

# The effects of social comparison on inaction inertia<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

In this paper, we examine inaction inertia in a social context where the decision-maker is among others who are faced with similar current and past opportunities. We specifically investigate whether the likelihood of taking advantage of a current opportunity after having missed a previous, relatively superior opportunity depends on whether a referent other did or did not take advantage of the previous opportunity. We report results from three studies that provide evidence for the interplay between the past actions and inactions of a referent other and the extent of inaction inertia displayed by a focal decision-maker. We also show that the proximity of the other and the valence of the relationship between the decision-maker and the other influence the extent to which the decision of the other impacts the likelihood to take action. And, finally, we show that regret mediates the relationship between the decision of the other with respect to the past opportunity and the decision-maker's likelihood of taking advantage of the current opportunity. © 2004 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Imagine the following situation. Two acquaintances have been talking about each buying a pair of sports shoes. They like the same brand and design and know the regular price of the product. Suppose they both see a weekly advertisement in the newspaper to buy the shoes at half the regular price. The first individual fails to take advantage of the offer. A few weeks later the shoes are again on sale at a discounted price that is not as low as that during the previous sale. Will the likelihood that the first individual will take advantage of the second sale depend on whether or not the second individual took advantage of the previous sale? Will the likelihood depend on the nature of the relationship between the two individuals?

Research shows that the likelihood that people will take advantage of a good opportunity decreases if they have failed to take advantage of a previous, more attractive opportunity in the same action domain

(Tykocinski, Pittman, & Tuttle, 1995). This decision-avoidance tendency (Anderson, 2003), termed *inaction inertia*, exists in part because people code the current opportunity as a loss with respect to the past opportunity, especially if the discrepancy between the two is large.<sup>1</sup> They often choose not to avail themselves of the current opportunity in an attempt to create distance from the emotions of counterfactual regret that would arise were they to act now and take advantage of a relatively inferior opportunity (Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998).

However, in everyday life, we are aware of not only our own past actions and inactions but also those of others who surround us. Comparisons between our own actions and outcomes and those of others are therefore inevitable (Olson, Buhrmann, & Roese, 2000). These

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<sup>1</sup>As one of the reviewers points out, some researchers consider the fact that this tendency is exhibited only when the difference between the two opportunities is large but not when it is small as central to the definition of inaction inertia. However, we consider inaction inertia as the tendency to avoid taking advantage of a subsequent good opportunity when a previous, better opportunity has been missed, and think of the small versus large difference condition as a matter of operationalization to study the effect.

person-to-person comparisons provide referents for the evaluation of one's own decisions as well as serve as a source of ideas and motivation for improvement (Collins, 2000). While others are ubiquitous in our decision environment, research on inaction inertia has thus far focused on the relationship between one's own past inactions and the likelihood of subsequent actions in the same domain. It has not yet accounted for the fact that decisions may often be made within a social context where the decision-maker may interpret and evaluate her own actions and outcome not in isolation, but in reference to those of others.

In this paper, we examine inaction inertia in a context where the decision-maker is among others who may face similar opportunities but whose actions may be similar to or different from those of the focal decision-maker. We specifically investigate whether the level of inaction inertia from having missed a past opportunity depends on whether a referent other did or did not take advantage of the same opportunity. We report results from three related studies. The findings from these studies extend the literature on inaction inertia to a social context and provide insights into the role of inter-personal comparisons in determining whether or not one takes advantage of a current opportunity after having missed an earlier, superior one. They show how factors such as the valence of the self–other relationship and the proximity of the other moderate the extent and direction of the other's influence on one's inaction inertia. And finally, they show that the intensity of regret plays a mediating role between the decision of the other and the extent of the focal decision-maker's inaction inertia.

### **Inter-personal comparisons, counterfactual thinking, and inaction inertia**

#### *Inaction inertia*

Several streams of literature have explored the relationships among past actions or inactions, emotional responses, such as feelings of regret, and the likelihood of future action within the same action domain. Work on the psychology of regret has examined the relationship between action versus inaction and the intensity of experienced regret. A majority of studies on this issue finds evidence for an *action effect*; that is, bad outcomes achieved through action lead to greater experienced regret than the same outcomes achieved through inaction (Baron & Ritov, 1994; Landman, 1987). In contrast, Zeelenberg, van den Bos, van Dijk, and Pieters (2002) show that decisions following negative prior experiences lead to an *inaction effect* in that people experience greater regret following inaction rather than action. The discrepancy between the two sets of findings is reconciled by positing that greater regret is experienced

following an abnormal decision, and that negative past experiences render inaction abnormal and unjustified (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002).

A related stream of work looks at the influence of past decisions or the resulting emotions on future decisions within the same action domain (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). One of the major issues addressed in this stream of research is the impact of missing an earlier, relatively superior opportunity on the likelihood of taking advantage of a subsequent, good, but relatively inferior opportunity. In a series of studies, Tykocinski et al. (1995) demonstrate that when there is a large difference between the attractiveness of the two sequential opportunities, then missing a previous, superior opportunity has an adverse effect on the likelihood that one will take advantage of the subsequent, inferior one.

While there are several possible explanations for the existence of this tendency, labeled *inaction inertia*, research tends to implicate the feelings of counterfactual regret as a primary cause (Arkes, Kung, & Hutzler, 2002; Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998). Regret is an emotion that is experienced when one imagines how an outcome might have been better if one had acted differently (Zeelenberg, 1999). When people fail to take advantage of a superior opportunity, they frame the subsequent, relatively inferior opportunity as a loss. The loss framing leads to a contrast effect resulting from a counterfactual comparison between how good the current opportunity "is" and how good it "could have been." This comparison engenders feelings of regret that people attempt to minimize by not availing themselves of the current opportunity and avoiding comparing it with the previous one (Tykocinski & Pittman, 2001).

#### *Interpersonal comparisons*

People compare themselves with others for several reasons and these comparisons often affect their state of well-being (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Early work in this area was based on the premise that people engage in inter-personal comparisons to evaluate their own opinions and abilities in order to make better choices in the future (Festinger, 1954). However, subsequent work shows that such comparisons are driven by a number of motivations that may include not only self-improvement, but also self-enhancement (Hegelson & Mickelson, 1995; Wills, 1981). Self-improvement captures the desire to obtain knowledge and information in order to improve future performance. On the other hand, self-enhancement captures the need to preserve favorable emotional states and self-esteem.

A comparison with another person, whether deliberate or unintended, induces a range of rational and emotional reactions. For example, an upward comparison with someone close and superior is often ego deflating and induces envy resulting from discontent with

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