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## Residential Mobility and Consumption: A Regulatory Focus Theory Perspective

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### Abstract

Residential mobility refers to the frequency with which individuals change their place of residence (i.e., moving). As a key socio-ecological factor, it exerts significant influence on individuals' cognition, emotion, and behavior. Previous scholars have reviewed the consequences of residential mobility in terms of health and well-being, social relationships, and educational outcomes. Residential mobility also significantly impacts consumer psychology and behavior; however, to date, no review studies have summarized the consumer behavioral responses triggered by residential mobility, nor have any studies theoretically synthesized and explained the underlying mechanisms of this influence. After reviewing research on the psychological and behavioral responses of consumers resulting from residential mobility, this paper utilizes Regulatory Focus Theory to categorize and discuss relevant research findings, indicating that residential mobility leads consumers to adopt either promotion-focused response strategies or prevention-focused response strategies. Furthermore, it proposes that the autonomy (active vs. passive) and directionality (upward vs. downward) of residential mobility can explain when consumers who have experienced residential mobility will select promotion-focused versus prevention-focused strategies. Finally, based on the established promotion-prevention strategy framework for residential mobility, several potential research topics are proposed for further investigation and discussion.

### Full Text

#### Residential Mobility and Consumption: An Explanation Based on Regulatory Focus Theory

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## Abstract

Residential mobility refers to the frequency with which people change their place of residence (i.e., moving). As a key socio-ecological factor, it significantly influences individuals' cognition, emotions, and behavior. While scholars have reviewed the consequences of residential mobility regarding health and well-being, social relationships, and educational outcomes, its impact on consumer psychology and behavior remains largely unsynthesized. No existing review studies have summarized the consumer behavioral responses triggered by residential mobility, nor have they theoretically explained the underlying mechanisms. This paper reviews research on the psychological and behavioral responses of consumers to residential mobility and uses regulatory focus theory to categorize these findings, demonstrating that residential mobility leads consumers to adopt either promotion-focused or prevention-focused response strategies. Furthermore, we propose that the autonomy (active vs. passive) and directionality (upward vs. downward) of residential mobility can explain when consumers will choose promotion-focused versus prevention-focused strategies. Finally, we propose several potential research topics based on this framework of promotion and prevention strategies in residential mobility for future investigation.

**Keywords:** residential mobility, consumer behavior, regulatory focus

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The World Migration Report shows that as of 2015, there were over 232 million international migrants and 740 million domestic migrants worldwide (International Organization for Migration, 2015). The results of the seventh national census also reveal that China currently has 375.82 million floating population, representing a 69.73% increase compared to 2010, with the scale of the floating population expected to continue expanding (Ning Jizhe, 2021). Given the prevalence and frequency of residential mobility, scholars in sociology, epidemiology, demography, and psychology have paid extensive attention to this phenomenon in recent years (Oishi, 2010). Residential mobility refers to the frequency with which people change their place of residence (Choi & Oishi, 2020). Psychological research has found that due to frequent changes in living space and repeated disruptions to social networks, high residential mobility generally leads to negative changes in individuals' social environments (Fomby & Sennott, 2013; Dai Yiru & Li Yanmei, 2018), thereby exerting direct and significant effects on physical and mental health (e.g., Adams & Plaut, 2003; Jolleyman & Spencer, 2008; Mok et al., 2016), cognitive development (e.g., Coley & Kull, 2016), and educational outcomes (e.g., Benner et al., 2021).

Beyond affecting individual cognition and behavior, residential mobility also significantly influences consumer behavior. First, residential mobility affects individuals' consumption patterns and preferences. High residential mobility not only increases spending on moving-related goods and services but also elevates consumption in entertainment, dining (Li Ming & Liu Wei, 2017), and

non-durable goods (Chen, Lu, & Zhong, 2015). Simultaneously, high residential mobility makes consumers feel anxious and uncertain, prompting them to engage in familiarity-seeking (Oishi, Miao, & Koo, 2012), uniqueness-seeking (Koo et al., 2016), and preference for nostalgic products (He Liu, 2020). Second, high residential mobility significantly expands consumers' activity range and increases their movement trajectories (Jia Jianmin et al., 2021). Such trajectory-based mobile recommendation strategies have been proven to yield higher redemption probabilities, faster redemption behaviors, and greater transaction amounts (Ghose et al., 2019; Jia Jianmin et al., 2021). Finally, high residential mobility encourages consumers to rely on the internet to contact old friends or expand their social network scale through online platforms (Oishi et al., 2013). During this process, the transformation of consumers' social network structure leads them to avoid posting extreme comments to gain social recognition (Shi Ting, 2021) and reduces the effectiveness of information obtained from previous strong social ties (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Given that high residential mobility is a lifestyle pattern for many consumers, exploring and reviewing how residential mobility affects consumer psychology and behavior can help businesses and marketers better conduct precision marketing targeting mobile populations, thereby achieving financial returns. However, no marketing scholars have yet systematically reviewed this topic.

