



How Does Regret Influence Consumer's Behavior?

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Abstract

Regret is not only an emotional reaction to the bad results of decision but also a powerful force that motivates and directs one's behavior. In this paper, we studied the impact of regret on the post decision-making behavior of the consumer. A qualitative study was conducted to explore the consequences of regret on consumer behavior.

It was shown that regret has an influence on the post purchase evaluation via its impact on satisfaction and has various behavioral consequences such as: complaint, repurchasing behavior, Word of mouth communication, return, inertia etc...

Keywords: regret- satisfaction- post purchase evaluation- behavioral consequences.

Introduction

"We cannot live without desire, we cannot live without feelings and we cannot live without regret" (He, 2002). Who among us ever regretted a decision and never told himself: *"I should have seen other choices before buying! "" I should have waited the period of sales! "" I should have negotiated my starting salary better "; " I should not have declared my love»!* ... (Delacroix, 2003). Regret is omnipresent in our lives and very few people are exempt from the sensation of regret and it costs a lot.

Consumers are currently making thousands of decisions every day. This does not include only the decision on what products to buy or how much, but what to eat in the morning, what kind of tea or beverage choose then they will not look all the time to optimize their decisions but rather to make satisfactory

decisions and it is obvious that with this many decisions there are high chances to regret.

A study on verbal expressions of emotions developed by Shimanoff in 1984 shows that regret was the most pronounced negative emotion and love for positive emotions.

Recently, research has shown that regret is not only an emotional reaction to the bad results of decision but also a powerful force that motivates and directs one's behavior.

The feeling of regret felt after a certain decision has various consequences on consumer's behavior. It will allow explaining the judgments for future decisions. The literature is rather oriented towards the investigation of the consequences of satisfaction on post-purchase behavior. But few studies showed interest to the

consequences of regret on post purchase behavior.

The purpose of this paper consists in exploring through a qualitative approach the consequences of regret on the future behavior of consumers. We will first present the contribution of previous works in this area, then the research methodology and the main results obtained from an extensive thematic analysis. Limitations and future tracks of research will be presented in the course of this article.

Literature Review

The feeling of regret felt after a certain decision has various consequences on consumer's behavior. And few researches have focused on exploring the consequences of regret. Literature review is rather oriented towards the investigation of the consequences of dissatisfaction on post purchase behavior.

First previous research agree on the impact of regret on post purchase evaluation as the first consequences of retrospective regret. This effect of regret on post-purchase evaluation was explored via the study of the effect of regret on satisfaction which was the subject of several marketing research (Oliver, 1997). This effect is measured using the expectation-disconfirmation model where the consumer compares the perception he has of product performance with his expectations.

Researchers have long been interested in the impact of satisfaction on post-purchase behavior. However, they neglected an equally important gap namely that between the performances of the chosen alternative and the rejected alternative. In fact, the latter plays a decisive role on the fidelity and the orientation of the consumer's future behavior.

Starting then, from the idea that the results are not evaluated only according to whether they meet expectations or not but also

relatively to the alternatives available on the market (Tsiros and Mittal, 2000) the expectation-disconfirmation model was considered incomplete (Inman and al 1997, Taylor 1997; Tsiros, 1998; Tsiros and Mittal, 2000). Indeed it has been proven that the consumer not only evaluate the performance of the product purchased but also evaluated the performance of the rejected product.

Tsiros and Mittal (2000) have postulated a relationship, certainly, significant between satisfaction and regret. Their contributions converge with those of Inman and al (1997), and Taylor (1997) to remove the negative influence of regret on satisfaction. This is how our satisfaction does not depend solely on what we receive but also on what we could have received. While noting that a satisfactory purchase can lead to regret with the passing of time, either by considering the rejected alternatives, or by engaging counterfactual thoughts, either by receiving new information later on the chosen alternative or the one rejected.

