

POST-PURCHASE CUSTOMER REGRET: RESULTS OF THE PILOT STUDY

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Purpose: The main objective of this paper is to present the results of a pilot study on customer regret in a negative purchase situation. The paper presents the context of regret, the causes of negative emotions, how people react afterwards, and suggests themes or relationships worth exploring in more depth in future studies.

Design/methodology/approach: The study took an exploratory, qualitative and quantitative approach. Data was collected through a survey using questionnaires with closed and unstructured open-ended questions. A snowball sample of 70 participants was used to describe the purchase context, emotions experienced and subsequent actions taken.

Findings: The study found that the most common and strongly felt emotions after an unsuccessful purchase were disappointment, dissatisfaction, anger and regret – with regret reported by over 75% of respondents. The main causes of negative experiences were poor product quality, misleading descriptions, delivery problems and poor customer service, most commonly related to online shopping. Strong feelings of regret made it difficult for participants to accept the situation and some reported changing their shopping habits as a result.

Research limitations: Although it is a pilot study, the main limitation of it is the small sample size. Additionally the open-ended questions make it difficult to analyse the data and generalize findings.

Practical implications: Organizations, retailers and marketers should pay attention to key triggers of negative emotions (as poor product quality, misleading online representations, and inadequate customer service) and introduce improvement and preventive actions in these areas.

Originality/value: The paper is based on own surveys and data analyses.

Keywords: consumer regret, post-purchase behaviour, negative consumer experiences, negative emotions.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The decision-making process is inherently characterized by uncertainty, primarily due to the consumer's perceived risk. This risk perception is fundamentally linked to the consumer's concern about the potential for erroneous decisions, which may result in unpredictable adverse outcomes. The magnitude of risk undertaken by consumers during purchase decisions varies significantly and is contingent upon multiple factors. These include the price point of the product, the consumer's familiarity with the product, brand reputation, pre-existing expectations regarding the product, and the emotional context associated with the purchase.

Emotions are integral in the decision-making process. Consumers engage in thousands of daily decisions, frequently selecting products and services that fulfil their specific needs.

A review of the current literature reveals that there has been little attention paid to the study of regret from the customer's perspective. The role of emotions in decision making is well established, with affective reactions proposed to mediate the relationship between decision outcomes and subsequent consumer behaviour. However, gaps remain in fully explaining the complex interactions between individual differences, situational factors and the intensity of regret experienced.

Regret is a negative emotion experienced by consumers during the purchasing process, particularly in the post-purchase period. A number of factors contribute to this phenomenon. Perceived risk is one such factor, with the assumption being that as perceived risk increases, the consumer will experience greater regret for their purchases. Conversely, the consumer's regret affects their intention to repurchase (Ayidin et al., 2016).

The main objective of this paper is to present the results of a pilot study on customer regret in a negative purchase situation. Based on qualitative and quantitative analysis, the paper presents the context of regret, the causes of negative emotions, how people react afterwards, and suggests themes or relationships worth exploring in more depth in future studies.

2. Customer regret as a negative purchase experience

Emotions play an important role in decision making. Consumers are making thousands of decisions every day. They most often choose products and services that meet their specific needs. Each of these decisions entails some consequences, i.e. satisfaction or dissatisfaction, accompanied by various feelings, both positive and negative. Sometimes, consumers experience negative feelings after purchase. As notice Akci et al. (2016) this dissatisfaction can also be called regret. Nevertheless, these two emotional states diverge in a number of ways, and distinguishing between them is crucial for comprehending decision-making and emotion

regulation. Zelenberger and Pieters (2004) argue against incorporating emotions such as regret and disappointment into a general (dis)satisfaction measure (i.e., the valence-based approach), and in favour of a specific emotions approach to customer dissatisfaction. Regret is typically associated with self-blame (Zeelenberg, Pieters, 2004), whereas disappointment is linked with attributing blame to external factors or circumstances beyond one's control (Zeelenberg et al., 1998; Nicolle, 2010).

The aversive nature of regret drives individuals to invest in information that mitigates its occurrence, even at the cost of diminished learning from errors and the potential for heightened regret over the long term (Nicolle, 2010). Empirical research indicates that regret exhibits a positive correlation with dissatisfaction; however, it does not significantly influence switching intention or the propensity for negative word-of-mouth (Lee et al., 2023). As noted by Lee et al. (2023), regret serves as a principal determinant of switching intention, whereas disappointment emerges as a significant predictor of negative word-of-mouth.