Furthermore, existing research has mostly reviewed and explained the mechanisms through which residential mobility affects individual health, well-being, and psychological processes. Scanlon et al. used five theories—stress coping theory, mobility experience theory, social capital theory, classroom turnover theory, and upward mobility theory—to explain the impact of residential mobility on youth well-being (Scanlon & Devine, 2001). Fowler and McGrath (2015) also proposed an ecological development model of residential stability to explain how residential stability promotes children's cognitive development. Oishi, through cross-cultural and evolutionary history analysis, proposed a socio-ecological model of self and community identity to explain how residential mobility, as an ecological factor, affects the development of personal self and community identity (Oishi, 2010; Oishi et al., 2007). Overall, these models mostly explain the effects of residential mobility from macro-level perspectives such as society, environment, and groups (and have not formed a consensus explanatory mechanism). Since residential mobility—whether active or passive, upward or downward—is very common, few studies have examined whether different characteristic dimensions of residential mobility produce differential effects on individual behavior and the underlying mechanisms.

In summary, this paper will conduct a literature review on residential mobility in the marketing domain and identify the consumer behavioral responses and their differences caused by residential mobility. On this basis, we introduce regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) to explain how different characteristic dimensions of residential mobility (autonomy and directionality) differentially affect consumer psychology and behavior. Specifically, based on the match between residential mobility characteristics—autonomy (active mobility vs. passive mobility) and

directionality (upward mobility vs. downward mobility)—and regulatory focus theory, we explain why upward and active mobility prompt consumers to choose promotion-focused response strategies, and why downward and passive mobility prompt consumers to choose prevention-focused response strategies. It should be noted that the main thread of this paper treats residential mobility as the cause and promotion-focused and prevention-focused consumer responses as the outcomes. However, we also acknowledge another possibility: that individuals' promotion-focused and prevention-focused traits are the cause, and residential mobility is the result. Therefore, this alternative possibility is discussed in the future research directions section at the end of the paper. We hope this paper can provide domestic scholars with a new theoretical perspective and explanatory framework for conducting empirical research on residential mobility, and also offer practical insights for marketing management practitioners and policymakers.

## 2.1 The Concept of Residential Mobility

Residential mobility refers to the behavior of individuals leaving their original place of residence and migrating to a new one due to work, life, education, family, or other reasons (Oishi, 2010). Its main characteristic is the transformation of both physical living space and interpersonal environments (Oishi, 2010). In practical usage, residential mobility can also be expressed as “moving house” or “population migration.” The construct of residential mobility is derived from this phenomenon and can be defined as the frequency with which people change their place of residence (Oishi, 2010). Choi and Oishi (2020) argue that residential mobility at the individual level refers to the number of times an individual has moved or intends to move during a certain period, while at the societal level it refers to the ratio of residents who have moved or intend to move within a society, city, or community (Choi & Oishi, 2020). This paper examines the internal mechanisms through which residential mobility affects individual psychology and behavior from the individual level perspective, thus adopting the former definition. It should be noted that besides priming individuals' mobility or stability mindsets, most scholars use the frequency of residential moves (i.e., residential mobility) as an indicator of the independent variable to better explore the sustained and long-term effects of residential mobility on individuals (e.g., Oishi et al., 2013; Mok et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021). Consequently, empirical research in the consumer behavior domain more often investigates residential mobility rather than residential moving as the factor influencing consumers (e.g., Yu et al., 2020). Therefore, this review also focuses on residential mobility.

## 2.2 Characteristics of Residential Mobility

Residential mobility autonomy and directionality are two key characteristics of residential mobility. First, residential mobility autonomy refers to individuals' ability to independently decide whether to move and where to move. Residential mobility can thus be divided into active mobility and passive mobility based

on the mover's autonomy. These two types of movers exhibit significantly different psychological states during relocation (He Liu, 2020). Active mobility is typically motivated by the pursuit of greater benefits, as individuals change residences to improve their living conditions, such as obtaining better educational and work resources, higher happiness, or higher-quality retirement life (Oishi & Kisling, 2009). Passive mobility, conversely, occurs due to external circumstances rather than subjective desire, such as children moving with their parents. This type of passive mobility often occurs during individuals' childhood and adolescence, while reasons for adult passive mobility may include job changes, school district relocations, or natural disasters.