Then, it was postulated in previous works that regret is followed by various behavioral consequences. Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999, 2002) have stipulated the existence of a gap in the literature on the subject. Indeed, contrariwise with satisfaction little research has focused on the behavioral effects specific to regret. This results then, in the need to identify what behavior will be adopted by the consumer regretting, regardless of satisfaction.

Few studies were interested in the exploration of behavioral consequences of regret. The major are those by Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999,2002) which were based on the inventory of behavioral consequences of dissatisfaction to infer the behavioral consequences of regret given the close relationship between satisfaction and regret.

Recently, other researches such as those of Tsiros and Mittal (2000) and Delacroix in 2003 were inspired by the works of Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999, 2002) to

deepen the exploration of the consequences of regret on the consumer's post-purchase behavior.

Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) proved that regret (and disappointment) has a direct impact on consumer's behavior, such as the behavior of complaint, of change and word of mouth communication.

The combination of the contributions of this research allows inferring that the feeling of regret can affect, among others, the following behaviors:

- Re-purchasing intentions (changing brand);
- The behavior of complaint;
- Word of mouth communication;
- Inertia;
- The return.

• **Re-Purchasing Intentions: The Behavior of Change**

Zeelenberg and Pieters (2002, 1999) and Tsiros and Mittal (2000) showed that regret has an impact on repurchasing intentions, that is to say, on the tendency to buy again the same brand or the product of the same supplier. Thus, Tsiros and Mittal (2000) showed that if the performances of the rejected alternative are better than those of the chosen alternative the consumer is more likely to change in favor of the rejected alternative in the next purchase occasion that is supposed better. The customers who change do as if they accept the current loss and stop future losses by abandoning any relationship with the firm (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004).

The previous studies also showed that consumers can opt for change even when they are satisfied with their choices.

Zeelenberg and Pieters (2002) considered the behavioral consequences of regret after the consumption of a service and they showed that the change of service provider is a consequence of regret and that in the next purchasing situation the consumer prefers choosing the alternative that was more favorable than the option chosen previously. This is how change "*consisting in bringing an end to the relationship with a service provider, or with a brand and sometimes leading to begin a new relationship with another brand, to realize a service oneself or to stop using the product or service in question*" (Delacroix, 2003), is one among the major behaviors generated in response to experiencing regret.

There are three possible manifestations of behavior change namely:

- Change of supplier, service, brand, product;
- Change in the decision-making way (e.g. self-reliance in obtaining the service shortly);
- Boycott the product or service: not to use it anymore permanently or for a specified period.

The more we regret our decisions the more we tend to opt for change (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2002). Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999) so much approved that relationship between regret and behavior of change so much that they consider it as the obvious and they concluded thereafter a more precise definition of regret "regret is felt as a result to taking into account that the outcome of the alternative option was better what makes the shift towards this option the obvious"

Tsiros and Mittal (2000), on their part specified that regret has a negative influence on repurchasing intentions and that satisfaction has a positive influence on repurchasing intentions. However this

behavior of change can occur as well if the result of a better rejected alternative is known or unknown. The existence of information on the rejected result is not essential (Abendroth, 2000). Thus, research agrees on the existence of a significant negative relationship between regret and repurchasing intentions and to a significantly positive relationship between regret and exchange. And consumers prefer to change after a negative experience and stay inactive and stick to the brand chosen after a positive experience.

- **The Behavior of Complaint:** Individuals opt for behaviors of complaint when they feel certain emotions because of the perception of a certain unconformity (Singh, 1988).

Previous research related to behavioral consequences of satisfaction revealed a direct effect of satisfaction on the behavior of complaint (Singh, 1988; Maute and Forrester, 1993; Tsiros and Mittal, 2000). But on the other hand, no research proved the direct effect of regret on complaint intentions.

Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999, 2002) suggested that regret is not associated to behaviors of complaint, this result is explained by the fact that regret comes out from an error of choice and therefore implies the responsibility of the decision maker. It is unlikely that a decision maker who made an error of choice throws the responsibility of this bad choice on the producer or supplier of the service. So the buyer turns against the outlet to complain to sellers because the performance of the product purchased is below expectations and not because he realized that there is another alternative better than the one already chosen.

