Regime Structure as a Hidden Variable in Engagement Research : the Z variable

Florian Morin

Experiential Regime Research Unit

Independent Researcher

Florianmorinind@gmail.com

Core Claim

Certain forms of engagement disappear under evaluative conditions. Their presence depends less on stimulus content than on the regime under which experience unfolds. When experience must justify, compare, anticipate, or monitor itself, specific modes of engagement collapse. When evaluative demands are sufficiently reduced, they can persist.

The central variable is regime structure, permissive versus evaluative.

The Regime Distinction

A permissive regime is defined as a condition in which perceptual and affective signals are not required to close evaluatively. Recognition does not automatically recruit preference. Discrepancies can remain unresolved without being treated as problems to fix, interpret, or optimize.

An evaluative regime is defined by comparison, narrative framing, goal orientation, or explicit measurement. Experience must be assessed, stabilized, or made instrumentally coherent.

The same stimulus can yield different outcomes depending on regime

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Two Sources of Evaluative Collapse

Evaluative regimes can be induced in two ways.

First, contextually. External demands such as ratings, performance framing, time pressure, comparison tasks, or explicit measurement can recruit evaluative processing and reorganize experience.

Second, endogenously. Even in the absence of external demands, individuals may operate under high internal monitoring. Anticipatory testing, self-narration, or optimization tendencies can sustain an evaluative regime without visible prompts.

Regime outcomes therefore reflect an interaction between contextual evaluation and endogenous evaluative load.

Minimizing external measurement is necessary but not always sufficient for preserving permissive conditions.

Operational Indicators

The framework does not introduce new emotion categories.

It proposes regime-sensitive structural indicators:

– Engagement continuity rather than intensity ratings
– Recognition without preference
– Resistance to interruption
– Absence of spontaneous evaluative narration

These indicators detect whether engagement persists at all under low-evaluation conditions.

Developmental Exposure as Proxy, Not Definition

Endogenous evaluative load cannot be directly measured without risking collapse of the phenomenon itself. For this reason, developmental exposure variables can be used as indirect proxies.

For example, early environments characterized by low supervision, limited structured scheduling, and reduced performance pressure may reduce cumulative exposure to monitoring. Such variables do not define evaluative load, nor do they guarantee access preservation. They serve only to test whether cumulative early monitoring is sufficient to explain later inaccessibility.

If access loss were solely cumulative, individuals with lower early monitoring should show robust re-entry under permissive conditions. If access can also close through a discrete structural shift toward anticipatory testing, then early permissiveness will not be uniformly protective.

Developmental history is therefore a test variable, not an ontological definition of load.

Falsifiability

The regime account would be challenged if:

1. Engagement collapses even when both contextual evaluative demands are minimized and endogenous monitoring is demonstrably low.

2. Introducing evaluative operations does not reduce engagement under otherwise identical conditions.

3. No difference appears between stimuli that preserve unresolved discrepancy and those that aggressively close it, under matched regime conditions.

4. Observed effects are fully explained by novelty, passive salience, or sensory load alone.

The claim is structural and diagnostic. It concerns the conditions under which engagement can persist, not its magnitude or category.

Domains of Application

The regime variable scales across domains:

– Children's engagement with unresolved perceptual violations
– The fragility of play under observation
– Educational contexts with early performance framing
– Adult affect under self-monitoring
– Well-being research relying on continuous self-measurement

In each case, outcomes may depend less on content than on whether experience must be evaluated.

Minimal Thesis

The same experience functions differently depending on whether it must be evaluated. Regime structure, not stimulus intensity, may determine whether certain forms of engagement exist at all.

The Z Architecture: A Three-Component Model of Evaluative Load

Z is not a personality trait, nor a single latent variable. It refers to evaluative load, the degree to which experience is recruited into monitoring, justification, anticipation,

and optimization. For analytical clarity, Z is decomposed into three distinct components.

