goal setting over time. Secondly, a longitudinal design is recommended for studying the entire regulatory fit and achievement goal combination, because this would yield insights regarding potential *within* person variation in achievement goals. This is theoretically valuable because it allows for theoretically expected effects on distinct individuals to be validated under different circumstances, which can further add to the knowledge on the situation-specificity of achievement goal adoption. More specifically, future research could study the effect of both fit and misfit situations on the same individuals and the effect of being addressed with task framing multiple times over the course of a longer period of time. For example, does the effect of strategic task framing, in combination with regulatory focus, on an individual's achievement goal adoption decrease if individuals are addressed with task framing regularly / multiple times over the course of the year(s)? Finally, a longitudinal design would allow the regulatory fit-achievement goal relationship to be studied in practise, rather than in an experimental or laboratory setting, and thereby further complement and validate this study's findings with practical results.

## **5.5 Concluding Remarks**

As a result of their prevalence within different domains, achievement goals should be a central focus of individuals who address others with tasks. Especially within the business context, associated antecedents and consequences, and its situation-specific nature, emphasize

the importance of gaining predictive and influential power with regard to achievement goal adoption. With this study, I endeavoured to gain insights into individuals' achievement goal adoption, based on hypotheses that included regulatory focus and strategic task framing (combined regulatory fit/misfit). Experimental findings indicated that highly prevention focused individuals more strongly adopt mastery approach goals (than individuals with a low prevention focus) when the task requires vigilance, and significantly less strongly when the task requires eagerness. In contrast, findings indicated that highly prevention focused individuals more strongly adopt performance approach goals (than individuals with a low prevention focus) when the task requires eagerness, and significantly less strongly when the task requires vigilance. Moreover, although not significant, a similar directional pattern was found for prevention focused individuals and task framing conditions on feelings of autonomy. In contrast, the study did not yield significant results for promotion focused individuals, which might have been a consequence of the experimental design. Future studies are necessary to further explore the path this study has taken, and confirm and complement its findings. Nevertheless, this study was the first to combine regulatory fit and achievement goal theory, and, thereby, set an initial step towards laying a conceptual foundation for a more comprehensive integration of multiple motivational concepts and theories.

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## Tables and Graphs

Predictors	MAP (H1)		MAPself		PAP (H2)	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Condition	.109	.087	.193	.135	-.142	.122
Promotion	.098	.071	.186	.117	.031	.100
Prevention	.184**	.066	.021	.103	-.238*	.093
Promotion*Condition	-.112	.094	-.184	.150	.064	.133
Prevention*Condition	-.366***	.092	.008	.144	.449**	.131
Opposite AG	.491***	.044	.409***	.067	.704***	.063

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $P < 0.001$

Note: Coefficients were coded Vigilance = 0, Eagerness = 1

Table 1: Coefficients Regression analysis (anCova), Regulatory focus and task framing condition, and the interactions, on achievement goal adoption (H1 and H2)

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>MAV (H3)</b>		<b>MAVself</b>		<b>PAV (H4)</b>	
	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>
Condition	-.012	.087	.020	.875	.007	.102
Promotion	-.001	.071	.197	.107	.040	.083
Prevention	.117	.066	.147	.094	-.101	.078
Promotion*Condition	-.185	.094	-.189	.138	.148	.112
Prevention*Condition	-.188*	.092	-.115	.132	.188	.109
Opposite AG	.527***	.044	.430***	.061	.628***	.052

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $P < 0.001$

Note: Coefficients were coded Vigilance = 0, Eagerness = 1

Table 2: Coefficients Regression analysis (anCova), Regulatory focus and task framing condition, and the interactions, on achievement goal adoption (H3 and H4)

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Autonomous</b>		<b>Controlled</b>	
	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>
Condition	-.034	.147	-.149	.145
Promotion	.187	.125	-.080	.123
Prevention	.133	.111	-.104	.109
Promotion*Condition	-.047	.161	-.002	.159
Prevention*Condition	-.265	.155	.046	.153

Note: \* p <.05, \*\* P <0.01, \*\*\* P < 0.001

Note: Coefficients were coded Vigilance = 0, Eagerness = 1

Table 3: Coefficients Regression analysis (anCova), Regulatory focus and task framing condition, and the interactions, on self-determination

