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The effects of self-concept connection, partner quality and trust on commitment in the elderly segment

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Abstract

The changing demographics and the aging of population are affecting the age composition of consumer markets. Older adults constitute a rapidly growing demographic segment but stereotypes persist about their consumer behavior. Prior working have generally interested in older adults decline and compared to that of younger consumers. The analyses of 210 elderly reveal significant behavior differences between “men” and “women” and the “younger elderly” and “older elderly” women in relationship among self-concept connection, partner quality, trust and commitment.

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1. Introduction

Long term relationships between a firm and its customers provide many benefits for both the firm and the customers. Studies have found that firms practicing relationship marketing indeed enjoy increased competitiveness, reduced transaction reduced uncertainty, improved financial performance, and increased marketing productivity.

The global population is both aging and living longer due to improvements in health care and nutrition. Age 50 + consumers are a growing economic force that will transform multiple industries unlike any prior

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demographic shift in recent history. Yet most companies continue to design for and advertise to the young. To capture value from the over age 50 market, managers will have to master new skills and lead the transformation of products and strategy to adapt to a changing marketplace (Pak & Kambil, 2006).

Understanding older adults' product consumption behavior is of high importance to consumer and marketing research. Prior studies have mainly focused on older adults' cognitive decline and compared their behavior to that of younger consumers. A neglected area of research has been older consumers' brand attachment that is associated with potential differences between consumers in their fifties and in their seventies. In this article, the authors provide insights into the under-researched field of elderly women and men's brand attachments. Drawing on socioemotional selectivity theory, a shift towards emotional aspects in brand relationships is proposed.

In this article, the authors contend that elderly consumers are not only different by gender but that distinguishing between *younger elderly* and *older elderly consumers* illuminates current understanding of the aging process and its implications for marketing. Several studies suggest differences in emotion regulation across younger elderly and older elderly consumers that have marketing implications. All studies focus *differences in construct mean scores* (e.g., higher vs. lower variety seeking, higher vs. lower liking of informative vs. emotional advertising, higher vs. lower repurchase intent). To extend this view, the focus in this paper is on *differences in brand attachment processes* (e.g., higher vs. lower influence of brand trust on brand commitment) across younger elderly and older elderly consumers.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Socioemotional selectivity theory (SST)

Socioemotional selectivity theory is the theory that, as individual ages, he becomes more selective about how he spends resources such as time and money. Instead of trying to broadly spend life in pursuit of varied experiences or simple pleasures, he uses his resources on activities and items that have more emotional importance. This theory is largely based on what motivates different individuals at different ages. Socioemotional selectivity theory makes substantial claims about changes in social life, spending habits, memory, and goals across different age groups. According to socioemotional selectivity theory, goals are always set in temporal contexts. When people perceive time as expansive, as they typically do in youth, they tend to focus on preparing for the future. They value novelty and invest time and energy in acquiring information and expanding their horizons. In contrast, when people perceive boundaries on their time they direct attention to emotionally meaningful aspects of life, such as the desire to lead a meaningful life, to have emotionally intimate social relationships, and to feel socially interconnected. Because old age heralds a natural ending, socioemotional selectivity theory predicts age-related changes in motivation. Importantly, however, the theory does not hold age itself as causal; similar changes in motivation are observed in younger people suffering from life-threatening illnesses. However, because of the strong association of advanced age and mortality, age differences in motivation emerge. Socioemotional selectivity theory posits that people place increasing value on emotionally meaningful goals as they get older, and invest more cognitive and social resources in obtaining them. This shift in motivation toward emotional goals promotes emotion regulation (control over the emotions that an individual experiences and expresses). To the extent that people are motivated to prioritize goal-relevant information, attention to and memory for emotional information is expected to vary by age (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005).