1. Z_acc – Accumulated Evaluative Load

Z_acc refers to cumulative exposure to monitoring and evaluative structuring over time. It includes developmental exposure, such as early supervision, performance framing, structured scheduling, and comparative environments, as well as adult consolidation through repeated self-monitoring, narrative reinforcement, and optimization habits.

Z_acc operates gradually. It increases the probability that evaluative processing becomes the default mode of experience. However, it does not by itself imply irreversible closure. High accumulated load narrows the range of contexts in which permissive regimes can stabilize, but does not logically require permanent inaccessibility.

Z_acc is indirectly measurable through structural exposure variables, not through introspective self-report.

2. Z_shift – Discrete Structural Transition

Z_shift refers to a non-gradual transition in which anticipatory monitoring becomes stably recruited. It occurs when experience is no longer allowed to unfold, but becomes something to be tested for return.

This shift is not defined by accumulation, but by structural reorganization. A single recognition event, such as the realization that a previously available experiential regime does not reliably return when anticipated, may be sufficient to recruit stable anticipatory evaluation.

Once established, Z_shift functions as a logical lock. Even in low-demand contexts, experience may be pre-emptively monitored. Z_shift explains abrupt loss of access in individuals with otherwise low cumulative exposure.

Unlike Z_acc, it is not indexed by degree, but by presence or absence.

3. Z_ctx – Contextual Evaluative Load

Z_ctx refers to evaluative demands induced by the immediate environment. These include ratings, preference judgments, performance framing, time pressure, comparison tasks, explicit measurement, or visible observation.

Z_ctx is experimentally manipulable. Reducing Z_ctx is necessary to preserve permissive regimes. However, lowering contextual load does not eliminate Z_shift or Z_acc. Contextual permissivity may fail if internal evaluative recruitment remains active.

Regime Collapse as Interaction

Regime stability reflects the interaction of these three components.

Z_acc increases baseline evaluative probability.
Z_shift introduces structural anticipatory monitoring.
Z_ctx acts as a trigger or amplifier.

The probability of regime collapse can therefore be expressed as:

Regime collapse probability = f(Z_acc, Z_shift, Z_ctx)

No single component is sufficient in all cases. High Z_ctx can induce collapse even when accumulated load is low. A present Z_shift can sustain collapse even under minimal contextual evaluation. High Z_acc narrows the window of stability and increases vulnerability to contextual triggers.

Methodological Implication

Because evaluative load can be internally sustained, minimizing contextual evaluation is necessary but not always sufficient for preserving permissive regimes. Developmental exposure variables serve only as indirect proxies for Z_acc; they do not define evaluative structure and do not guarantee access preservation.

The framework is falsifiable. If regime stability proves independent of these components, or if evaluative manipulations fail to alter engagement probability under controlled conditions, the Z architecture loses explanatory value.

The minimal claim is structural: experiential regimes differ not only by content, but by the degree to which evaluation is recruited. Z specifies how that recruitment is distributed across accumulation, discrete transition, and context.

Conclusion

This note argues that engagement outcomes are often misattributed to stimulus content when they are in fact regime-dependent. Certain experiential modes appear

only when evaluation is not recruited, and collapse when experience must justify, compare, stabilize, or optimize itself.

The proposed regime distinction, permissive versus evaluative, reframes engagement as a structural phenomenon: not “how much” engagement is present, but whether it can exist at all under a given evaluative configuration.

The Z architecture decomposes evaluative load into accumulated exposure (Z_acc), discrete structural transition (Z_shift), and contextual demands (Z_ctx). This decomposition clarifies why minimizing external measurement can be necessary but insufficient, and why some access losses may be abrupt rather than gradual.

The framework is falsifiable. If engagement collapses even under genuinely permissive conditions with low endogenous monitoring, or if evaluative manipulations fail to reduce engagement probability under controlled comparisons, the regime account loses explanatory value.

The minimal thesis is that regime structure is a hidden variable in engagement research, and that many failures of replication, measurement, or interpretation may reflect regime-induced collapse rather than the absence of the phenomenon.