The Warmth of Our Regrets: Regulating Regret Through Temperature

Andrew W. Perkins, Ivey Business School, Western University
Jeff D. Rotman, Ivey Business School, Western University
Seung Hwan (Mark) Lee, Colorado State University, USA

Regret is an emotion that may result from errors of commission (action regret) or errors of omission (inaction regret). We suggest that action or inaction regret induces a change in psychological and physical warmth, motivating individuals to ameliorate that change via interaction with objects / ads that are opposite in temperature.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017043/volumes/v42/NA-42

copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Individuals can regret their actions (errors of commission), as well as their inactions (errors of omission) (Gilovich and Medvec 1995). Action regret is the result of an individual’s active decision (e.g., purchasing a stock that subsequently plunges in value), whereas inaction regret is caused by a failure to act (e.g., not purchasing a stock that subsequently rises in value). Recent research has shown how temperature influences product perceptions and consumer decision-making (Lee, Rotman, and Perkins 2014; Zwebner, Lee, and Goldenberg 2014). For instance, Zwebner and colleagues (2014) reported a temperature-premium effect as it relates to product perceptions, finding that exposure to physical warmth activates emotional warmth which in turn increases product evaluations. Recent developments in this field have not only strengthened the physiological-psychological connection in embodied processes, but also provide insights into consumer behavior and potential managerial implications for marketing decisions.

With regards to regret, we believe different forms of regret may lead to different emotional states, and that the type of regret experienced may have a distinct physiological state mapped in our neural system. This is consistent with recent research (Nummenmaa et al. 2013) that demonstrates different emotions correspond with different self-reported physiological states. In Wilkowski et al. (2009), people primed with anger-related thoughts felt physically warmer suggesting a systematic link between heat and anger. Based on classic associative theories of semantic memory, heat and anger could be associated concepts in memory such that one concept would activate the other. Given that action regret has been associated with anger (Kedia and Hilton 2011), it is likely that the emotional experience of action regret will result in a elevated physiological heat response. Thus, it is plausible that action regret will induce people to feel hotter. On the other hand, inaction regret is likely to be linked with coldness. When individuals experience inaction regret, the feeling of “missed opportunity” is borne from the person’s inability to achieve a sense of self-fulfillment (missing a chance to be in a better state than their current state), which subsequently induce other emotions such as wistfulness and sadness (Gilovich et al. 1998). Thus, we suggest that different forms of regret lead to different physiological responses resulting from the conflation of physiological and psychological metaphorical associations between hot and cold, and that these different physiological responses to feelings of regret directly affect subsequent consumption behavior. To our knowledge, no research to date has examined how regret might affect physical perceptions of temperature or how the physiological response to the cognitive emotion of regret might affect subsequent consumptive behavior, and whether marketing efforts (i.e., advertisements) might mitigate the effects of regret.

Results from three studies suggest that experiencing regret induces a change in psychological temperature, motivating individuals to ameliorate that change via interaction with consumptive objects that are perceived to be physically or psychologically opposite in temperature. Furthermore, we find that promotional material, such as advertisements that represent warm or cold climates or beverages that can be served either hot or cold, can serve as a source for temperature mitigation and regret reduction. We further contribute to the mechanisms underlying embodied cognition effects. Although other research has examined the role of construct accessibility (e.g., Lee and Schwarz 2012), we demonstrate an opposing mechanism: self-regulation. Specifically, we argue that just as an individual will seek to regulate their temperature by desiring warmth when they feel cold and to cool off when they are too warm (e.g., homeostasis, see Benzinger 1969). Individuals will similarly desire hot or cold objects when they experience embodied temperature change through experiencing emotions. Given that emotional responses to experiencing regret are negative (Gilovich and Medvec 1995), we posit that the motivation to self-regulate is due to a desire to alleviate a negative emotional state. Research has shown that people are motivated to seek remedies to reduce the negative emotions that they are feeling (Cooper et al. 1995). Thus, it is reasonable to believe that self-regulation observed here is a response to people’s desire to reduce their regretful emotion. If one was to experience a positive emotion (e.g., joy), it is unlikely that they will employ self-regulatory strategies to regulate their positive state. These self-regulatory effects also coincide with research on compensatory consumption. Indeed, prior research has demonstrated that individuals attempt to use products to “fill their emotional gap”. For example, individuals made to feel powerless seek products that help them maintain or enhance their status (Rucker and Galinsky 2008). We argue here that such regulatory compensatory effects can be embodied in nature.

Understanding why consumers feel regret is critical to marketers as it is part of their objective to minimize the negative emotion experienced by their customers. Here, we provide a simple solution for businesses to help ameliorate the effects of consumer regret. If people are experiencing action regret, a customer service attendant can offer a cold drink to subtly mitigate their negative emotion. If people are experiencing inaction regret, the attendant can offer a hot drink to subtly mitigate their level of experienced regret. Finally, companies trying to sell ‘risks’ products (e.g. one that may elicit action regret) would likely benefit from keeping the store a little cooler or offering colder drinks. Exploring the link between risk and temperature may be a fruitful investigation in the future.

Finally, we believe that the embodied phenomenon discovered in this research is not just limited to regret. Future research may benefit from investigating regulatory mechanisms in other negatively-laden emotions (i.e., anger, sadness, guilt, fear, depression, etc). Given that our research shows that products or ads can mitigate people’s level of regret, it may be a worthwhile endeavor to investigate whether physiological remedies (e.g., hot/cold drink) can also mitigate psychological discrepancies that arise from other negative emotions.

REFERENCES:

The Warmth of our Regrets: Regulating Regret through Temperature
Seung Hwan (Mark) Lee, Colorado State University, USA
Andrew W. Perkins, Washington State University, USA
Jeff D. Rotman, Western University, Canada

REFERENCES:


