



FlashReport

Feeling torn and fearing rue: Attitude ambivalence and anticipated regret as antecedents of biased information seeking[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical work on attitudinal ambivalence suggests that anticipated regret may play a role in causing awareness of contradictions that subsequently induce a feeling of an evaluative conflict. In the present paper we empirically examined how the anticipation of regret relates to the association between the simultaneous presence of contradictory cognitions and emotions (objective ambivalence), and the evaluative conflict associated with it (subjective ambivalence), in the context of decision-making. Across three studies ($N_s = 204, 127, 244$), manipulating both objective ambivalence and regret, we consistently found that when a dichotomous ambivalent choice had to be made, (objectively) ambivalent attitude holders for whom feelings of anticipated regret were made salient reported higher levels of subjective-attitude ambivalence than participants in the other conditions. Moreover, in Studies 2 and 3 we found that the effect of anticipated regret on subjective ambivalence had consequences on information processing. Specifically, anticipating regret made ambivalent participants search for attitude-congruent information. This effect was mediated by the increase in subjective ambivalence. This work provides the first empirical evidence for the role of regret in the association between objective-and-subjective attitude ambivalence, and its consequences.

1. Introduction

Although people have a fundamental desire for consistency (Festinger, 1962), they often have inconsistent attitudes, such as liking the taste of chocolate cake while at the same time disliking its calories. Such evaluative discrepancies are known as attitudinal ambivalence. The notion that awareness of ambivalence can elicit negative affect (Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002) is reflected in the distinction between *objective* and *subjective* ambivalence. Objective ambivalence refers to the co-existence of positive and negative attributes with regard to an attitude object (Kaplan, 1972); subjective ambivalence refers to the extent to which one *experiences* conflict about one's ambivalent attitude (Priester & Petty, 1996). When individuals with ambivalent attitudes are confronted with a dichotomous evaluative choice, their positive and negative components become simultaneously accessible, leading to subjective ambivalence (Van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, & De Liver, 2009). In this work it is argued that the anticipation of regret about potentially making the wrong decision amplifies the association between the objective and subjective attitude

ambivalence. This study is the first to empirically test the role of regret as regards the consequences of awareness of ambivalence.

1.1. Anticipated regret and ambivalence

The theoretical relationship between ambivalent decisions and regret has been described in different ways. Ambivalent attitude holders facing a dichotomous decision are forced to choose one side of the issue and let go of the other. As they intrinsically do not know which choice will lead to the best outcome, anticipation of regret is likely. Previous research has shown that the relationship between objective ambivalence and negative arousal is mediated by uncertainty (Van Harreveld, Rutjens, Rotteveel, Nordgren, & Van Der Pligt, 2009), which was positively associated with anticipated regret (Loomes & Sugden, 1982).

Research has also shown that anticipating regret about a risky decision leads decision-makers to avoid taking that risk (Li et al., 2010). Similarly, procrastination has been found to be related to thoughts about how things could have gone better (Sirois, 2004). In the context

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of ambivalence it has been argued that when a decision is imminent, the first inclination of ambivalent attitude holders is also to procrastinate (Van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, et al., 2009). Since ambivalent decisions are almost intrinsically risky (one cannot be sure which alternative is likely to generate the most positive outcome), it could be argued that regret anticipation drives the effect of ambivalence on procrastination, thus further supporting the notion that the anticipation of regret can arise in ambivalent decision-making.

Thus, building on previous work, we hypothesized that regret is what causes objective ambivalence to become the more conflicted experience of subjective ambivalence; namely:

H1. When a decision has to be made regarding an ambivalent attitude, regret will amplify the association between objective and subjective attitude ambivalence.

1.2. Consequences of regret-induced subjective ambivalence

Subjective ambivalence is known to guide the processing of attitude-relevant information. Specifically, ambivalent attitude holders have a preference for information that is consistent with their initial attitude (Clark, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 2008; Sawicki et al., 2013). In other words, ambivalent attitude holders who are slightly positive (negative) arguably prefer positive (negative) information as this is the most direct route towards univalence (Van Harreveld, Nohlen, & Schneider, 2015). To date, however, research has not empirically addressed the emotions and mechanisms underlying such biased information search.

