Impact of Age on Repeat Choice and Attitude Certainty

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What is the impact of age on attitude certainty? Visser and Krosnick (1998) observe an inverted U-shaped impact of age on attitude strength: Compared to mature respondents (40 to 60), older respondents are more likely to change their attitude following counter-argumentation. This is in contrast with results on brand choice, in which older consumers have a higher probability of repeating the same choice. To explore this apparent contradiction, we contrast rooted attitudes that respondents have developed over the years (political attitudes leading to voting intentions at a presidential election) against rootless attitudes developed online about a previously unknown topic.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We investigate the impact of age on repeat choice and attitude certainty. This research is motivated by the apparent contradiction between two series of previous results on the impact of age: impact on attitude strength, impact on repeat purchase.

Visser and Krosnick (1998) study attitude strength in the context of a new topic (e.g., a fictitious foreign conflict), for which respondents, by definition, have to develop online, during the interview, a new attitude (for or against a US intervention in the conflict), and to take a position on the spot. Researchers then supply additional "information:" Each respondent is told that the United Nations have a position opposite to the one s/he has just taken, and asked whether s/he holds to her/his first attitude or changes it.

Visser and Krosnick find an inverted U-shape impact of age on attitude strength. Attitude stability is at its maximum for mature persons (between 40 and 60), while both younger and older respondents are more likely to change their position.

This seems to contradict results on age-related differences in brand choice. For example, Lambert-Pandraud, Laurent, and Lapersonne (2005) find that choice stability increases monotonically across age ranges: Older car buyers are more likely to consider and repeat purchase the previous car brand, and less likely to explore alternative choices.

Could this apparent contradiction be due to the type of attitude under investigation? Visser and Krosnick investigate, after a few minutes, the stability of a rootless attitude: Since the foreign conflict is fictitious, the respondent does not bring a previous attitude, let alone a network of related attitudes, to the survey. In contrast, Lambert-Pandraud et al. investigate stability towards the previous car brand, for which consumers have likely developed a rooted attitude, based on daily usage over several years, and on their lifelong experience with cars.

Besides, are attitude stability and attitude certainty correlated?

Study One

In contrast with Visser and Krosnick, we therefore analyze a domain in which respondents have had lifetime opportunities to develop rooted attitudes: A presidential election. We perform a secondary analysis of survey data collected in the two months preceding the French 2007 presidential election (n=17,622). We analyze respondents’ certainty about their planned vote (a binary answer to “Is your choice final or can it still change?”) in relationship with choice stability (whether the planned 2007 vote is the same as at the previous [2002] presidential election, coded by the authors on the basis of separate questions on the planned 2007 vote and on the previous 2002 vote).

Age has a very significant positive impact on choice stability. The probability of a repeat vote increases linearly across age ranges. Attitude stability and certainty are correlated. At any age, respondents who plan to vote in 2007 as they voted in 2002 are more likely to be certain about their future vote (“My choice is final”) than respondents who plan to change their vote.

However, we find contrasted age-related patterns: There is indeed a monotonic growth in certainty among respondents who plan to vote in 2007 as they voted in 2002, but an inverted U-shape relationship for respondents who plan to change their vote.

This suggests a possible avenue to reconcile the apparent contradiction described above. One may distinguish the impact of age on attitude certainty, depending on whether the current attitude remains consistent with the attitude held in the past (in our case, with the 2002 vote), or the current attitude is new, in the sense of either differing from the attitude held in the past (in our case, changing the vote) or being formed online, in answer to a new topic (as in Visser and Krosnick).

Study Two

Study One and the Visser and Krosnick study (1998) are not comparable: different subjects in different countries, under different circumstances, using different questions to measure attitude certainty. In Study Two, we therefore obtain more comparable data on rootless and rooted attitudes by comparing answers provided by the same respondents in the same study, using the same questions to measure certainty.

We interview US respondents (n=245 respondents in an Internet survey) about one week before the 2008 presidential election. For the rooted attitude, we replicate Study One by asking their voting intentions. For the rootless attitudes, we ask for their online attitudes towards two minor fictitious stimuli (a healthcare program about a benign Mediterranean skin disease, and a program by Volkswagen to develop an environment-friendly car in France). On each of the three attitudes, we measure respondent confidence with the same question.

As in Study One, older respondents have a higher likelihood of planning to vote for the same party at the 2008 presidential election as at the 2004 presidential election. Also, older respondents have a higher confidence in their planned vote, and the increase is monotonic. However, we find no significant correlation of confidence with the intention to vote for the same party as in 2004.

In contrast, in agreement with Visser and Krosnick, we observe, for each of the two online attitudes, an inverted U-shaped impact of age on confidence. The highest average confidence in their attitude is obtained among mature respondents (between 55 and 60 years of age). Older respondents display a lower average confidence.

Discussion

Combining both studies, we find that respondent age has a significant impact on consumer confidence, but that the shape of the relationship differs, depending on the attitude under study. For voting intentions, which are rooted in the respondents’ political attitudes developed over their lifetime, we find that average consumer confidence (measured on a confidence scale, or by the likelihood of stating “My choice is final”) increases monotonically across older age ranges. For online attitudes, in contrast, we replicate Visser and Krosnick (1998) finding that, for respondent confidence in an online attitude just developed about a previously unknown topic, the impact of age on confidence follows an inverted U-shaped relationship.
Further research could replicate these findings for other consumer decision domains, and investigate mediating variables between age and observed results.

REFERENCES