Threat Perception in Product Harm Crises: Do Older Consumers Feel More Vulnerable?

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Previous research indicates that older consumers have a reduced capacity to engage in primary control behaviors to counteract threats, and thus compensate with secondary control processes by perceiving negative events as less threatening. Two studies were conducted to examine control processes in older versus younger consumers in relation to a product harm crisis. Results indicated that older consumers perceived themselves as less threatened by the crisis in terms of vulnerability and severity, placed less blame on the company, and had stronger intentions to purchase and recommend the company’s products in the future.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Age-related declines in physical and cognitive abilities are well-documented (Schneider and Rowe 1991). These declines result in older adults having a reduced ability to actively cope with problems and being more susceptible to potential threats than younger consumers (Heckhausen 1997). Although there is ample evidence that older adults experience an increase in real susceptibility to threat, there is relatively little evidence indicating whether perceptions of susceptibility to threat increase similarly with age. The present research attempts to examine this issue within a marketing context by (a) examining how older consumers evaluate potential threats in relation to negative marketing events in the form of product harm crises, and (b) studying how threat perceptions influence marketing outcomes for involved companies.

The existing literature provides two competing predictions regarding how age will relate to perceived threat. The most straightforward prediction is that real increases in susceptibility to threat in older adults should be paralleled by increases in perceived susceptibility to threat. There is substantial research indicating not only that older adults experience real decline in many domains, but also that people of all ages are aware that mental, physiological, and psychological decline is associated with old age. Furthermore, these declines are most prominent in the physical domain, which has been the focus of most research on product harm crises.

However, more recent research suggests that this common sense hypothesis might not be correct and that instead older adults might view themselves as less susceptible to threat than younger adults. This alternative hypothesis is based on Heckhausen and Schulz’ (1995) proposition that there are age-related differences in primary versus secondary control processes. Primary control processes are typically active and outwardly directed, and represent an effort to change the present or future environment to fit one’s needs or desires (e.g., by avoiding threatening circumstances, for example by not purchasing a dangerous product); secondary control processes are primarily cognitive and inwardly directed and involve psychological adjustment to accept existing circumstances as they are (e.g., altering perceptions to perceive a situation as less threatening, for example by viewing the danger associated with a product harm crisis as being exaggerated by the media). Research suggests that, whereas the ability to engage in primary control declines across the adult lifespan, secondary control becomes more prevalent with age. Secondary control involves altering one’s own perceptions so that a problem (which typically can’t be resolved via primary control processes) is viewed as less threatening and thus more acceptable to the individual. Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers 1975) describes threat perception as being derived from the perceived severity of a negative event and perceptions of personal vulnerability to negative outcomes associated with that event. Thus, reductions in perceptions of severity and personal vulnerability would be evidence for a stronger impact of secondary control processes on judgments related to a product harm crisis.

Based on the proposition that older adults have a reduced ability to engage in threat protection via primary control and thus compensate with increased secondary control, our hypotheses are that, compared to younger adults: (1) Older adults will engage in less primary control, meaning that they will have stronger intentions to purchase or recommend a product associated with a product harm crisis; (2) older adults will engage in more secondary control, meaning that they will perceive themselves as less personally vulnerable and a product harm crisis as less severe; and (3) older adults will place less blame on the company involved in a product harm crisis due to lower threat perceptions based on the defensive attribution hypothesis (Robbenholt 2000). A theoretical model is also proposed in which age predicts secondary control (perceived severity and vulnerability), secondary control predicts blame to the company, and blame to the company predicts purchase and recommendation intentions toward the company’s products.

Two studies were conducted to test these hypotheses. In each study, older versus younger consumers were presented with a scenario describing a product harm crisis (involving televisions in study 1 and coffee in study 2). After reading the scenario, participants completed measures of their perceptions of the severity of the product harm crisis, their perceptions of their own vulnerability in relation to the crisis, the degree to which they blamed the company for the crisis, and their intentions to purchase and recommend the involved company’s products in the future.

In both studies, the hypotheses were fully supported: Compared to younger adults, older adults had lower perceptions of severity and vulnerability in association with the product harm crisis, blamed the company less, and had stronger intentions to purchase and recommend the company’s products. The theoretical model was also supported in both studies, with one exception: For the television crisis (study 1), blame to the company was predicted by perceived severity but not by perceived personal vulnerability. For the coffee crisis (study 2), however, perceived personal vulnerability was a stronger predictor of company blame than perceived severity. Thus, although older participants exhibited stronger secondary control processes with regard to both aspects of threat perception in both studies, this result suggests that different aspects of secondary control might be more relevant under different circumstances.

In conclusion, we find evidence that, contrary to the perceptions of many in the general public regarding the elderly, real increases in susceptibility to a threat due to aging are not associated with increases in consumers’ perceptions of the danger posed by that threat. In fact, the present results suggest that perceptions of threat related to a product harm crisis actually decrease with age. Older adults appear to focus less on the negative information associated with a crisis, and are thus less likely to incorporate this negative information into their attitudes and preferences. This research provides unique insights to marketers relative to a growing and under-researched segment of the world population.

REFERENCES