Finally, the relationship between the behavior of complaint is direct and significant only with satisfaction and disappointment and not with regret (Delacroix, 2003). Regretting Individuals are more likely to take actions that are rather of

self-reproach. The expression of regret is internal and silent while the expression of dissatisfaction is directed outwards. This is why Tsiros and Mittal (2000) explored the mediating role of satisfaction between regret and the behavior of complaint. Regret has, then, an indirect effect on behavior of complaint via satisfaction.

- **Word of Mouth:** The word of mouth behavior can result from both satisfaction (positive word of mouth) and dissatisfaction (negative word of mouth).

The main research that studied the relationship between regret and word of mouth are those by Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999, 2002). In a first study conducted among students they highlighted a negative, slightly significant, of regret on word of mouth. After they regret, individuals tend not to share their bad decisions with others. In a second study conducted among a representative sample among the Dutch population, they come to a positive effect of regret on word of mouth. This contradiction was explained by Zeelenberg and Pieters by means of the sample. Students were more sensitive to the image they give of themselves, maybe they were also less sensitive to telling their mistakes to others. They do not engage in word of mouth behaviors after a situation of regret unlike the other sample.

Recently Zeelenberg and al (2004) showed that a link exists between the word of mouth behavior and the experience of regret. Individuals tend to use word of mouth communication as a discharging mechanism of negative emotions.

Therefore psychologists assume that we can minimize the negative effect when speaking or writing, they showed that those who engaged with active logic in speaking of their fears to their family for example will feel significantly less regret than those who are passive and prefer to keep all their thoughts silent.

The conclusion that regret generates word of mouth as consequence still remains a hypothesis to be tested in future research because the results are not always in coherence.

- **Inertia:** Inertia is by definition "the absence of an objective-oriented behavior." (Landman, 1993) Inertia seems to be a relevant behavioral response for both regret as well as disappointment.

A state of annoyance can also lead to actions (change of brand, return of the product ...) as well as to inactions (doing nothing: it is the behavior of inertia). Hence there are times when facing a bad result, individuals find themselves without action. In some cases the experience of regret would result passivity and rumination.

Zeelenberg and Pieters (2002, 2004) introduced the notion of inertia by combining this passivity and rumination that is to say, "the tendency to dwell on the past without actually attempting to resolve it" (Landman, 1993) in only one notion which is inertia. They stressed the importance of taking into consideration "inertia" for a better understanding of consumer behavior.

They prove that there is a significant effect of regret on inertia. They noted that in many situations of dissatisfaction, consumers do not react at all and do not adopt any particular behavior in response to the situation. (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2002, 2004) Regret is then supposed to have a significant effect on inertia. In the mind of the consumer inertia does not simply mean "doing nothing", but it refers to "not doing certain things" (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004).

Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) assume the existence of a connection between the word of mouth behavior and inertia. Individuals who have difficulties in accepting failure but who cannot undertake reactions of reparation adopt the word of mouth

behavior to discharge their negative emotions.

- **Return:** Delacroix (2003) assumes that the exchange or the return of the product to the store can be evidence to be included in the behavioral consequences of regret. Delacroix is the first researcher, to our knowledge, who referred to it in his conceptual framework.

The return behavior is often manifested through the return of a product purchased by the customer.

This is a sign of dissatisfaction which can have three different explanations:

- The product is defective;
- The consumer does not like the product ;
- Sales information about this product was erroneous.

However, the return is a sign of dissatisfaction, but it is not necessarily negative. The second possibility is worse, because it implies that the customer was about to accept the product before receiving information that specifies a superiority relative to the competing product.

That regret implies product returning behaviors remains a hypothesis to be tested.