Second, the directionality of residential mobility emphasized in this paper refers to the spatial characteristics of the move (Cheng Hanbei et al., 2020). Based on changes in relocation destinations, China's current residential mobility phenomena can be categorized into four types: urban-to-urban, rural-to-urban, urban-to-rural, and rural-to-rural, with the primary patterns being rural-to-urban and urban-to-urban mobility (Zheng & Yang, 2016). Some scholars view these two patterns as "upward social mobility" (Xu et al., 2019). However, literature on urban-to-rural and rural-to-rural mobility patterns is relatively scarce. Some scholars suggest that individuals moving within rural areas in China often do so for marriage (Zheng & Yang, 2016). Additionally, urban-to-rural mobility may be triggered by policies (such as the "sent-down youth" program) or by illness and family caregiving needs (Chen, 2011; Dou & Liu, 2015; Hu et al., 2008). In summary, upward mobility is primarily aimed at seeking better resources and living conditions to achieve positive goals, whereas downward mobility often reduces living standards and disrupts existing states, potentially causing individuals to experience greater stress and negative outcomes after moving.

### 2.3 Measurement of Residential Mobility

Overall, the measurement methods for the three variables discussed above are largely similar. Existing research primarily uses secondary data and survey methods to measure residential mobility, and scholars have also developed a series of paradigms to manipulate participants' residential mobility mindset.

In secondary data studies, scholars typically utilize relevant indicators from large-scale census data to measure residential mobility. For example, some researchers have used donation data for the Wenchuan earthquake from various regions to explore the relationship between residential mobility and donations to distant beneficiaries (Wang et al., 2021). In survey research, investigators mostly measure residential mobility by asking participants to report their residential history. For instance, participants may be asked to recall residential moves experienced during different life stages (e.g., preschool, primary school, middle/high school, university) and report the frequency and reasons for moving (Oishi et al., 2013). This approach can also obtain information related to mobility autonomy and directionality. Some scholars have measured residential mobility based on the number of moves in the past five years to examine its

impact on adolescent depression (Susukida et al., 2016). In addition to asking participants to recall moving frequency, researchers have developed single- or multi-item scales to measure residential mobility. For example, Zuo et al. (2018) used an 18-item scale including statements such as “I have changed residences many times since birth,” “I have lived in my current residence for a long time,” and “Moving to other regions is a good idea” to measure residential mobility across three dimensions: history, current status, and intention. In experimental studies, scholars use sentence completion tasks (Oishi & Schimmack, 2010) and scenario imagination tasks (Yu et al., 2020) to prime participants’ residential mobility mindset. Both survey and experimental methods have been widely applied.

For clarity, we summarize the definitions, measurement methods, and representative studies of residential mobility, residential mobility autonomy, and residential mobility directionality in Table 1.

**Table 1: Concepts, Measurement, and Representative Studies of Residential Mobility-Related Variables**

Variable	Definition	Measurement	Representative Studies
Residential Mobility	The frequency with which people change residences; can be defined at individual and societal levels	Secondary data analysis	Wang et al., 2021
		Survey (self-report of moving history)	Oishi et al., 2013
		Multi-item scale	Zuo, 2018
		Sentence completion task	Oishi & Schimmack, 2010
		Scenario imagination task	Yu et al., 2020

Variable	Definition	Measurement	Representative Studies
Residential Mobility Autonomy	Individuals' ability to independently decide whether and where to move; divided into active vs. passive mobility based on autonomy	Scenario imagination task	He Liu, 2020
Residential Mobility Directionality	Spatial characteristic of mobility, i.e., the direction in which individuals change residences	Self-report	Zheng & Yang, 2016

Source: Compiled by the authors

### 3 Residential Mobility and Consumer Behavior from a Regulatory Focus Perspective

Through reviewing consumer behavior research related to residential mobility, we find that studies on how residential mobility influences consumer behavior reveal two distinct behavioral response pathways. On one hand, residentially mobile individuals expand their social networks to obtain social resources and overcome the vulnerability of social relationships (Oishi et al., 2013), and they also strengthen their personal self through uniqueness-seeking (Koo et al., 2016). The essence of these behaviors is a focus on resource acquisition, optimal selection, and optimization—namely, promoting maximum benefits through various actions. On the other hand, research on residential mobility has also documented that highly mobile individuals engage in familiarity-seeking (Oishi, Miao, & Koo, 2012) and exhibit increased risk aversion and loss aversion (Yu et al., 2020). The essence of these behavioral outcomes is to alleviate negative emotions, reduce uncertainty, and avoid greater health and interpersonal risks, with consumers focusing more on the presence or absence of losses. It is evident that although individuals face the same stressful situation of residential mobility, their behavioral responses differ significantly—they make promotion-focused

responses to obtain more resources, opportunities, and benefits, and prevention-focused responses to reduce risks and losses. This aligns perfectly with regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), which proposes that individual behavioral responses can be categorized as either promotion-focused or prevention-focused, suggesting that using regulatory focus theory to explain the relationship between residential mobility and consumer behavior is logically sound.

Therefore, this section first introduces regulatory focus theory and the classification criteria for promotion-focused and prevention-focused responses under this theory. It then identifies which category various consumer behaviors related to residential mobility belong to. Finally, it explains under what circumstances (focusing primarily on the autonomy and directionality of residential mobility) consumers exhibit different regulatory foci, thereby prompting individuals to adopt different behavioral responses.