Regret is a complex emotional and cognitive phenomenon that has been defined and interpreted by various scholars across disciplines (table 1). Zeelenberger and Pieters (2007) observe that, in contemporary research, regret is studied across a wide range of fields. Examples include marketing, law, organizational behaviour, medicine, cross-cultural psychology, economic psychology, health psychology and neuroscience.

Table 1.
Definitions of regret

| Autor | Definition |
|---|---|
| Sugden (1985) | “the painful sensation of recognising that 'what is' compares unfavourably with 'what might have been'” |
| Landman (1993) Patrick et al. (2003) | “a more or less painful cognitive and emotional state of feeling sorry for misfortunes, limitations, losses, transgressions, shortcomings, or mistakes” |
| Lee, Cotte (2009) | “regret is a comparison of individual's assessment of the outcomes between what has been bought and what could have been bought” |
| Patrick et al. (2003) | “unusually cognitively-laden or cognitively-determined emotion” |
| Akçi et al. (2016) | “a negative emotional state, characterised by regret, may emerge when an alternative that has been forgotten by an individual due to uncertainty or lack of knowledge is compared to the chosen option” |
| Zeelenberg, Pieters, (1999) | “is the emotion that we experience when realizing or imagining that our current situation would have been better, if only we had decided differently” |

Source: own, based on cited literature.

Undoubtedly, feelings like regret are accompanied by negative emotions such as:

- anger, irritation, upset, frustration and disappointment (Biu et al., 2009),
- guilt, shame, self-punishment, depression (Burnett, Lunsford, 1994; Zeelenberger, Pieters, 2004; Biu et al., 2011),
- anhedonic depression, anxious arousal (Roese et al., 2009),
- increased depressive symptoms and self-blame, self-recrimination and reduced self-worth (Sugden, 1985; Lee et al., 2023).

Even if regret can have a range of detrimental consequences for consumers and companies, there are strategies for minimizing its impact and promote emotional wellbeing.

It can be understood through examination of consumer regret maximize customer happiness, minimize post-purchase dissonance, and build long-term trust with buyers.

In considering the perception of regret from a philosophical, economic, and psychological perspective, Landman (1987) has reached the following conclusions:

- Regret, like other emotional experiences is characterised by a substantial cognitive component.
- Regret is associated with higher-order cognitive processes, including critical judgement, induction and decision-making.
- Regret cannot be reduced to cognitive processes alone. It is therefore necessary, though not sufficient, to define regret as a cognitive phenomenon.

The occurrence of consumer regret can be influenced by a number of factors which were presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Factors of regret

| General classification | Regret factors | Autors |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Decision-related factors | Perceived risk – fear of making the wrong choice | Ayidin et al. (2016) |
| | Perceptions of scarcity – Pressure from limited availability | Nasiry, Popescu (2009) |
| | Decision time – Time constraints affecting judgment | Lee, Cotte (2009), Gilovich et al. (1998) |
| | Type of product – Influence of product category on regret intensity | Sameeni et al. (2022) |
| | Level of commitment to purchase – Higher commitment leads to stronger regret if dissatisfied | Ayidin et al. (2016) |
| | Sense of responsibility – self-blame or a desire to make better decisions in the future | Zeelenberg, Pieters (2007) |
| Outcome evaluation factors | Forgone outcome – Awareness of a potentially better alternative | Zeelenberg (1999) |
| | Outcome reviews and process reviews – Assessing both the decision-making process and the result | Barta et al. (2023) |
| | Alternate outcomes – Comparing actual results with hypothetical scenarios | Dankwah (2024), Qingwei Jin et al. (2022) |
| | Counterfactual comparisons – Mental simulations of better possible outcomes | Nicolle (2010) |
| Psychological and emotional factors | Self-blame and responsibility – Holding oneself accountable for the decision | Nicolle (2010) |
| | Internal guilt, external guilt – Feeling personal remorse or societal pressure | Barta et al. (2023) |
| | Trust violation – Regret triggered by perceived deception or betrayal | Sameeni et al. (2022) |
| | Rumination – Repetitive thinking about the regretful decision | M'Barek, Gharbi (2012) |
| Behavioral factors | Impulse purchase – Regret stemming from rushed or emotionally driven decisions | Barta et al. (2023) |
| | Negative reviews – External feedback reinforcing regret | Barta et al. (2023) |
| | Under-consideration regret – Feeling regret due to insufficient deliberation | Lee, Cotte (2009) |
| | Personality factors – risk aversion, impulsivity, perfectionism, or emotional resilience | Vahedi Moakhar et al. (2018) |

Source: own, based on cited literature.

