



## Cultural variation in the role of responsibility in regret and disappointment: The Italian case

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### ABSTRACT

Regret and disappointment are decision-making related emotions. We examine the relation between these emotions and responsibility for the decision outcomes in the Italian language. This is interesting because in Italian, there exist multiple words that refer to regret and disappointment. We base our research on earlier studies by Zeelenberg, Van Dijk, Manstead, and Van der Pligt (1998) and Zeelenberg, Van Dijk, and Manstead (2000) and by Ordóñez and Connolly (2000). The results show that several factors (terms, experimental situation and design) influence the relationship between responsibility on the one hand, and regret and disappointment on the other. As such we provide a demonstration of how emotion words and emotional experiences do not always have a one-to-one relationship. We suggest that it is important to take these factors into consideration when we investigate cognitive emotions such as regret and disappointment, which play a pivotal role in economic and consumer behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

Regret and disappointment are negative, cognitively determined emotions that we may experience when a situation would have been better if: (a) we had done something different (in case of regret); or (b) the state of the world had been different (in case of disappointment). Put differently, both are counterfactual emotions. Disappointment and regret are also the two emotions that are most related to the hedonic value of the decision outcomes. This is probably the reason why they have received so much attention from economists as well as psychologists. Early regret research by economists investigated how anticipated regret affects decision making under uncertainty (e.g., Bell, 1982; Loomes & Sugden, 1982). Early psychological research focussed on how negative decision outcomes could exacerbate regret experiences (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). Soon thereafter a similar interest in how disappointment influences decision making arose (Bell, 1985; Loomes & Sugden, 1986).

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### 1.1. How regret and disappointment differ

Regret and disappointment research has been primarily based on the assumption that people have different experiences when they feel regret from when they feel disappointment.

Indeed, although regret and disappointment have the same valence (e.g., Russell, 1980), both are negative emotions which can even occur simultaneously when outcomes deviate from one's expectations, they differ in several important aspects, with different roles and implications in both intrapersonal (e.g., Zeelenberg, Van Dijk, & Manstead, 2000) and interpersonal (e.g., Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2006) decision-making contexts. In intrapersonal contexts, for example, regret is focused on non-obtained goal and promote goal persistence, disappointment may instead results in goal abandonment (Zeelenberg et al., 2000). Instead, in research on customer dissatisfaction, Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999, 2004) found that regret is related to switching behavior whereas disappointment is related to complaining. In interpersonal contexts, one can feel regret for the harm inflicted to someone else and as a consequence regret lead to apologize with the other (Steiner, 2000; Zeelenberg, Van Dijk, Manstead, & Van der Pligt, 1998). Disappointment instead leads us to lower our goals and to make smaller demands in order to minimize its experience in the future (Van Kleef et al., 2006), as it arises when a desired outcome is not achieved (Bell, 1985; Frijda, 1986; Van Dijk & Van der Pligt, 1997). Moreover, regret increases prosocial behaviors, whereas disappointment reduces prosocial behavior (Martinez, Zeelenberg, & Rijsman, 2011a, 2011b; Van Kleef et al., 2006). Given these differential behavioral consequences of regret and disappointment it is relevant to know where such differences come from. In order to answer this question one should pay attention to different antecedents of regret and disappointment and in particular to the responsibility attribution. Indeed, behavioral differences were mainly related to the responsibility attribution (e.g., Zeelenberg, Van Dijk, & Manstead, 1998; Zeelenberg et al., 2000). Despite this, findings in the literature not always converge as we will document later on. In this study we examine whether the different behavioral consequence following negative outcomes for which one is or is not responsible can be ascribed to the words used to investigate them.

### 1.2. Emotion meaning and emotion words

Psychologists tend to see emotion words as indicators of distinct emotional experiences (Sabini & Silver, 2005). Although the phenomenological experience of an emotion is much more important than the label of that emotion (Zeelenberg, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Pieters, 2008), often we use a single label to investigate what that emotion means. But, we cannot expect that a simple label always refers to the same experience. Indeed, emotions are fuzzy concepts (Scherer, 2005) and there is little evidence for a one-to-one correspondence between emotional experience and emotion labels (Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006; Frijda, Markam, Sato, & Wiers, 1995; Scherer, 2005; Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2008). This can help to explain why, despite the research attention for regret and disappointment, some issues, such as their precise relation with responsibility, are still unresolved.

### 1.3. How regret and disappointment are related to responsibility

Several studies showed that regret is more related to self-agency/responsibility and internal attribution, and that disappointment is more related to other-agency/responsibility and external attribution (e.g., Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989; Zeelenberg, Van Dijk, Manstead, et al., 1998). It is noteworthy though, that other studies showed different findings (e.g., Van Dijk, Van der Pligt, & Zeelenberg, 1999).

In particular, the relation of regret to responsibility has received a lot of interest. For instance, Shefrin and Statman (1986) argue that investors prefer to avoid self-blame and responsibility by investing in conventional companies such as IBM. Frijda, Kuipers, and Ter Schure (1989) and Gilovich and Medvec (1994) also recognized responsibility as pivotal to regret: the more responsibility is perceived for a negative outcome, the more regret is experienced. However, some theorists argued against a crucial role of responsibility on regret. For example, Taylor (1985) suggested that regret is also felt when the actor (i.e., "decision agent") does not think him/herself responsible for the negative outcomes. Furthermore, Simonson (1992) suggested that while responsibility and regret are closely related in terms of magnitude and likelihood, still they should be considered two independent constructs because responsibility is not necessary for regret.

Interestingly, Connolly, Ordóñez and Coughlan (1997; hereafter COC) report several experiments that could be interpreted as showing that regret is unrelated to the responsibility for a negative outcome. In each experiment, responsibility was manipulated in two different decision agent conditions: the choice was made by the actor or by a computer. The scenario was based on about the same story in all the experiments. Three students were registered for a required undergraduate course, and assigned to three different sections (A, B and C), taught by three different instructors. Just before the start of the semester, the students had the opportunity to change to another section (high responsibility condition), or they were reassigned to another section by the computer (low responsibility condition). All the students ended in the same moderately good section (B). For one of them, the newly assigned section was the same as before, for another student the newly assigned section was worse than the initial one (the student that moved from section A), and for the third student the newly assigned section was better than the initial one (the student that moved from section C). In their Experiment 1, participants were asked to read the scenario and rate, on an 11-point scale, how happy each student was with the section where he ended up in. Results showed that the highest rating of happiness was given to the student who moved from the worse section,

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