### 3.1 Regulatory Focus Theory

The hedonic principle of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain has long been a fundamental assumption about human behavioral motivation. However, this principle only points to individuals' natural tendency to approach benefits and avoid harm, revealing the source and essence of human behavioral motivation without explaining how people actually achieve this. Therefore, Higgins (1997) proposed regulatory focus theory to further explain the means and approaches through which people realize benefit-seeking and harm-avoidance. Regulatory focus refers to the specific manner or tendency individuals exhibit during the self-regulation process of goal pursuit. The two types of regulatory focus are promotion focus and prevention focus, whose essential differences are reflected in three aspects: psychological needs, desired end-states, and response to outcomes, which subsequently influence individuals' behavioral strategy tendencies and emotional experiences.

Specifically, different regulatory foci serve different types of needs. Promotion focus is related to advancement needs (i.e., growth, development, and nurturance), whereas prevention focus is related to security needs (i.e., protection and risk prevention). Second, individuals with different regulatory foci desire different end-states. Promotion-focused individuals pursue achievements, hopes, and aspirations, striving to approach their ideal self by adopting success-seeking strategies. Prevention-focused individuals, in contrast, focus on safety, responsibilities, and obligations, preventing themselves from failing to become their ought self. Moreover, they attend to different outcomes and exhibit different sensitivities to outcome events. Promotion-focused individuals are more concerned with the presence or absence of positive outcomes during goal pursuit and are sensitive to the presence or absence of positive results, consequently experiencing more dejection/cheerfulness-related emotions such as disappointment, sadness, and happiness/satisfaction. Prevention-focused individuals, however, focus on the presence or absence of negative outcomes and are sensitive to the presence or absence of negative results, consequently experiencing more

agitation/quiescence-related emotions such as anxiety, unease, and relaxation.

Furthermore, regulatory focus can be either a long-term trait or a temporary state (Higgins, 1997; Manczak et al., 2014). Trait regulatory focus, or chronic regulatory focus, is a personality tendency formed during childhood under the influence of caregivers and individuals' success/failure experiences. Situational regulatory focus, or temporary regulatory focus, is induced by environmental and task framing cues and is a state-level situational variable. It is important to emphasize that this section primarily considers situational regulatory focus—namely, how characteristics of residential mobility (directionality and autonomy) affect individuals' regulatory focus. However, we also consider the relationship between trait regulatory focus and residential mobility in the future research directions section.

Based on the regulatory focus characteristics summarized in Table 2 below, we establish the following criteria for judging promotion-focused and prevention-focused responses: behaviors oriented toward the ideal self, pursuing achievements, aspirations, and fulfilling individuals' growth needs are promotion-focused behavioral responses; behaviors oriented toward the ought self, emphasizing the fulfillment of safety, responsibilities, and obligations and meeting individuals' security needs are prevention-focused behavioral responses. The behavioral outcome differences of individuals with different regulatory foci can serve as auxiliary criteria to support our classification.

**Table 2: Definitions, Characteristics, and Behavioral Outcomes of Regulatory Focus**

	Promotion Focus	Prevention Focus
<b>Definition</b>	Regulatory focus refers to the specific manner or tendency individuals exhibit during the self-regulation process of goal pursuit, with promotion focus and prevention focus as its two types	
<b>Focus</b>	Emphasizes pursuing achievements, aspirations, and hopes	Emphasizes fulfilling safety, responsibilities, and obligations
<b>Self-guide</b>	Strong ideal self	Strong ought self
<b>Emotional</b>	Experiences	Experiences
<b>Experience</b>	dejection/cheerfulness-related emotions	agitation/quiescence-related emotions
<b>Outcome Sensitivity</b>	Sensitive to presence/absence of positive outcomes	Sensitive to presence/absence of negative outcomes

	Promotion Focus	Prevention Focus
<b>Behavioral Strategy</b>	Eager approach strategies for achievement	Vigilant avoidance strategies to prevent losses

Source: Higgins, 1997

### 3.2.1 Promotion-Focused Response Pathways in Residential Mobility and Consumer Behavior

**Acquiring Social Resources.** Conservation of Resources (COR) theory states that in contexts of resource depletion, individuals become more concerned with resource acquisition and preservation (Hobfoll, 2001). Previous literature indicates that the potential negative effects of high residential mobility include reduced opportunities to obtain social capital (Coleman, 1988) and lack of social support and integration (Myers, 1999). Therefore, highly mobile individuals find themselves in a state of resource loss and are motivated to take action to preserve or regain resources. Expanding social network size (Oishi et al., 2013; Oishi et al., 2007) and building broad, loose, and diverse (Lun & Roth, 2013) social relationships are adaptive strategies that highly mobile individuals employ to gain social opportunities, resources, and support. Additionally, a survey study validates the rationality of this strategy, finding that in areas with higher residential mobility, individuals with larger social networks earn higher incomes and experience more promotions (Li, 2017). Similarly, high residential mobility increases emerging adults' (ages 18-25) intention to explore social environments. To cope with the stressful event of residential mobility, young people leading highly mobile lifestyles become more sensitive to social resources and seize opportunities to meet strangers, seeking more social interactions (He et al., 2021).