Components showed in table 2 interact to shape the intensity and duration of regret, influencing future decision-making and consumer behaviour.

It is also important to acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between regret and dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction can give rise to regret as a consequence of the discrepancy between expectations and reality, which prompts comparisons with rejected options. Conversely, regret can result in diminished satisfaction due to the fact that the evaluation of the purchased product is not solely based on expectations, but also in comparison to the rejected alternatives (M'Barek, Gharbi 2012).

Even if regret is not something pleasant we can indicate its positive aspects. It can encourage individuals to learn from their missteps and to make more informed decisions in the future (Zeelenberg, Pietrs, 2007; Sijtsema et al., 2022).

3. Customer regret – results of own pilot study

The issue of consumer regret (as well as other negative customer perceptions) is present in research, but not yet adequately exploited. In order to take a closer look at this phenomenon in basic research, we conducted a pilot study. The aim of the study was suggesting research areas and relationships that might be interesting and productive for future research.

Our preliminary study took the form of a questionnaire, in which participants were asked to recall a recent purchase that triggered negative emotions — such as regret, anger, disappointment, or general dissatisfaction. They were free to choose any shopping situation that came to mind, without any restrictions. Respondents then described the context of the purchase, explained what motivated them to make it, identified the emotions it evoked, and shared whether they took any actions afterward. At the end, they were also asked whether they could find any positive aspects in the experience, despite the discomfort it caused.

Questions about these issues were open-ended and unstructured, which allowed us to gather a wide range of responses and uncover conceptual categories that could be useful for further research.

The questionnaires were distributed using the snowball sampling method. In total, we collected 70 fully completed responses. The majority of respondents were women (64.3%), and most were individuals who did not were running a household on their own. The basic characteristics of the sample are presented in Figure 1.

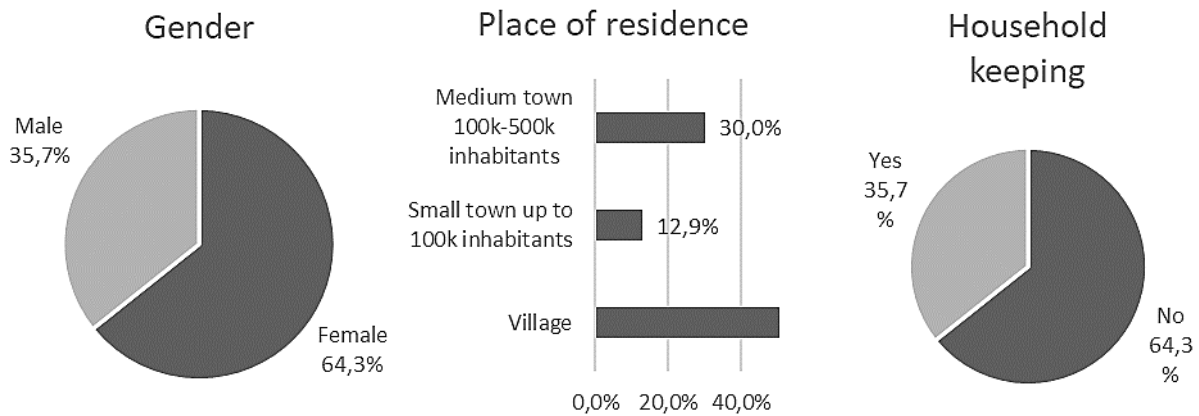


Figure 1. Main characteristics of the sample.

Source: own.

One of the questions in the questionnaire was about the feelings respondents were experiencing after an unsuccessful shopping situation. Respondents were given a choice of 10 feelings: such as dissatisfaction, regret, anger, frustration, disappointment, embarrassment, discomfort, fear, feelings of guilt, helplessness. In relation to each of these feelings, the respondents were asked to indicate whether it accompanied them after a failed purchase and, if so, how strong it was (strength was rated on a scale of 1 weak - 5 strong). The results obtained are presented in Figure 2.