According to socioemotional selectivity theory, prioritization of personal goals is influenced by the perceived amount of time remaining in one's life. When time is perceived as more limited, which occurs

with aging, motivation is geared more toward deriving emotional meaning from life and less toward expanding one's horizons. As a result of perceiving time as more limited, older adults are predicted to show a greater focus on goals related to emotions and emotion regulation (e.g., *not depend on someone else's feelings*), generativity (e.g., *help others to find their purpose in life*), and social selection, which is defined by an increased focus on close relationships—in other words, a narrowing and intensifying of social contacts (e.g., *spend more time with my wife*). In contrast, as a result of perceiving time as being more expansive, younger adults are predicted to show a greater focus on goals related to knowledge acquisition or novelty (e.g., *learn to speak Spanish*) (Penningroth & Scott, 2012)

According to Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory, the subjective sense of remaining time until death plays a critical role in human motivation, cognition, and emotion because it affects the ranking and execution of behaviors which are geared toward specific goals. These goals can be either knowledge-related or emotion-related (Jahn et.al, 2012).

Key to this SST thesis is that a shift in chronological age plays a significant part in as far as adult selecting and investing resources in meaningful goals and activities is concerned. This theory partly postulates that as chronological time horizons shrink, adults tend to be particular about the knowledge-oriented goals for knowledge acquisition, career planning and social relationships and other endeavors that will pay off in the future (Pansiri et.al, 2012). According to SST, time perspective, not chronological age, drives these changes in adulthood. Because of the inextricable association between chronological age and perceived time left in life, age-related motivational patterns are apparent. However, theoretically, age does not play a causal role. Empirical evidence supports this contention. Under conditions that prime endings, similar goal changes are observed among younger adults as well. For example, young males with symptomatic HIV infections who are approaching the end of their lives mentally represent social partners in ways similar to people in old age. When time in life is limited, younger and older people alike pay more attention to the emotional aspects of situations (Löckenhoff & Carstensen, 2004).

2.2. Brand attachment

“Brand attachment is defined as *the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self*. Consistent with attachment theory this bond is exemplified by a rich and accessible memory network (or mental representation) involving thoughts and feelings about the brand and the brand's relationship to the self. Two critical factors reflect the conceptual properties of brand attachment: *brand-self connection* and *brand prominence*” (Park et.al, 2010).

On a general level, actual self-congruence has the greatest impact on emotional brand attachment. Product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness increase the positive impact of actual self-congruence but decrease the impact of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment (Malar et.al, 2011).

Brand attachment is *strength of the cognitive and emotional bond connecting the brand with the self*. This definition involves two unique and essential elements (1) connectedness between the brand and the self and (2) a cognitive and emotional bond, the strength of which evokes a readiness to allocate one's processing resources toward the brand. We elaborate on each element below.

Brand-self connectedness reflects the extent to which the brand is linked to the self, given its essentiality in facilitating utilitarian, experiential and/or symbolic needs (goals) (Park et.al, 2006).

The intensity of an attachment has typically been inferred from the before mentioned attachment behaviors, particularly in the context of mother-child relationships. The use of these observational

indicators is understandable as infants and small children are unable to articulate attachment-related feelings (Thomson et.al, 2005).

The attachment concept has been studied in numerous contexts (romantic relationship, friendship etc.) and from varying perspectives (e.g., individual difference vs. relationship perspectives). We approach attachment from the perspective of an individual's *relationship* with the brand as the attachment object. In this context, we define attachment as *the strength of the cognitive and affective link between a consumer and a brand*. It denotes a psychological *state* of mind in which a strong cognitive and affective bond connects a brand to an individual in such a way that the brand is an extension of the self. This relationship perspective differs sharply from a trait perspective in which attachment reflects an individual difference variable characterizing one's systematic style of connection across relationships (i.e., secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant styles). Statements like "mine," "part of me," "reflecting me," "expressing me," "an extension of myself," "aesthetically appealing to me," or "emotionally relating to me" all reflect different aspects of a brand-self connection (Park et.al, 2007).

Commitment is as an essential ingredient for successful long-term relationships. Developing a customer's commitment in business relationships does pay off in increased profits, customer retention, willingness to refer and recommend. Relationship marketing literature suggests customer satisfaction and trust as major determinants of commitment. Recently, practitioners and scholars have identified customer value as a pivotal issue in the management of business relationships. In this article the authors theorize (1) customer satisfaction, (2) customer trust, (3) customer relationship value, and (4) customer commitment as key variables for successful business relationship management (Walter et.al, 2000).