I- Research Methodology

A qualitative approach using individual interviews and focus groups was established in this research. We individually discussed with fifteen persons, men and women, different age groups and social class. This is where we observed reaching the saturation of information. The duration of each interview was around 30mnts. We recorded the discussion.

For the maximum information and to fully understand the impact of regret on consumer behavior we resorted to the

method of focus group. Four focus groups were conducted among a diversified target

in terms of age, gender and socio-professional categories.

GROUPE	Genre	Age	CSP
Group1	Male	17-35	Average-Upper class
Group2	Female	17-35	Average-Lower class
Group3	Male	36-50	Average-Lower class
Group4	Female	36-50	Average-Upper class

We used direct and indirect question through projective technical as word association's technical, completion of sentence's technical, completion of narrative's technical.

Once the discussions were conducted we transcribed in full the speeches carried out in groups and individually. We used the NVIVO 8 to build up our analysis grids.

II- Thematic Analysis

As presented in previous works, regret like any negative or positive emotion has various consequences on the post purchase evaluation of the product as well as on consumer behavior.

A. Post Purchase Evaluation

The analysis of the transcripts shows that the sensation of regret has an obvious consequence on the post purchase evaluation of a product via its impact on satisfaction.

The analysis of meaning units identified in this category allowed us to infer a two-way relationship between regret and satisfaction. On the one hand regret can result in the under evaluation of the chosen alternative and the decline in level of satisfaction felt. Indeed, the interviewees mentioned explicitly or implicitly that the fact of perceiving there is a better result than the

one obtained or a better process the level of satisfaction with the result obtained decreases even in case of compliance between expectations and performances obtained "*...in fact my car is good I'm satisfied about it, but when I saw the new model I do not feel the same level of contentment I felt at the beginning ...*". We conclude then that the evaluation of the alternative obtained is no longer achieved by confrontation between the performances obtained and consumer expectations but also with resort to the performances of the rejected alternative. Regret then negatively influences the post purchase evaluation and reduces the level of satisfaction by the decision in question.

On the other hand dissatisfaction gives rise to regret, because noncompliance between expectations and the result obtained stimulates the individual to compare his decision with respect to other ones rejected. Thus we confirm a two-way relationship between regret and satisfaction, dissatisfaction increases and may even cause regret and regret can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction.

B. Behavioral Consequences

Extensive analysis of respondents' speeches shows that regret can have diverse behavioral consequences namely repurchasing intentions, the behavior of complaint, the word of mouth behavior, inertia, return and abandonment.

a) The Behavior of Change

This category appeared with the highest frequency in the overall corpus. Respondents mentioned that they opt for a behavior of change after regretting a decision. More specifically, regret can have an influence on repurchasing intentions from the same supplier, the same brand or the same product. Regret may also influence the attitude vis-à-vis the brand or the product or the service that can reach the stage of boycotting. Like generating changes in the decision making way later.

First and in a manner very frequent respondents often mentioned that regret has a negative influence on repurchasing intentions from the same brand or the same supplier. Thus they spontaneously mentioned their tendency to switch to the rejected alternative after an experience of regret. *"... next time I will never buy anymore from this lady, even telephone refill..."*

Deepening the analysis of this category we deduced that this negative relationship between regret and repurchasing intentions is conditioned by negative valence. In other words, respondents will opt for behaviors of change in repurchasing intentions except after negative experiences and as a result to noncompliance between the performances obtained and expectations. If it is not the case, and especially when they see themselves responsible for the bad choice the relationship between regret and repurchasing intentions will be neutral. *"... I have no problem with the brand, it was my responsibility that I did not choose the best model..."*

Second, respondents who had experiences of very intense regret mentioned that these experiences may have consequences on their behaviors vis-à-vis the brand that can reach the stage of boycotting. Indeed and especially after negative experiences and rip-off experiences perceived respondents change behavior vis-à-vis the brand or the supplier and decide not to buy anymore from the same brand or the same supplier

and boycott it for an unspecified time. Responses type: *"...I will not buy anymore from this supplier, never; I have been ripped off how I can come back to him, never in my life..."*