**Strengthening Personal Self.** In addition to coping with negative events by striving to acquire and maintain their resource reserves, individuals and groups can reposition themselves by strengthening their personal self to place themselves in more advantageous environments when resources are limited (Baltes, 1997). In the process of re-establishing interpersonal relationships, personal attribute information (e.g., unique skills, abilities, and potential) is more easily accessible and stable than collective attribute information (e.g., family lineage, group membership, and social organizational affiliation) (Baumeister, 1987). Therefore, high residential mobility prompts consumers to strengthen their personal self (Oishi et al., 2007), and this process also represents consumers actively reconfiguring their resources to maximize benefits. This tendency further influences individuals' purchases of products that symbolize self-identity, their willingness to share unique information, and their group bias behaviors. For example, research finds that high residential mobility prompts individuals to engage in uniqueness-seeking (Koo et al., 2016) and increases their willingness to share unique information (Zhong Jialing, 2018). Moreover, the personal self-

enhancement resulting from high residential mobility can minimize differential treatment between ingroups and outgroups (Simon, 2000), indicating that high residential mobility can reduce group bias (Li et al., 2019; Lun & Oishi, 2012; De et al., 2015).

**Pursuing Identity.** High residential mobility can also foster individuals' global identity. According to the common in-group identity model, this tendency has adaptive advantages. Specifically, the model posits that when members of different groups imagine themselves more as part of a single superordinate group rather than two separate groups, they hold more positive attitudes toward former outgroup members (Dovidio et al., 1998). Therefore, to gain larger social platforms, facilitate acceptance by higher-level groups, obtain more help from strangers in the future, and enable more cross-group cooperation (Buchan et al., 2011; Buchan et al., 2009), highly mobile individuals exhibit broader group identification, which subsequently increases their donations to distant beneficiaries (Wang et al., 2021). Conversely, because high residential mobility fosters broader identity, this experience can reduce individuals' identification with nearby communities, resulting in fewer pro-community behaviors. However, if the community helps individuals enhance themselves (e.g., improving self-esteem or social status), individuals will still show strong group identification (Oishi et al., 2007).

Based on the criteria for promotion-focused behavioral responses listed in Table 2 above, acquiring social resources, strengthening personal self, and pursuing identity belong to promotion-focused response pathways. These pathways can explain why existing consumer behavior research on residential mobility finds that high (vs. low) residential mobility individuals increase their social network size (Oishi et al., 2013; Oishi et al., 2007), increase social environment exploration intentions (He et al., 2021), engage in uniqueness-seeking (Koo et al., 2016), and make donations to distant beneficiaries (Wang et al., 2021).

### 3.2.2 Prevention-Focused Response Pathways in Residential Mobility and Consumer Behavior

**Alleviating Anxiety.** High residential mobility causes consumers' living spaces to change frequently and their social networks to rupture repeatedly. This unpredictability makes individuals perceive more uncertainty, generating greater anxiety (Oishi, Miao, & Koo, 2012). To alleviate the discomfort caused by anxiety and avoid further health problems, consumers prefer strategies such as familiarity-seeking and nostalgic consumption. For example, highly mobile individuals consume more products from international chain brands, an effect mediated by anxiety (Oishi, Miao, & Koo, 2012). Additionally, He Liu (2020) found that high residential mobility induces anxiety, which weakens individuals' sense of personal control and ultimately increases their tendency to consume nostalgic products and brands, with residential mobility autonomy playing a moderating role. These behavioral outcomes also provide empirical support for the argument that anxious individuals tend to avoid negative results (Gorman

et al., 2012).

**Reducing Uncertainty and Enhancing Control.** In situations of high uncertainty and low control, individuals exhibit greater control-seeking tendencies and behaviors to avoid the unknown and risks, thereby reducing the fear and threat that uncertainty poses to themselves (Bos, 2001). Consequently, high residential mobility reduces consumers' generalized trust in strangers (Yuan et al., 2021). The underlying reason is that strangers represent greater unknowns, and trusting them involves higher risk, so individuals reduce social generalized trust after moving to prevent resource loss. Moreover, high residential mobility also leads to decision-making biases (Yu et al., 2020), because highly mobile individuals' uncertainty avoidance directly increases risk aversion, loss aversion, and temporal discounting. A recent study extends these findings, showing that higher residential mobility and uncertainty about future income reduce individuals' investment risk tolerance, leading to a preference for shorter-term risky asset investments. However, if individuals choose active mobility to improve their quality of life, aiming to obtain greater benefits by bearing the risks associated with mobility, these individuals' risk tolerance rebounds (Zhou Jiawen & Li Yanmei, 2021).