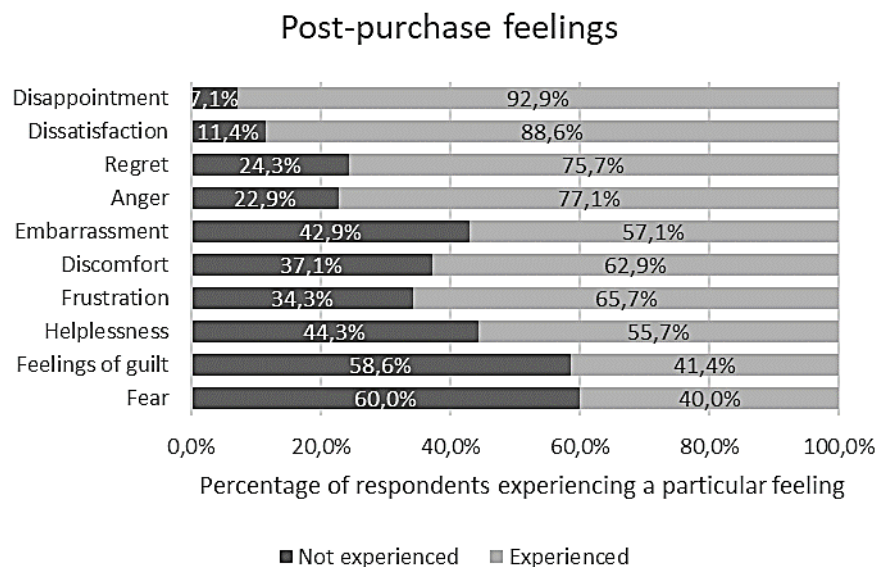


Figure 2. Feelings after a negative purchase situation.

Source: own.

The emotions most frequently reported by respondents in the aftermath of an unsuccessful purchase were disappointment, dissatisfaction, anger and regret. The latter sentiment was expressed by just over 75% of respondents.

By allowing the respondents to rate the strength of their feelings on a scale of 1-5, it was possible to calculate an average score for the intensity of the feeling. The results are presented in Figure 3. The results show that the most strongly felt feelings were similarly disappointment, dissatisfaction, regret and anger. It can therefore be concluded that these four feelings were most frequently experienced by the respondents and that their intensity was the highest.

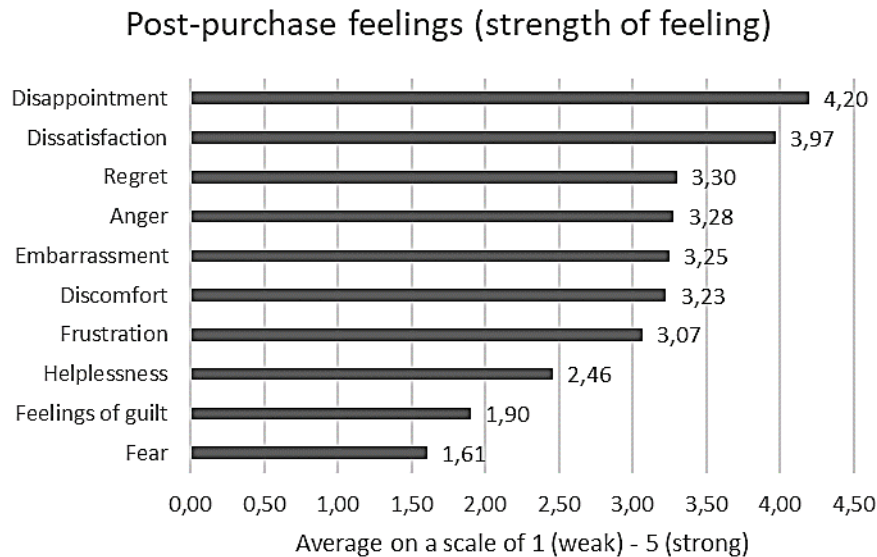


Figure 3. Strength of respondents' feelings after a negative purchase situation.

Source: own.

The majority of respondents (32.1%) rated their level of regret as moderate, 28.1% as strong and 17% as very strong (Figure 4). We decided to take a closer look at the group of customers who declared that they were accompanied by a strong regret related to a failed shopping situation (4-5 on the scale). This sub-sample comprised 24 people (or 34.3% of the total surveyed).

