

Research Article

# The warmth of our regrets: Managing regret through physiological regulation and consumption ☆☆☆

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## Abstract

This research suggests that experiencing action regret induces a change in psychological and physical warmth, motivating individuals to ameliorate that change via interaction with objects that are perceived to be physically or psychologically opposite in temperature. Experiment 1 revealed individuals experiencing action regret felt more self-conscious emotions, and subsequently preferred cold (versus hot) drinks. Experiment 2 replicated this effect and ruled out arousal as a possible alternative explanation. Experiment 3 furthered this link by demonstrating that those feeling more self-conscious emotions felt warmer and subsequently preferred cold (versus hot) drinks. Finally, experiment 4 found that advertisements manipulated for temperature (e.g., cold climate) mitigated the psychological effects of action regret. We interpret the results of these four studies within the emerging field of embodied cognition, which argues that our understanding of emotional concepts is grounded in, and can be influenced by, physical experiences.

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Regret is an aversive cognitive emotion that people are motivated to avoid, suppress, deny, and regulate should they experience it (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). It is a negative, cognitively-based emotional response experienced when realizing or imagining that our present situation would have been better had we acted differently (Zeelenberg, 1999). For consumers, regret induces a painful sensation that arises as a result of comparing

‘what is’ with ‘what might have been’ (Sugden, 1985). In other words, regret transpires when an obtained outcome compares unfavorably with an outcome that could have been better had the individual chosen differently. Within a marketing context, consumers are constantly making choices that might lead to feelings of regret; understanding the processes that lead to ameliorating this experience is important for maintaining the well-being of consumers. As such, one key area of interest for marketers is to understand how the cognitive experience of regret might affect consumption behavior.

Recent theories (Damasio & Carvalho, 2013) of emotion processing assert that our subjective mental experiences of emotion are a function of our bodily states. In line with an embodied perspective, emotions are thought to be generated by the individual’s perception of related physiological responses. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests bodily expressions and responses are closely tied to the processing and interpretation of emotional

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experiences (Damasio, 2000; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005; Niedenthal, Mondillon, Winkielman, & Vermeulen, 2009). For instance, fear is associated with certain bodily responses such as raised heart rate and goose bumps (Oosterwijk, Topper, Rotteveel, & Fischer, 2010). Stepper and Strack (1993) suggest that specific bodily postures (e.g., upright posture) are associated with specific emotional response (e.g. pride). Even merely thinking about emotional content elicits certain facial expressions (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001). Physiological research demonstrates that emotional responses may result in certain forms of bodily stimulation, such as electrodermal activity (Glenberg, Webster, Mouilso, Havas, & Lindeman, 2009). Hence, emotion processes are inherently linked with physiological responses, and contain psychobiological properties such as motor expression, action tendency, subjective experience, and emotion regulation (Fontaine, Scherer, Roesch, & Ellsworth, 2007).

Here, we argue the effects of experiencing regret on consumer behavior from an embodied cognitive perspective. Importantly, we move beyond merely documenting the physiological–psychological link between regret and consumption by uncovering the process mechanism that explains this relationship. Specifically, we show that experiencing a certain form of regret (i.e., action regret) results in increased perceptions of warmth via the experience of self-conscious emotions and creates a subsequent desire for cold (versus hot) products. Taken together, these findings help to define the psychological underpinnings of experienced regret within the context of embodied cognition theory and extend it into meaningful applications in marketing and consumer behavior from both a theoretical and managerial perspective.

## Conceptual background

Individuals can regret their actions (errors of commission), as well as their inactions (errors of omission; Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). For example, an individual can regret an active decision gone wrong (e.g., purchasing a stock that subsequently plunges in value), or regret failing to act (e.g., not purchasing a stock that subsequently rises in value). We use the terms *action regret* and *inaction regret* to denote whether the regret stems from an event in which one took action or failed to act. Prior research examining regret has shown that there are fundamental differences between regretful situations that result from action and regretful situations that result from inaction in terms of the distinct emotional patterns that are elicited (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). For instance, action regret (e.g. regretful situations that are caused by one's actions) induces not only the emotion of regret but also self-conscious emotional experiences such as shame and guilt, whereas inaction regret (e.g. regretful situations that are caused by one's inaction) similarly induces the emotion of regret but also wistful emotions such as longing and contemplation (Kedia & Hilton, 2011). Action regret typically results in increased internal attributions and self-focused counterfactual thinking (Byrne & McEleney, 1997; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Zeelenberg, van der Pligt, & Manstead, 1998; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, & Manstead, 1998). Subsequently, emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment and remorse (generally considered to be among the consequences of evaluating

oneself negatively) should be higher when experiencing situations of action regret. On the other hand, emotions such as anger and frustration are a function of external attributions, and should occur in similar propensity for action and inaction regret. Finally, the feeling of regret reflects a temporal pattern in which situations of action regret tend to elicit greater regret in the short-term but not in the long-term. For example, while buying a stock that subsequently plummets tends to elicit greater immediate regret than holding onto that stock (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982), other research that examines recalling regret later has found either no differences or even the opposite effect (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Kedia & Hilton, 2011; Zeelenberg, van den Bos, van Dijk, & Pieters, 2002).

Notably, it is important to acknowledge that the emotional profiles (e.g., shame vs. wistfulness) resulting from the varying situations that elicit action vs. inaction regret are seen as separate from the regret emotion itself. Similarly, while regret may be seen as a type of self-conscious emotion, it is theoretically distinct from other self-conscious emotions such as shame, embarrassment, or disappointment. As Zeelenberg and Pieters (2007) note “regret is distinct from related other specific emotions such as anger, disappointment, envy, guilt, sadness and shame, and from general negative affect on the basis of its appraisals, experiential content and behavioral consequences.” (p.7). Individuals can feel regret without feeling shame or embarrassment, and they can experience shame and embarrassment without regret. Research examining both regret and shame find only modest correlations between the two (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Further, Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead and van der Pligt (1998) extended Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz's (1994) ideas to compare the phenomenological differences between regret and disappointment. They found that regret was associated with items such as “[you] feel that you should have known better” or “[you] want to undo the event”, while disappointment was associated with “[you are] feeling powerless” or “[you] want to do nothing” (see Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead and van der Pligt, 1998 for more differences). Overall, those who experienced regret tended to rethink about past events, while those who experienced other negative self-conscious emotions tended to dismiss their negative experience. This explains why regret has been found to promote goal persistence, while disappointment has been found to promote goal abandonment (Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & van der Pligt, 2000). Individuals who regret are likely to set goals that are directed at improving one's self, similarly to how a person becomes self-focused and seek replenishment when experiencing emptiness (Levontin, Ein-Gar, & Lee, 2015).

Taken together, we offer series of predictions based on individuals' desire to regulate their level of regret. We propose that consumers seek to ameliorate their experienced regret through consumptive acts. Moreover, we focus primarily on the situation type (e.g., action regret) as it involves the activation of self-conscious emotions.

## Hypothesis development

Niedenthal (2008) suggests emotions are understood through an embodied framework where individual's physical, cognitive, and other emotional properties are mapped together

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