As seen above, alleviating anxiety, reducing uncertainty, and enhancing control prompt highly mobile consumers to adopt prevention-focused response pathways to avoid further losses. These pathways can explain why existing consumer behavior research on residential mobility finds that highly mobile consumers engage in familiarity-seeking (Oishi, Miao, & Koo, 2012), nostalgic consumption (He Liu, 2020), and prefer stable short-term investment products (Zhou Jiawen & Li Yanmei, 2021).

### 3.3.1 When Individuals Engage in Active (vs. Passive) Mobility, They Exhibit Promotion (vs. Prevention) Regulatory Focus

**Active Mobility Elicits Promotion Focus.** Although frequently mobile individuals must cope with unstable living conditions, not all mobility leads to deterioration of the social environment (Hansen, 2014), nor do negative environments affect all individuals uniformly. For example, differences in residential mobility autonomy (active vs. passive) lead to significantly different psychological states in consumers (He Liu, 2020). First, individuals who actively move are typically motivated by the pursuit of greater benefits, independently deciding to change residences for better living conditions, such as obtaining better educational and work resources, higher happiness, or higher-quality retirement life (Oishi & Kisling, 2009). Such movers generally learn about their new residence in advance, having certain psychological expectations and preparations for post-move life, and thus tend to possess higher personal control, which prompts consumers to adopt more active behavioral strategies (He Liu, 2020). Clearly, these psychological and behavioral characteristics of focusing on benefits and actively acquiring resources align with promotion focus features mentioned in regulatory focus theory, particularly the emphasis on advancement needs, achievement pur-

suit, and positive outcomes.

**Passive Mobility Elicits Prevention Focus.** Meanwhile, because passive movers cannot control the initiative of change, they lack a sense of environmental control. Therefore, they tend to exhibit motivations to avoid further resource loss and risk, refraining from spending existing resources to expand social networks, moving to areas with lower living costs, children moving with parents to avoid family separation, or relocating to avoid job loss. These characteristics align with prevention focus features such as being ought self-oriented, focusing on safety, responsibilities, and obligations, and caring about the presence or absence of losses or negative outcomes. Based on this matching, we predict that active mobility will prompt consumers to choose promotion-focused behavioral response pathways. Conversely, passively mobile consumers will adopt prevention-focused response strategies.

### 3.3.2 When Individuals Engage in Upward (vs. Downward) Mobility, They Exhibit Promotion (vs. Prevention) Regulatory Focus

**Upward Mobility Elicits Promotion Focus.** Xu et al. (2019) examined the effects of four types of residential mobility in the Chinese context—urban-to-urban, rural-to-urban, urban-to-rural, and rural-to-rural—on individuals' cognitive function. Among these, urban-to-urban and rural-to-urban mobility constitute upward residential mobility. Research shows that moving from rural to urban areas may be associated with improved living and working environments, such as reduced exposure to pesticides and indoor pollution (Bruce et al., 2000; Kim et al., 2015), or better educational and employment opportunities in early adulthood (Chen, 2011). This upward residential mobility can enhance individuals' socioeconomic status and strengthen their upward social mobility (Alcántara et al., 2014). The motivations and characteristics of upward mobility align with promotion focus features (focusing on advancement needs; related to the ideal self; desiring achievement and aspiration-related goal states). Similar to active mobility, upward residential mobility prompts individuals to adopt promotion-focused response strategies, engaging in various behaviors to obtain resources and pursue achievements.

**Downward Mobility Elicits Prevention Focus.** Urban-to-rural and rural-to-rural mobility constitute downward residential mobility. In rural China, people often migrate for marriage (Zheng & Yang, 2016). In such cases, mobile individuals may experience higher stress levels and loss of social support due to living in an unfamiliar environment, which over time may adversely affect their cognitive function (DiNapoli et al., 2014). Urban-to-rural mobility (typically due to illness or other family needs) also leads individuals to exhibit relatively poor cognitive function (Chen, 2011; Dou & Liu, 2017; Hu et al., 2008). It is evident that downward mobile individuals often have fewer resources, motivation to avoid losses, and high stress—characteristics consistent with prevention focus features (e.g., focusing on security needs; related to the ought self; adopting vigilant-avoidance strategies to solve problems). Therefore, we argue that

downward mobile consumers will choose prevention-focused response strategies, engaging in behaviors related to loss avoidance.