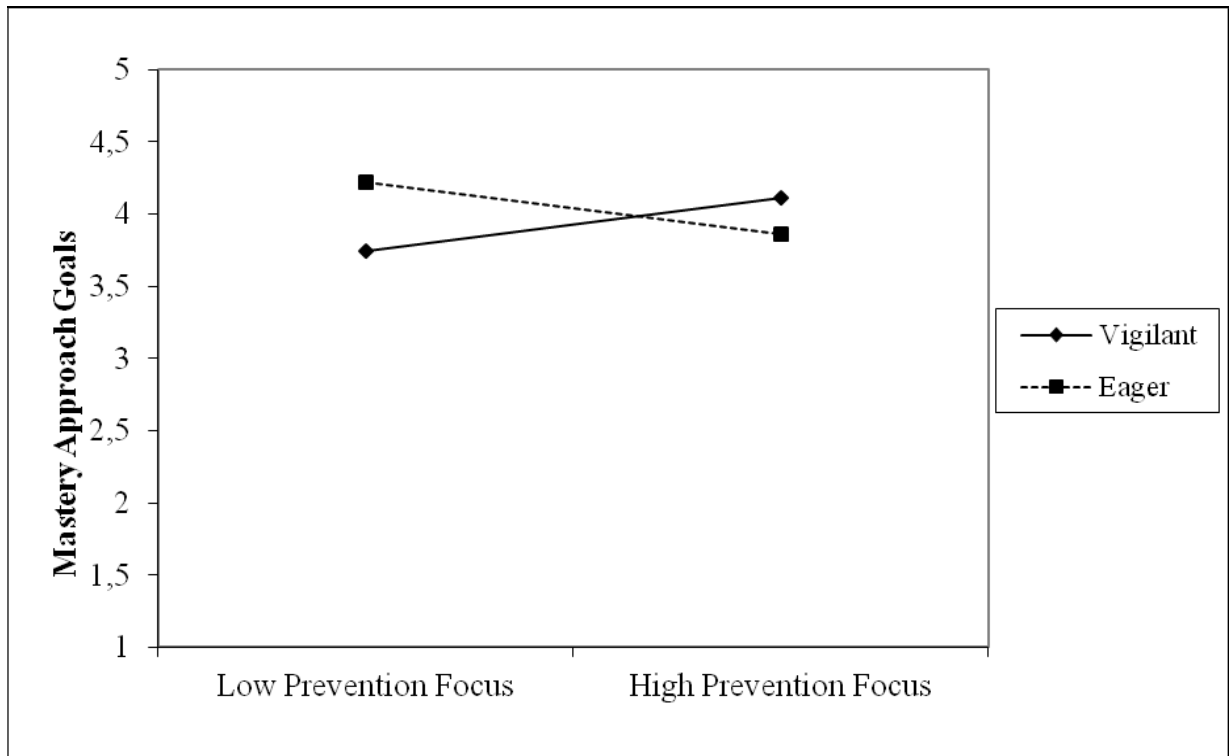


Figure 2: Two-way Interaction effect graph of prevention focus and task framing condition on Mastery Approach Goals

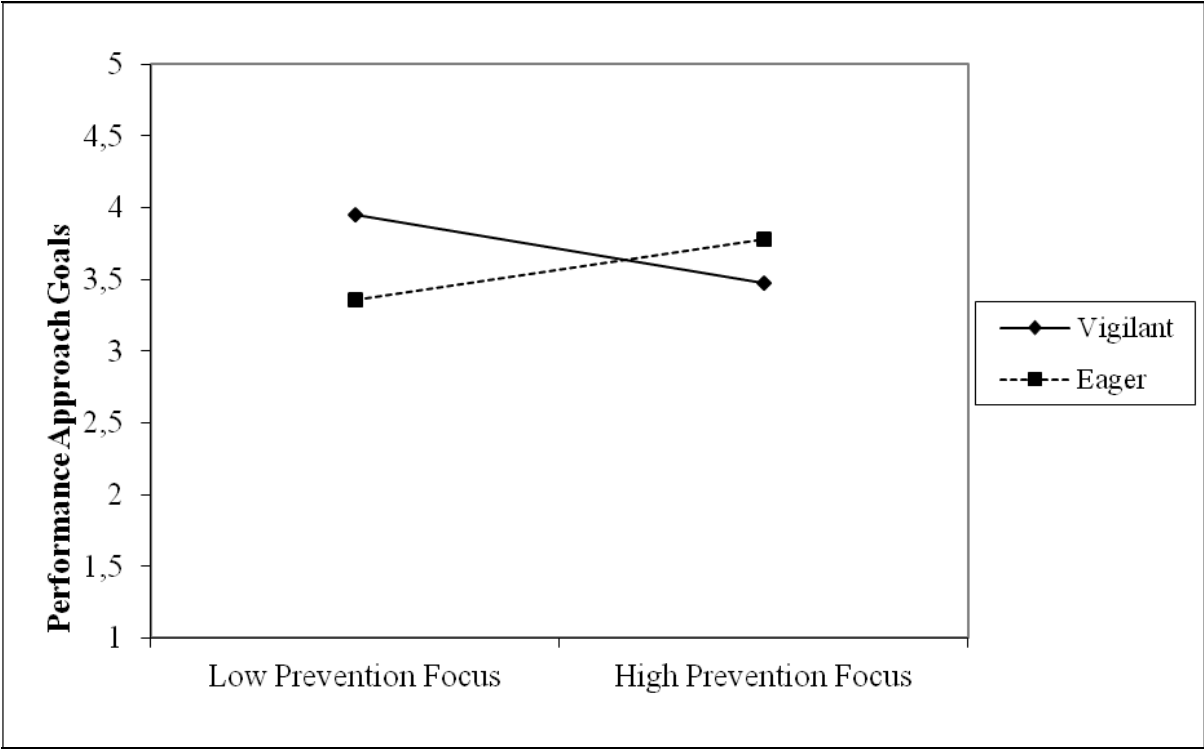


Figure 3: Two-way Interaction effect graph of prevention focus and task framing condition on Performance Approach Goals