Finally respondents often mentioned that lived experiences of regret may influence on the manner to decide later. It was frequently mentioned that regret can use learning to decide well and it is this way we learn from our negative decisions. Several times respondents mentioned they would be more attentive in later decisions, be more rigorous and rational, well invest the effort and not be impulsive.... Thus regret can have positive consequences in order to improve later well being. *".. It was a lesson ..."* *"... he will learn from this bad experience and shortly he will probably be the best choice ..."*

b) The Behavior of Complaint

The opinions identified in this category did not converge. In terms of frequency this category was less pronounced in the overall corpus.

Some respondents affirm that they opt for a behavior of complaint after an experience of regret and others deny it.

The extensive analysis of these evocations allows inferring that those who complain to the supplier often had unsatisfactory experiences. Thus noncompliance between the performances obtained and expectations is a reason that stimulates the complaint to the supplier *"... I go back to the vendor and I negotiate with him ..."*

Nevertheless when regret is felt in cases of satisfaction, respondents assume that it is not possible to go to complain to the provider because they found another alternative better than theirs.

c) The Behavior of Word to Mouth

The meaning units formed on the subject were more or less frequent. However

opinions did not converge. By asking direct questions on the relationship between the behavior of word of mouth and regret respondents affirm it, responses type: "*... yes we talk to others about our regrets ...*" "*... the proof is that we are here and we discuss our regrets ...*" were often mentioned.

However, and via the projective methods of indirect questioning it was inferred that the behavior of word of mouth is not often a consequence of regret.

It may be if the respondent does not perceive himself responsible for the error and especially if the experience is negative. So word of mouth here is a way of discharging negative emotions and of vengeance. "*... Yes I advise my friends not to fall into the same trap ...*" "*... yes I tell it to my daughters, that relieves me ...*".

Nevertheless if the respondent perceives himself responsible for the error and feels he failed in making his decisions he perceives regret as weakness. In this case he refuses to talk about his regret not to display a certain weakness which annoys him in his entourage and that could affect his own image. Several times they say "*... personally I regret nothing ...*" "*... I was crying alone at night I do not want to tell my family so that it reproaches me nothing, this reproach intensifies my pains ...*".

After reading the meaning units we could infer that women engage more in word of mouth behaviors than men and more young people than older people.

Indeed men and elderly have always trends to display a certain image of the mature, the rational the expert and regret is synonymous with failure therefore talking about his regret can affect this image displayed.

d) Inertia

Respondents also mentioned that they adopt a behavior of inertia in response to an experience of regret. Indeed, they frequently

mentioned their tendency to choose (or to be forced) to be passive after regretting a decision. Sometimes regret generates a behavior of inaction in case we decide to do nothing, to accept the decision as it is and to live with the problem without solving it. "*... he accepts failure that's all ...*" "*... I did not do anything, the harm is done ...*"

It is important to note that such behavior does not reduce regret because the psychological imbalance felt was not resolved. And generally this kind of behavior is adopted if no possibility of change is possible and in this case regret lasts longer.

e) Return

The return is a very important consequence of post purchase regret as mentioned by interviewees. Indeed, they often tend to try to resolve the psychological imbalance felt and that by returning the product in order to be reimbursed or to exchange it. Respondents affirmed that it is the immediate behavioral consequence of post-purchase regret "*... the next day I returned the item ...*" "*... to return the product is the best solution ...*" "*... I return the product even if 'there is no guarantee; I try to find a solution with the vendor ...*".

To return the product in order to be reimbursed or to exchange it is a behavioral consequence which resolves the psychological imbalance felt and puts an end to regret and counterfactual thoughts. Nevertheless this strategy is not often possible.

f) Abandonment

To abandon the product is a behavioral consequence frequently cited in respondents' speeches. This category was ranked second in term of frequency.

