

## Inaction inertia, regret, and valuation: A closer look <sup>☆</sup>

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Received 13 January 2005

Available online 4 January 2006

### Abstract

Inaction inertia is the phenomenon that one is not likely to act on an attractive opportunity after having bypassed an even more attractive opportunity. So far, all published work has assumed a causal role for the emotion regret in this effect. In a series of 5 experiments we found no support for this regret explanation. In these experiments factors that influenced regret did not influence inaction inertia, and factors that influenced inaction inertia did not influence regret. In addition, in two experiments we found evidence that missing the initial opportunity leads to a devaluation of the later offer. We propose that, in some cases, regret may be a by-product of this devaluation, rather than a cause of inaction inertia.

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**Keywords:** Inaction inertia; Regret; Valuation; Decision-making

The things we do have a clear impact on our lives. Not only as a result of the direct impact of these actions on the outcomes we obtain and the well-being that stems from it, but also more indirectly via its influence on subsequent behavior. This particular impact of actions on subsequent behavior is documented by a number of well-known phenomena, such as the sunk cost effect (Arkes & Blumer, 1985) and the foot-in-the-door effect (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). However, Tykocinski, Pittman, and Tuttle (1995) revealed that also actions we forgo can impact on our future behavior. These authors introduced the *inaction inertia effect*: the phenomenon that “forgoing an attractive action opportunity (initial inaction) decreases the likelihood that subsequent action will be taken in the same domain” (Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998, p. 607).

The inaction inertia phenomenon can easily be illustrated by Tykocinski et al.’s (1995, p. 796) fitness center scenario. In this study, participants imagined that they considered becoming a member of a fitness club located 30 min away. Next, they read that they had failed to act on an earlier opportunity, namely becoming member of a fitness center that was located 25 min away (the small difference condition) or one that was located 5 min away (the large difference condition). Participants who failed to become member of the center that was only 5 min away were less likely to join the center that was currently under consideration. Thus, because the initial, more attractive action opportunity is missed (initial inaction), the second less attractive action opportunity is not taken (inertia).

In other publications Tykocinski and Pittman (1998, 2001, 2004; Tykocinski, Israel, and Pittman, 2004) and other researchers (Arkes, Kung, & Hutzel, 2002; Butler & Highhouse, 2000; Kumar, 2004) showed similar effects for decisions about vacation trips, automobile purchases, renting apartments, ski passes, gambles, and etcetera. In all these cases, a large difference in attractiveness

<sup>☆</sup> This research is partly supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (Grants # NWO 400-03-385 awarded to Marcel Zeelenberg and # NWO 452-04-311 awarded to Bernard Nijstad).

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between the initial and second opportunity led to a lower likelihood of taking the second opportunity than did a small difference between the initial and second opportunity.

The most intriguing question regarding inaction inertia concerns the cause of this phenomenon. To our knowledge, all published work on inaction inertia suggests a causal role for the emotion regret. We will review the relevant literature and bring to light that evidence for the regret explanation is mixed. We further present a series of five experiments that systematically tests the regret explanation of inaction inertia and fails to provide support for this explanation. Interestingly, our two final experiments support an alternative explanation in terms of the devaluation of the second opportunity (see Arkes et al., 2002).

### Regret and inaction inertia

Regret is felt after realizing that our present situation would have been better if only we had acted differently (Zeelenberg, 1999). It is a comparison-based emotion (Van Dijk & Zeelenberg, 2005) and can be felt in response to bad decision outcomes and bad decision processes (Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2005). The key element of the regret explanation of inaction inertia is that missing the attractive initial opportunity to act leaves the decision maker with regret, because missing the initial opportunity is considered a loss. Tykocinski et al. (1995), in the general discussion of their original article on inaction inertia, already alluded to an explanation in terms of regret. They wrote: “Because the opportunity in question is now associated with a negative situation, individuals may be reluctant to process additional information that might reactivate this negative experience and provoke processes such as counterfactual regret” (p. 802). As a consequence of this regret, people reject the subsequent alternative promptly and without much consideration. In a later publication Tykocinski and Pittman (1998, p. 608); wrote: “participants in the large difference condition in these studies were probably entertaining upward counterfactual thoughts such as ‘If only I had joined the frequent flyer program before my first trip, by now I could have been close to getting a free ticket.’ Such upward counterfactuals are clearly unpleasant, provoking the experience of regret.” Thus, as it seems, regret over missing the initial opportunity is considered to be prime cause of inaction inertia.

There is indeed some evidence that experiences of regret may influence subsequent behavioral decisions (Ratner & Herbst, 2005; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 1999; see for a review, Zeelenberg, Inman, & Pieters, 2001). But, to ascertain whether regret indeed has explanatory power for the inaction inertia phenomenon, it is relevant to be more specific about how regret might operate. The

regret explanation of inaction inertia implies at least two things. First, missing an initial very attractive opportunity should produce more regret than missing an opportunity that was less attractive. Second, there should be a negative correlation between regret and the likelihood of accepting the second opportunity (more precisely, there should be evidence for statistical mediation). Our reading of the literature revealed that the evidence appears to be mixed with respect to both aspects of this explanation.

Before we turn to this empirical evidence, however, it is appropriate to note that there are two slightly different versions of the regret explanation. One stresses the avoidance of future regret, the other the escape of current regret. Tykocinski and colleagues and Butler and Highhouse (2000) seem to favor the avoidance explanation, whereas Arkes et al. (2002) and Kumar (2004) favor the escape explanation. Importantly, the difference between the two explanations is not always clear, both theoretically and empirically. Tykocinski and Pittman (1998) write in their introduction: “We propose that declining the subsequent action opportunity, with its inferior outcomes, represents an attempt *to prevent* or *to put an end to* the unpleasant psychological experience of regret” (p. 608, emphasis added). When discussing their results they write, “we cannot say which of these two processes, escape or avoidance, motivates inaction inertia” (p. 615). Importantly, although there are two slightly different regret explanations, we would like to note that in both explanations the regret stems from missing the first opportunity: In the one case regret is presently felt, in the other it is anticipated to be felt in the future. Further, according to both explanations, manipulations that amplify regret over missing the first offer, should also amplify the inaction inertia effect. Interestingly, no study to date has actually compared both types of regret within a single experiment. We will make the distinction between escaping current regrets and avoiding future regrets explicit in our Experiments 4 and 5. Let us now briefly review, in chronological order, the studies in which the regret explanation was tested and indicate for each study how regret was assessed.

### Mixed support for the regret explanation

Tykocinski and Pittman (1998, Experiment 4) were the first to explicitly test the regret explanation and to include a measure of regret. Participants in this experiment first read a scenario about booking a discounted trip to Tuscany after having missed a much more attractive or slightly more attractive offer. Next they indicated the likelihood of acting on the current discounted trip. After this they were asked to list the reasons that had led them to their decision. These were coded in different

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