### 3.3.3 A Research Framework for Residential Mobility and Consumer Behavior from a Regulatory Focus Perspective

**Explaining Existing Research Through Autonomy and Directionality Features of Residential Mobility.** Previous consumer behavior research on residential mobility finds that high (vs. low) residential mobility individuals increase their social network size (Oishi et al., 2013; Oishi et al., 2007), increase social environment exploration intentions (He et al., 2021), engage in uniqueness-seeking (Koo et al., 2016), and make donations to distant beneficiaries (Wang et al., 2021). We argue that these consumer behavioral responses caused by residential mobility will be more pronounced under active and upward mobility conditions. This is because, in active or upward mobility situations, consumers strive to pursue more resources and opportunities, making it highly likely that they will expand social network size and enhance social environment exploration to obtain more social resources. Additionally, under active or upward mobility, consumers may also make donations to distant beneficiaries (Wang et al., 2021) to ensure they can obtain more help and social resources from strangers in the future. Furthermore, active and upward mobility lead consumers to strengthen their personal self through uniqueness-seeking.

Conversely, previous research on residential mobility and consumer behavior finds that high (vs. low) residential mobility individuals increase purchases of familiar and nostalgic products to avoid the discomfort caused by anxiety (Oishi, Miao, & Koo, 2012; He Liu, 2020). Previous studies also find that high (vs. low) residential mobility individuals seek to minimize uncertainty risks (Yu et al., 2020) and prefer stable short-term investment products over risky high-yield investment products (Zhou Jiawen & Li Yanmei, 2021). We argue that these consumer behavioral responses will be more pronounced under passive and downward mobility conditions. This is because, in passive and downward mobility situations, consumers adopt the prevention-focused response pathways argued above. In summary, the autonomy and directionality features of residential mobility can play an important moderating role in existing research on residential mobility and consumer behavior.

**Predicting Unexplored Consumer Behavioral Responses Through Autonomy and Directionality Features.** We speculate that active and upward mobility will prompt consumers to make promotion-focused behavioral responses such as purchasing scarce products and preferring and adopting innovative products. We also speculate that passive and downward mobility will prompt consumers to make prevention-focused behavioral responses such as reducing excessive consumption, choosing functional products, decreasing variety-seeking, preferring products with bordered designs, and engaging in impulse buying. Next, we elaborate on the reasoning behind these predictions.

First, research shows that high residential mobility places individuals in a state of resource loss, motivating them to take action to acquire resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Therefore, we argue that when consumers experience active or upward mobility, high residential mobility prompts them to adopt resource competition strategies, leading to a tendency to purchase scarce products to obtain scarce resources. We suspect that the pursuit of social resources remains the underlying mediator of this effect. Under passive or downward mobility conditions, however, to avoid further loss of existing resources, consumers will reduce excessive consumption to cope with future income uncertainty (avoiding increased pressure and risk of future debt repayment). We suspect that uncertainty is the underlying mediator in this case.

Second, frequent residential mobility, especially passive and downward mobility, makes individuals experience negative emotions such as loneliness (Oishi et al., 2013) and anxiety (Oishi, Miao, & Koo, 2012). The intensification of negative emotions prompts consumers to engage in more impulse buying behaviors (e.g., Li Rong, 2015). Therefore, we speculate that passive and downward mobility will prompt consumers to engage in more impulse buying, with negative emotions as the underlying mediator. In contrast, active and upward mobility generates positive emotions such as excitement, anticipation, and curiosity (Oishi & Talhelm, 2012). This intensification of positive emotions can enhance individuals' cognitive flexibility, thereby increasing consumers' willingness to adopt new products and innovative behaviors (see Isen, 2001). Therefore, we argue that active and upward mobility increases consumers' innovation adoption, with positive emotions as the underlying mediator.

Finally, research finds that compared to active mobility, passive mobility often makes individuals perceive weaker personal control (He Liu, 2020). When experiencing low control, consumers choose functional products over hedonic products to enhance control (Chen, Lee, & Yap, 2017), tend toward variety-seeking rather than uniformity-seeking (Yoon & Kim, 2018), and prefer product designs with borders over borderless designs (Cutright, 2012). Therefore, we speculate that compared to upward and active mobility, downward and passive mobility will enhance consumers' preference for functional over hedonic products, increase their variety-seeking tendencies, and strengthen their preference for products with bordered designs. We suspect that control-seeking is the underlying mediator.

For clarity, Figure 1 below depicts the theoretical framework of the relationship between residential mobility and consumer behavior from a regulatory focus perspective. It should be noted that, considering the autonomy and directionality features of residential mobility, we predict that active or upward residential mobility will prompt individuals to generate promotion-focused responses, while passive or downward residential mobility will prompt individuals to adopt prevention-focused response strategies. This research framework is primarily based on logical deductions derived from matching regulatory focus characteristics with residential mobility features and requires further empirical support.

Therefore, we use dashed rather than solid lines to outline “residential mobility features” and other hypothesized future behavioral outcomes. We use solid lines to indicate research findings already revealed and reported in existing residential mobility studies.

It should also be noted that residential mobility refers to the frequency of residential moves. In multiple residential moves, there may be inconsistencies in autonomy or directionality (not every move is active or upward). This poses a significant challenge for our theoretical framework in explaining complex residential mobility phenomena. However, for logical clarity and simplicity, Figure 1 in this paper does not address situations where both upward and downward mobility exist for the same individual, but rather focuses on cases where an individual’s frequent moves are mostly upward or mostly downward.