Respondents affirmed they tend to abandon their regretted decisions. This is performed especially when regret is accompanied with a feeling of dissatisfaction and a flagrant

incompatibility between expectations and performances obtained "... *she thought about making an exchange with a friend ...*" "... *I simply get rid of it ...*"

Thus to get rid of product and to abandon is a way to mitigate regret felt and the feeling of self-blame. Moreover, this consequence often occurs when no solution is possible "... *Yes never to see it and never to remember this trickery of which I was victim! I threw it once and for all to think no more about it ...*"

III- Discussion and Conclusion

- The results of this research converge with those of previous research regarding the impact of regret on satisfaction levels obtained. Indeed as it was proved by Taylor (1997), Inman and al (1997) and Tsiros and Mittal (2000) we show that the rejected alternative has an impact on the evaluation of the chosen alternative. Thus the favorable evaluation of the rejected option will negatively influence the evaluation of the chosen alternative. In other words the level of satisfaction by the chosen alternative decreases in case of regret.
- According to the qualitative research conducted to explore the behavioral consequences of regret, it seems that regret has an influence on **repurchase intentions**. Moreover it was shown that after regretting a decision people often tend to switch to the rejected alternative. Thus regret negatively influence the behavior of repurchase of the same product, or from the same brand or the same supplier. This result was approved by Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999, 2002), Tsiros and Mittal (2000), Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004), Delacroix (2003).
- From a theoretical point of view the impact of regret on the **behavior of complaint** is apprehended through satisfaction (Maute and Forrester, 1993; Tsiros and Mittal, 2000; Delacroix, 2003; Zee 1,3lenberg and Pieters, 1999, 2002).

The qualitative analysis performed clarified to us the relationship between regret and complaint. Indeed it was inferred that people tend to adopt behaviors of complaint to the provider only when they are dissatisfied. Hence regret may engender a behavior of complaint via satisfaction.

- Regarding the relationship between regret and the **behavior of word of mouth** it was both ways. Such a relationship was very little apprehended by previous works (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999, 2002, 2004) but is more clarified by ours.

On the one hand regret may engender a word of mouth behavior. On the other hand no relationship between regret and word of mouth behavior exists. In conclusion, we suggest that individuals tend to engage in a word of mouth behavior after a negative experience more than after a positive experience. This especially when they do not perceive themselves responsible for the error in decision making and especially when they feel ripped off by the vendors. In this case they use word of mouth communication as a mechanism for discharging negative emotions of which we are not responsible.

- **Inertia** was recently introduced by Zeelenberg and Pieters (2002, 2004), which includes the behavior of rumination and passivity or simply the behavior of doing nothing. This research confirmed this theoretical contribution by showing that people adopt behaviors of inertia when no possibility of reparation is possible and when we prefer to accept the situation as it is and assume regret oneself.

- After this exploratory study it seems that people considering the experiences of regret seek **to return** the product in order to be reimbursed or to exchange it. Such behavior allows to solve the psychological imbalance felt and to put an end to regret and to counterfactual thoughts.

Return as a negative consequence was only mentioned by Delacroix (2003). Such a hypothesis is worth to be verified in this work of research especially that it was pronounced much in respondents' speeches.

- Our research is the first to our knowledge that showed that people often abandon their regretted decisions. This consequence often occurs when no reparation solution is possible.

Thus this research shed light on the impact of regret on the future consumers' behavior. We explored the consequences of regret directly and not via satisfaction on the basis that each emotion is distinguished by its own consequences on the individual's behavior.

Nevertheless we analyze the memory of our cognitive and emotional responses from past experiences. The process of memory can bias the results. Future research may benefit from new information technology such as using online studies to examine the actual experiences and not the memories.

It would also be useful to understand whether these consequences differ from one person to another and from one condition to another and how regret might not be that intense to have these behavioral consequences. Deepening on how one can increase management strategies of regret so as to reduce the impact of regret on consumer behavior.

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