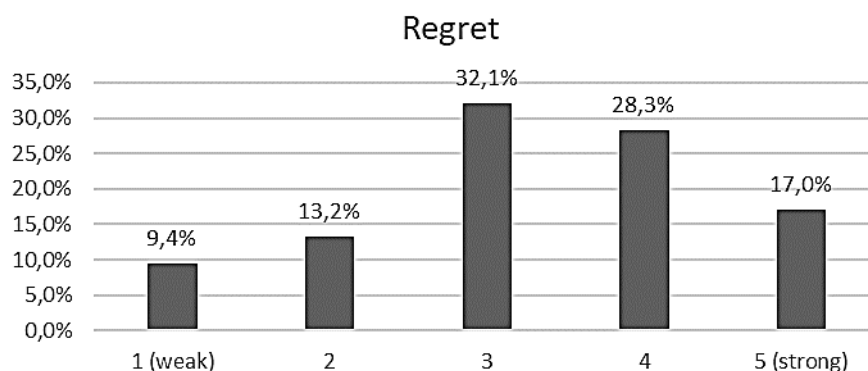


Figure 4. Level of perceived regret according to respondents.

Source: own.

Almost half of these people, 45.8% of the unsuccessful purchase was recent, up to a month, and a sizeable proportion of respondents up to a year. This may suggest that an unsuccessful shopping experience, not far removed in time, may compound the evaluation of negative shopping feelings. The main product categories for these purchases were clothing and electronics, as well as household appliances. Although the respondents were free to choose the item and the purchasing situation, it was these product groups that were most often chosen. The category other, located in third position, included specialised technical or hobby products, among others (Figure 5).

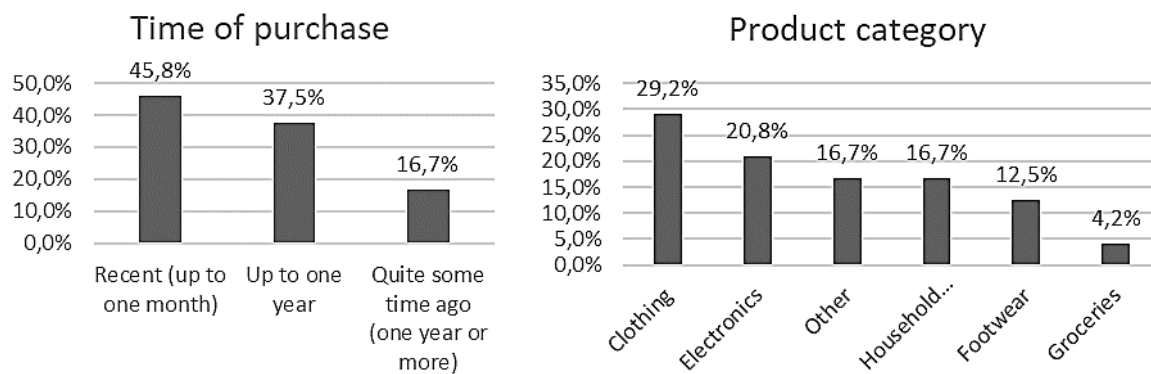


Figure 5. Purchase situation of respondents with strong sense of regret.

Source: own.

Looking at the data illustrated in Figure 6, it can be summarised that this was a product of a brand familiar to the respondent, rather normally priced, and importantly purchased online. Nearly 70% of the respondents in our survey chose a negative shopping situation related to an online purchase to complete the questionnaire.



Figure 6. Purchase situation of respondents with strong sense of regret.

Source: own.

We asked respondents about the reasons for their negative feelings. This was an open question and they were free to shape their statements here. The respondents' answers can be grouped into several categories:

- Quality problems – many products had visible defects (e.g., glue stains, scratched surfaces, damp smell, loose seams), clothing and footwear were often of poor material or construction (falling apart after minimal use).
- Misleading product representation – several respondents complained the actual product looked different from online photos, and was not worth the price, some did not match the description, leading to disappointment or did not meet advertised specifications (such as a lamp that only lit up in one colour or a GPS watch with poor signal reception).
- Delivery and order problems – delayed or cancelled deliveries, lost packages, causing confusion and frustration.
- Failing customer service – respondents described being misinformed, ignored, or even scolded when defects were present, returns and refunds were often denied, especially for used items, even when defects were present.
- Misleading recommendations — in one case, a pharmacist recommended a product unfit for use, resulting in additional costs and inconvenience.
- Price aspects – several customers felt the price was too high for the quality received.

These causes of negative emotions are summarised in Figure 7.