#### 4 Future Research Directions on Residential Mobility and Consumer Behavior from a Regulatory Focus Perspective

First, examining the interaction between residential mobility (as antecedent) and regulatory focus (trait vs. state) on consumer behavioral responses. Regulatory focus can function as both a long-term, relatively stable personality trait and a state that changes with situations (e.g., Yao Qi & Le Guoan, 2009). What, then, is the relationship between trait regulatory focus and state (i.e., situationally primed) regulatory focus? Research on regulatory fit suggests that goal compatibility effects depend on whether the situationally primed regulatory focus matches the trait regulatory focus (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001). That is, when the situationally primed regulatory focus matches the trait regulatory focus, the goal compatibility effect is maximized. However, when they do not match—for example, when a promotion-focused individual is in a prevention-focused situation—it remains unclear which side dominates. Existing studies provide evidence supporting both the dominance of situationally primed regulatory focus (e.g., Lee et al., 2010) and the dominance of trait regulatory focus (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001). Therefore, future research could examine the differences between different regulatory foci and their interactive relationships. For instance, when placing promotion-focused trait individuals in passive mobility or downward mobility situational primes, what behavioral response strategies will participants adopt? How will their consumer behavior change? The series of consumer responses discussed in Figure 1 in Section 3 of this paper can be investigated by future research as dependent variables. This will be an interesting and important topic, the exploration of which will not only help us understand and explore regulatory focus theory more deeply but also yield beneficial insights for marketing practice.

Second, treating residential mobility as an outcome, investigating the interactive effects of trait and state regulatory focus on residential mobility decisions and related consumer behavioral responses. It should be noted that the research variable framework proposed in this paper based on literature review (Figure 1) treats residential mobility as an antecedent variable, leading to the conclusion

that consumers make promotion-focused (vs. prevention-focused) consumption responses due to different regulatory foci. This overlooks another possibility: that residential mobility may be a potential consequence of different regulatory focus patterns. For example, promotion-focused individuals may choose upward or active mobility due to their focus on achievement and high needs for growth and development. Prevention-focused individuals, based on loss avoidance characteristics, may exhibit downward and passive mobility to save living costs or avoid conflicts. Addressing this limitation, future research could further explore how trait regulatory focus and situationally primed regulatory focus interact to influence individuals' residential mobility decisions and the consumption responses made to facilitate these decisions. One speculation is that promotion-focused individuals, when primed with situational promotion focus, will gain increased confidence in upward and active mobility, subsequently choosing upward and active mobility. To facilitate this upward and active mobility, they will choose high-yield financial products and increase budget expenditures on educational and self-improvement products. Conversely, prevention-focused individuals, when primed with situational prevention focus, will increase the likelihood of downward and passive mobility. To cope with potential downward and passive mobility (and alleviate the resulting low control and uncertainty), they will choose products with bordered designs and engage in variety-seeking. Of course, when promotion-focused individuals are primed with prevention focus, and when prevention-focused individuals are primed with promotion focus, their mobility decisions become complex and dependent on specific research contexts. In summary, exploring these propositions will help researchers clarify the relationship between residential mobility and regulatory focus. Naturally, as an individual trait, regulatory focus is difficult for marketers to identify, and how to solve this problem becomes one of the managerial challenges for future research.

Third, exploring boundary conditions of residential mobility's effects. Beyond the autonomy and directionality features of residential mobility, other factors that can differentiate consumers' regulatory focus traits or states can be studied as moderating variables. For example, age (Renner, 2006), education level, socioeconomic status (Morris et al., 2016), cultural differences (Yuan et al., 2021), and implicit personality (Zhong Jialing, 2018). These variables have received empirical support in regulatory focus theory research. Whether these conclusions can be replicated in residential mobility research and whether different findings will emerge remains unknown. Moreover, beyond these factors related to residential mobility itself and individual regulatory focus, what other externally related factors might trigger consumers' unique coping responses? For instance, mobility caused by national encouragement policies (such as the "diao zhuang" immigration policy) differs from simple residential mobility in measurement, and its potential impact on consumers remains unknown. Because such collective mobility leads to greater changes in external living environments but smaller changes in social networks, research on this issue may involve discussions of policy implementation effects at a more macro level, posing certain challenges

for marketing scholars.

Fourth, discussing the effects of residential mobility autonomy and directionality on consumer behavior in more realistic contexts. Since residential mobility refers to the frequency of residential moves, there may be inconsistencies in autonomy or directionality across multiple moves (not every move is active or upward). For logical clarity and simplicity, this paper only focuses on cases where an individual's frequent moves are mostly upward or mostly downward. Future research could consider manipulating such inconsistent situations (inconsistent autonomy or directionality) to explore consumer coping responses in more realistic contexts.

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