In terms of the process underlying this effect of ambivalence on consistency bias, we adopted a motivational account. Specifically, we argue that ambivalent attitude holders' consistency bias is driven by the motivation to reduce the unpleasant feeling of regret by trying to acquire a more univalent attitude (Van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, et al., 2009). We therefore examined whether regret-induced subjective ambivalence would have downstream consequences for information search. We hypothesized that when a decision has to be made, regret-induced evaluative conflict should make the ambivalent attitude holder search for attitude-congruent information (see Fig. 1).

H2. Regret-induced subjective ambivalence will result in biased information search in the direction of the initial attitude.

Our work is also related to existing research in the context of decision-making and information processing, and specifically to the concept of the psychological immune system. The psychological immune system is thought to be comprised of people's tendency to restructure their beliefs, such that outcomes are experienced more positively in the context of cognitive dissonance (Gilbert & Ebert, 2002), as illustrated

by the post-decisional spreading of the attractiveness of alternatives (Brehm, 1956). The motivational aspect of cognitive consistency effects is driven by the desirability of the outcome (Kruglanski et al., in press). Our study examined whether ambivalent decisions can also trigger the psychological immune system, by leading decision-makers to focus on one side of the issue and thus increase confidence in their decision.

Three studies were conducted to test the research hypotheses. Study 1 established the role of regret on the objective-subjective attitude relationship (H1). Study 2 tested the subsequent effect of regret and ambivalence on biased information search (H2). Finally, Study 3 aimed at increasing ecological validity by testing the hypotheses in an (ostensibly) naturalistic setting.

2. Study 1

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Participants and design

Undergraduates ($N = 203$, 64% female) from a local university participated in the study in exchange for course credit ($M_{age} = 22.62$, $SD = 2.11$). This sample size has a power of 0.90 to detect a medium effect sized-interaction, $Cohen's f = 0.25$, in a 2*2 between-participant design.

2.1.2. Procedure

After filling out the consent form, participants were asked to read a paragraph about an ostensible university decision that requires undergraduate students to do an annual 40 h of community service in jobs that benefit society (Baker & Petty, 1994). Participants were randomly assigned to a high or low objective ambivalence condition. Participants in the low ambivalence condition read the following passage:

“A recent decision of the University states that starting next year, undergraduate students will be required to do 40 hours of volunteer work in projects that benefit society. Some examples of these projects include helping underprivileged elementary and high-school students with their homework, volunteering in organizations that help the elderly and projects with people with special needs (the blind and otherwise disabled, etc.). Students will be able to choose their own project, which will then have to be approved by the University, or take part in a project organized by the University. Completing the 40 hours is mandatory to graduate. The student council argues it will place an undue burden on students' already busy schedules and will thus interfere with their ability to study. It also argues that the decision will also hurt the students who need to work in their free time to pay their tuition.”

Participants in the high ambivalence condition read the following passage:

“A recent decision of the University states that starting next year, undergraduate students will be required to do 40 hours volunteer work in projects that benefit society. Some examples include helping underprivileged elementary and high-school students with their homework, volunteering in organizations that help the elderly and projects with people with special needs (the blind and otherwise disabled etc.). Students will be able to choose their own project, which will then have to be approved by the University, or take part a project organized by the University. Completing the 40 hours is mandatory to graduate. The student council argues that the decision will place an undue burden on students' already busy schedules and will thus interfere with their ability to study. On the other hand it is argued that this proposal will help the university attract donors, which will result in better facilities for the students.”

Subsequently, to associate ambivalence with a dichotomous choice, which is known to facilitate simultaneous accessibility and a more subjective experience of ambivalence (Van Harreveld et al., 2009), we asked participants to state whether they were either in favor or opposed the

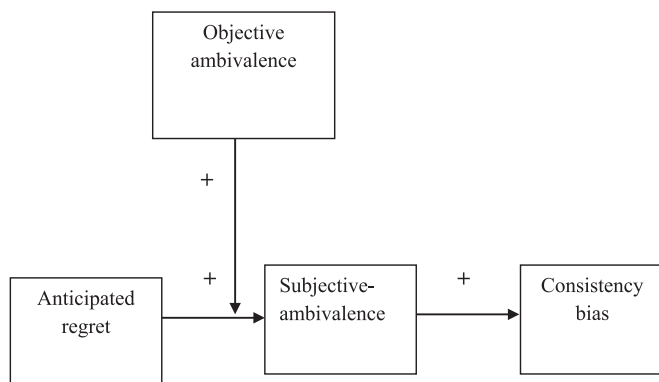


Fig. 1. Moderated mediated model for the effect of regret on consistency bias via subjective-attitude ambivalence.

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