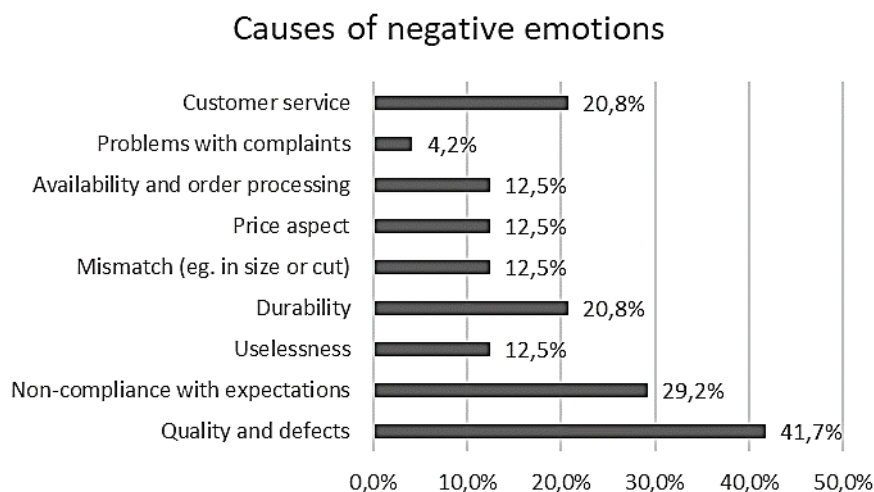


Figure 7. Summarized causes of respondents' negative emotions.

Source: own.

A negative shopping experiences causing feelings of regret allowed some respondents to draw conclusions, positive lessons and insights. These conclusions can be grouped as follows:

- Increased caution and awareness – many respondents reported that the experience made them more cautious and reflective, they plan to think more carefully before buying, some will check product quality more thoroughly (e.g. “I will look at shoes 5 times before I wear them”). They intend to read more reviews, verify sellers, and pay closer attention to product descriptions.
- Lessons about specific brands or product categories – respondents will to be wary of specific brand, product origins or specific vendors.

- Change in shopping habits – several participants expressed changes in how they will shop in the future, e.g. preference for shopping in physical stores, avoiding foreign websites or unknown platforms.
- Better understanding of personal needs and expectations – some of survey participant learned more about their own expectations or needs (e.g. knowing which features matter in a sports watch).
- Becoming more aware of the type and quality of products they want to invest in.
- Consumer rights – acknowledging that product failure wasn't their fault, and feeling validated by receiving compensation or apologies.

Unfortunately some respondent (29.2%) did not see any positive outcomes. This information in quantitative terms is collected on Figure 8.

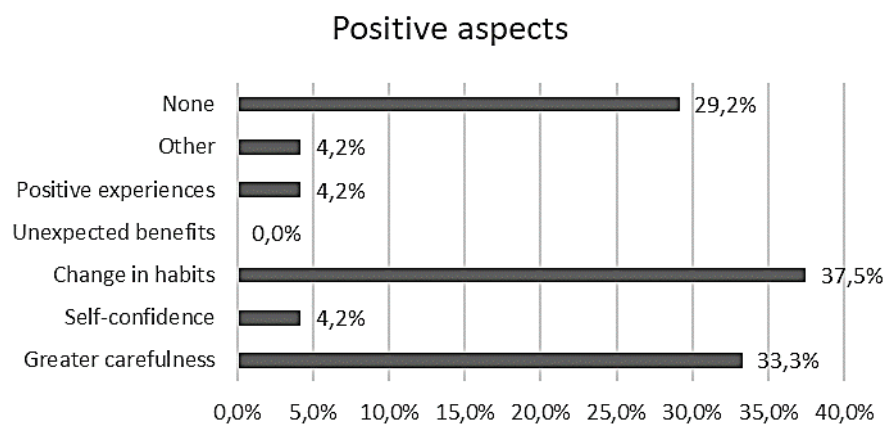


Figure 8. Positive outcomes of the described purchase situation.

Source: own.

In the last question, we asked respondents to declare on a scale from -3 (not at all) to +3 (completely this one) to what extent they accepted the described negative purchasing situation. The results are presented in Figure 9.

