If Only I Switched Instead: Exploring the Consequence of Regret & Consumer Brand Switching Behaviors

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The purpose of this research is to better understand how consumers’ regret coping behaviors influence brand switching. An experimental design is used to examine how regret and validation influence attitude toward brand bought, satisfaction toward purchase decision, and brand switching likelihood. Findings indicate that although expectations were invalidated and regret was reduced, consumers have more favorable attitudes and higher satisfaction level towards the brand purchased. Furthermore, the results reveal that when regret was induced, consumers have a higher likelihood of switching brands. Implications for advertisers, brand managers, and consumers are offered.

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A wealth of research has been devoted to exploring brand-switching behavior among consumers (Nowlis and Simonson 2000). Brand switching can be driven by various reasons, particularly perceived superior quality, lower prices of alternatives (Blattberg et al. 1995), lower levels of satisfaction and regret (Inman et al. 1997). Generally, the invalidation of information may lead consumers to question their past judgments and reassert the strategies they previously employed to inform their judgments (Bettman 1979). As a result, a central aim of brand-switching research is to further understand how consumers cope with regret, given that this is expected to influence post-purchase behavior.

Researchers have been using regret theory to help explain consumer behavior and decision-making (Zeelenberg and Pieters 1999). Regret prompts an assessment of whether or not the consumer can amend the situation, which then facilitates the consumers’ use of coping strategies. It is typically the invalidation of information or expectation that prompts the experience of regret and consequently the promotion of these coping strategies. Specifically, in an attempt to cope with the invalidation, switching processing mode to an enhanced cognitive demand is imposed (Mazursky and Schul 2000).

Treating coping as a defense system (i.e., to reduce tension and restore equilibrium) can be distinguished as reactive coping or future-oriented coping. Reactive coping refers to a harm or loss experienced in the past (Schwarzer and Knoll 2003). In contrast, the proactive coping process (i.e. future-oriented coping) consists of constructing a reserve of resources that can be used to either prevent or minimize future net losses (Aspinwall and Taylor 1997) – particularly switching brands.

Despite the quantity of research done on brand switching, little is known about the behavioral determinants of switching on previous evaluation of expectations. In order to understand what influences post-purchase behavior, understanding previously purchased product evaluations are key elements. Furthermore, Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) call for more attention to be devoted to understanding future-oriented coping.

The purpose of this research is to better understand how consumers’ regret coping behaviors influence brand switching. We predict that the level of regret induced and level of expectations validated will moderate consumers’ attitude toward the brand bought, consumers’ satisfaction levels, and consumers’ choice to either stay or switch brands.

Study

The experiment is a 2X2 between-subjects design with regret and validation serving as between-subjects factors. All participants were exposed to hypothetical purchase-decision scenario manipulations of regret and validation. Participants were either exposed to one of four conditions: induced regret with validation; induced regret with invalidation; reduced regret with validation; or reduced regret with invalidation. For example, for the induced regret by validation condition, subjects had experienced a positive outcome (i.e. contentment with purchase decision); then regret was induced due to the participant learning that their purchase decision was not the best decision they could have made. A total of 81 students from a southern university in the United States participated in the study.

**Attitude Toward Brand Bought.** The ANOVA yielded a regret by invalidation interaction (F (1, 77)=23.33, p<.001). When expectations were invalidated, attitude toward the brand bought was significantly lower when regret was induced (M=3.70), whereas when expectations were invalidated, attitude toward the brand bought was significantly higher when regret was reduced (M=6.00). No effect was found for validation and regret on attitude toward the brand bought. The analysis also revealed a strong significant effect for regret (F (1, 77)=24.48, p<.001), indicating that reducing regret lead to more favorable attitude toward the brand bought (M=6.06 vs. M=4.89).

In addition, the analysis revealed a strong significant effect for validation (F (1, 77)=28.11, p<.001), indicating that validation lead to more favorable attitude toward the brand bought (M=6.10 vs. M=4.85).

**Satisfaction Toward Purchase Decision.** The ANOVA revealed a regret by invalidation interaction (F (1, 77)=12.86, p<.05). When expectations were invalidated, satisfaction toward purchase decision was significantly increased when regret was reduced, (M=6.02 vs. M=3.03); however when expectations were validated, satisfaction toward purchase decision was lower when regret was induced (M=5.17 vs. M=6.30). The analysis also revealed a strong significant effect for regret (F (1, 77)=63.84, p<.001), indicating that reducing regret lead to higher satisfaction toward purchase decision levels (M=6.16 vs. M=4.10). In addition, the analysis revealed a strong significant effect for validation (F (1, 77)=22.01, p<.001), indicating that validation lead to higher satisfaction levels toward purchase decision (M=5.75 vs. M=4.53).

**Brand Switching.** An ANOVA was performed, and the analysis approached significance for the regret by validation interaction (F (1, 76)=3.27, p=.07). When expectations were invalidated, brand switching was more likely to occur when regret was induced (M=6.02) than when regret was reduced (M=3.95). No significant effect was found for induced/reduced regret and validation on brand switching.

The analysis also revealed a strong significant effect for regret (F (1, 76)=14.97, p<.001), indicating that inducing regret lead to a higher likelihood of brand switching (M=5.19 vs. M=3.80). Additionally, the analysis revealed a significant effect for validation (F (1, 76)=6.69, p<.05), indicating that invalidation lead to a higher likelihood of brand switching (M=4.96 vs. M=4.03).

These results highlight the importance of the emotion of regret and validation on attitude, satisfaction, and brand switching likelihood. The results show how regret can be used as a marketing instrument for advertisers and brand managers. As a marketing tool, regret can be used to both urge potential consumers to switch from an old brand or to stay with an existing brand. Ultimately, the use of regret is an excellent approach for firms seeking to increase sales, manage brands, or retain existing customers. More research is needed however to further explore and validate the findings of this study since a marginally significant interaction was found for brand switching. A limitation of the study is that hypothetical scenarios were used instead of actual scenarios. Actual consumer branding switching behavior may be