Old, But Gold! the Role of Aging Stereotypes on Consumers’ Purchase Intentions in Second-Hand Marketplaces

Felipe  Pantoja, IESEG School of Management (LEM-CNRS), France
Marat Bakpayev, University of Minnesota, Duluth, United States
Patricia Rossi, IESEG School of Management (LEM-CNRS), France
Sukki Yoon, Bryant University, United States

This research examines the impact of sellers’ age on consumers’ purchase intentions in online second-hand markets. Drawing on stereotypes and consumer contagion literature, we show a consistent preference for products pre-owned by senior (vs. young) sellers and investigate the mediator role of sellers’ perceived interpersonal warmth on the referred relationship.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The global population is aging. Due to a combination of increased life expectancy and reduction in fertility rates (Lutz et al. 2008), the percentage of people over 60 years old is expected to double in the next few years (United Nations 2013). Therefore, marketers should be attentive to this new growing market of senior consumers.

The online presence of seniors is rapidly expanding as well. In Europe alone, Internet usage has doubled among people over 65 years old (Edwards et al. 2015). The “silver surfers” are increasingly subscribing to online social networks (Choudrie and Vyas 2014) and also turning to Internet to earn additional income (Winch 2014).

Online second-hand markets are one of the fastest growing markets (Walia and Zahedi 2013). Websites such as Ebay and Amazon are just a few examples. Such markets are peculiar to the extent that available products are pre-owned by someone that buyers rarely know. Evidence suggests that people perceive certain invisible properties of previous owners to be transferred to goods (Kapitan and Bhargave 2013).

Age is one of the three primary dimensions of interpersonal categorization (North and Fiske 2012). Previous research shows that consumers often use stereotypes as heuristics to judge elderly people (Fiske et al. 2002; Cuddy, Norton and Fiske 2005), both in positive (e.g. warm) and negative ways (e.g. less competent) (Couto and Koller, 2012). In addition, the theory of consumer contamination (Argo, Dahl and Morales 2006, 2008) suggests that a physical contact between a product and a given source (e.g. person) can contaminate the referred product with the source’s essence (Argo, Dahl and Morales 2006, 2008).

In this scenario, does the seller’s age has an impact on consumers’ purchase intentions toward a second-hand product? Considering the mixed-nature of age stereotypes, to what extent does an elderly seller contaminate their used goods? Does the contamination lead to a positive or negative outcome in terms of purchase intentions?

In study 1, we primed participants with a picture of either a young or an old seller of a second-hand product. Participants saw the same product and the same details for the seller (e.g. seller rating). We used purchase intentions as the dependent variable. A one-way ANCOVA using physical attractiveness as a covariate shows a significant main effect of age condition on purchase intentions. Participants showed higher intentions to purchase the armchair when the seller was an old (vs. young) lady.

In study 2, we use a similar procedure as in study 1. To control for seller attractiveness, in this study we use a written description of the seller. Again, we used purchase intentions as the dependent variable and included interpersonal warmth as a mediator. The results suggest a positive effect of seller’s age on purchase intentions toward a second-hand product. Using a 5,000 bootstrapped samples (Preacher and Hayes 2008; Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010), results show that age has a marginally significant effect on purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.37; t(114) = 1.88, p = .06$). Additionally, the effect of interpersonal warmth on purchase intention is significant ($\beta = 0.38; t(114) = 2.68, p < .01$). Finally, when controlling for interpersonal warmth, age no longer has a significant impact on purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.28, t(114) = 0.93, p > .3$), which confirms that interpersonal warmth mediates the effects of age condition on purchase intentions (95% CI 0.005 to 0.378). These findings suggest that consumers have higher intentions to purchase second-hand goods that were pre-owned by senior (vs. young) people.

While referring to the warmth dimension in elderly stereotyping, it is interesting to test boundary conditions. Prior research connects social exclusion with warmth-seeking behavior (Zhong and Leonardelli 2008; Li and Liao 2013). When a person is feeling lonely and socially excluded, he/she literally experiences interpersonal coldness, which leads to a need for warmth (Zhong and Leonardelli 2008). Thus, in situations where consumers feel socially excluded, it is expected that senior sellers of second-hand products will be preferred because they would be perceived as adding a warmth dimension to the product. That is, because social exclusion prompts consumers to search for social warmth, an older seller with a stereotypical image of warmth would better fulfill the need of socially excluded buyers. In contrast, those who do not feel socially excluded are not likely to be in a great need for warmth.

Study 3 uses a 2 (seller age: young vs. old) x 2 (social exclusion: excluded vs. control) between-subjects experimental design. The experimental procedure was very similar to the one of study 1 (using pictures). To manipulate social exclusion, we asked participants to take part in an unrelated task, which consisted in the “Southampton Loneliness Scale” (Wildschut, Sedikides and Cordaro 2011). Once the participants completed this task, we gave them their Loneliness Score. Participants received either a negative result (informing that they scored above the average on loneliness compared with the other undergraduates) or a positive result (informing that they scored very low on loneliness compared with the other undergraduates). Then, participants gave their opinion about a second-hand product (an armchair) that was being sold on Ebay. We used purchase intentions as the main dependent variable. A two-way ANOVA showed a marginally significant interaction between sellers’ age and social exclusion conditions on purchase intentions ($F(1,106) = 3.41, p = .068$). When feeling socially excluded, participants showed higher intentions to purchase the armchair when the seller was an old lady ($M_{young} = 1.50; M_{old} = 2.06; F(1,106) = 3.02, p = .085$). However, when participants do not feel socially excluded (i.e. control condition) the preference for the old seller dissipates ($M_{young} = 1.98 and M_{old} = 1.71; F(1,106) = 0.76, p = NS$).

Finally, across three studies we provide preliminary evidence that the age of the seller in second-hand markets has an important role on consumers’ purchase intentions. Specifically, the results show higher purchase intentions toward a product that was pre-owned by a senior (vs. young) seller and perceived interpersonal warmth mediates this effect.

REFERENCES

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