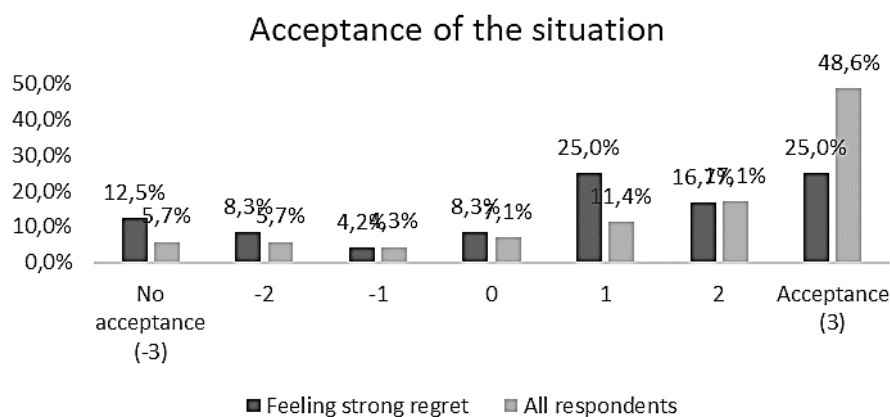


Figure 9. Acceptance of the the situation in the group of people declaring strong grief compared to all respondents.

Source: own.

At point -3 (no acceptance), regret declaring respondents constitute 12.5% of the sample, in comparison to a 5.7% of all respondents. Conversely, 25% of the strong-regret group fully accepted the situation (score 3), in contrast to nearly half (48.6%) of all respondents who reported full acceptance.

This suggests that respondents who experienced strong regret over their negative shopping experience were twice as likely to not accept the situation at all and half as likely to fully accept it compared to the broader group. This finding underscores the notion that strong emotional reactions, such as disappointment or frustration, hinder the process of rationalising or accepting a negative consumer experience.

4. Findings and conclusions

Regret encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions, involving self-recrimination, guilt, and the realization that a different choice could have led to a better outcome. It involves evaluations of both the outcome (missed opportunities, changing significance) and decision-making process (insufficient or excessive consideration). Regret can be anticipated or experienced, and it involves personal responsibility and comparisons between options. Regret has both maladaptive (emotional distress) and adaptive (learning-driven) components, influencing future decision-making and personal growth.

The key findings of our study show that the most common and intense emotions following a negative shopping experience were disappointment, dissatisfaction, anger and regret, with regret reported by over 75% of respondents. These negative experiences were most commonly associated with online purchases of clothing, electronics and home appliances, typically from familiar brands at normal prices. The main causes of regret included poor product quality, misleading product representations, delivery problems, ineffective customer service and unmet expectations of price and value. While many participants reported increased caution and changes in shopping behaviour as positive outcomes, nearly 30% found no benefit from the experience. Importantly, those who felt strong regret were less likely to accept the situation, suggesting that high emotional intensity hinders rationalisation and acceptance of negative purchase outcomes.

Future studies should deeply explore consumer regret across different contexts, measure the relationships between specific causes of regret and consumer behaviour, such as return rates or brand switching, show how regret influences consumer decision-making and whether this influence is permanent or whether it changes, e.g. fades, over time.

These findings can be valuable for wide range of stakeholders. Retailers can understand what triggers strong negative emotions can improve product quality, enhance the accuracy of online presentations, streamline delivery logistics, and optimize after-sales service. Online

marketers and sellers should be aware that regret often emerges when products do not live up to their online depictions. Improving the accuracy of online presentations can build more trustworthy digital environments and foster a better shopping experience. For consumer behaviour researchers and scholars our work provides a framework for exploring consumer regret in future. The results of this preliminary research can inspire the exploration of new research areas related to customer regret and the formulation of regret models in these areas.

Presented finding offer some practical implications. Organizations, retailers and marketers should pay attention to key triggers of negative emotions (as poor product quality, misleading on-line representations, and inadequate customer service) and introduce improvement and preventive actions in these areas. Furthermore, the findings show the importance of building proper relations in online shopping, suggesting that transparent communication, easy return policies, and reliable delivery can significantly reduce negative emotion, like regret.

To make the results presented more practical, we can suggest several implementation strategies. Retailers and sellers should train customer service teams to proactively reach out to customers after purchase, especially for higher-value items or categories where problems are common, such as clothing and electronics. As research has shown, problems in these areas mainly escalate to consumer regret. Internet detailers should improve product representation in the online environment by using high-quality images, videos and detailed descriptions that accurately represent products. They should include customer reviews and FAQ sections to provide a comprehensive view of the product. It is important to improve and develop return policies – simplify the returns process, provide clarity on terms and conditions and consider offering free returns for faulty or misrepresented products. Clear and fair return policies can alleviate customer grief and build trust.

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