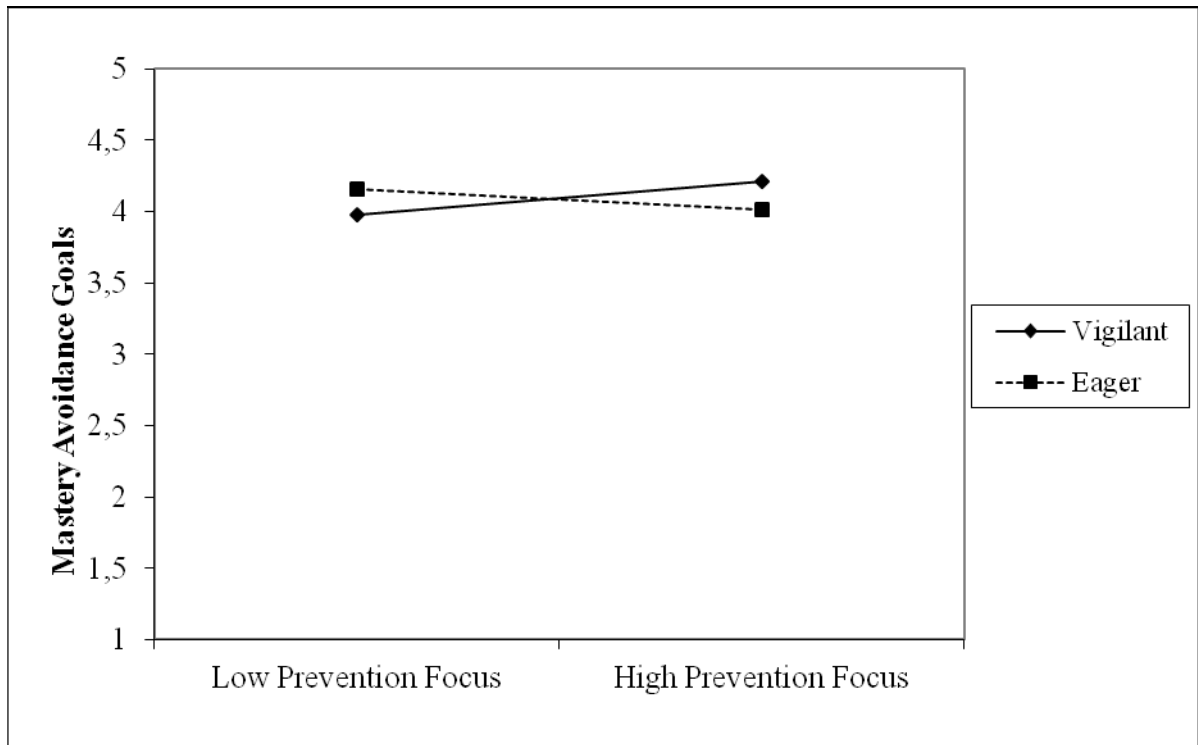


Figure 4: Two-way Interaction effect graph of prevention focus and task framing condition on Mastery Avoidance Goals

## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Numerical Series Task

Task Q1:

1, 4, 9, 16, 25, ...

Task Q2:

21, 25, 33, 49, 81, ...

Task Q3:

2, 6, 18, 54, ...

Task Q4:

89, 72, 14, ...

Task Q5:

2, 4, 7, 14, 17, ...

Task Q6:

1, 9, 25, 49, ...

Task Q7:

77, 49, 36, 18, ...

Task Q8:

2, 10, 40, 120, ...

Task Q9:

2, 4, 6, 12, 14, ...

Task Q10:

3, 5, 10, 12, 17, ...

## Appendix 2: Official Statement of Original Thesis

### Official statement of original thesis

By signing this statement, I hereby acknowledge the submitted Master thesis, titled:

*"Achievement Goal Adoption: The Interplay between Strategic Task Framing and Regulatory Focus"*

to be produced independently by me, without external help.

Wherever I paraphrase or cite literally, a reference to the original source (journal, book, report, internet, etc.) is given.

By signing this statement, I explicitly declare that I am aware of the fraud sanctions as stated in the Education and Examinations Regulations (EERs) of the SBE.

Place: Vijlen, The Netherlands

Date: 1 January 2018

First and last name: Dave van Delden

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