2.3. Age-based differences in older consumers' brand attachment

Recently, a number of articles suggest that consumer segments assess blame differently for a product harm crisis. It was found in two separate experiments that women blame a company more than men for a product harm crisis in which it is unclear whether the company, consumers, or situational factors were responsible for the crisis. Studies in psychology also suggest that blame attributions can differ across consumers in different countries. In a review of studies comparing North American and East Asian perceivers, researchers concluded that the sharpest differences in attributions for the cause of an individual's behavior lie in the weight accorded to contextual constraints and to pressures imposed by social groups. In a consumer context suggests that based on these findings, consumers in individualistic societies may be more likely to attribute product failures to a company whereas consumers in collectivistic societies may be more likely to consider situational factors external to the company (Laufer et.al, 2005).

Several conceptual frameworks from biology, psychology and sociology have been suggested to model the behavior of the elderly. Despite their differences, each of these emphasizes mass media behavior as a way to counter their social disengagement. In gerontology, the literature stresses the impact of cognitive aging on the processing of advertising stimuli. An important consideration, memory deficits have an impact on the information retrieval process and the elderly experience some difficulty in linking a new piece of information to what has been stocked in memory (Perrien et.al., 1997).

With the introduction of trust-commitment theory many studies have focused on the development of trust and its consequences. Researchers have found that trust complements and solidifies the relationship between the firm and the customer.

The general observation that the perceived quality of a relationship partner also determines consumer responses to brands seems to become increasingly relevant as consumers age, because brands may even

be perceived as impersonated relationship partners causing positive experiences or hurt for some consumers. This leads the first hypotheses:

H₁: The effect of partner quality on commitment is significantly different for the older elderly and younger elderly.

Positive emotions resulting from perpetuating one's self-concept are likely to become even more important for the older elderly compared to the younger elderly (Löckenhoff & Carstensen, 2004). In the relationship between self-concept connection and commitment there is argued for age-group differences. The close relationship between consumers and the brands trust will develop automatically.

H₂: The effect of self-concept connection on commitment is significantly different for the older elderly and younger elderly.

If they become really dissatisfied with a product, older elderly look for alternatives. Thus, even a decrease in trust may not lead to a respective drop in commitment because the emotion-driven motivation may also favor those constructs with higher emotional power. Laufer, Silvera, and Meyer (2005) show that in a trust threatening product harm crisis, the oldest consumers did not blame the company and did not react with reduced purchase. By contrast, commitment is assumed to be less emotionally driven for the younger elderly. Therefore, rather rational information from trust judgments becomes more important, and recent trust experiences may strongly impact the development of commitment. Consequently, if younger elderly do not fully trust a brand, their affective commitment might be less compared to older elderly (Jahn et.al, 2012).

H₃: The effect of trust on commitment is significantly different for the older elderly and younger elderly.

It is expected that the commitment to the bottled water brands is significantly higher for elderly women than elderly men among the respondents, because, as predicted, women reported more intense emotions than men. Women may have described higher levels of intensity than men. In addition, as expected, women reported that they experienced emotion for a longer duration than men (Birditt & Fingerma, 2003). This leads to the last hypothesis

H₄: The commitment to a brand is higher for elderly women, relative to elderly men.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research goal

The main focus of this research is to provide insight into the under-researched field of younger and older elderly men and women's brand attachment.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the effect of self-concept connection, partner quality and trust on commitment for the older elderly and younger elderly. Additionally the differences among gender are searched.

3.2. Differentiating the elderly

Following previous applications of SST in consumer behavior (Fung & Carstensen, 2003), the authors used chronological age to differentiate the elderly segment. In general, individuals are typically classified as “older” when they reach 50 (Weijters & Geuens, 2006). It is more difficult to draw a line between “younger” and “older” elderly. In the developmental psychology literature, researchers tend to use either 60 years (e.g., Labouvie-Vief et.al, 1995) or 65 years (e.g., Lang & Heckhausen, 2001) as a delineation point. Where the population in Turkey is younger, and average length of life is less than EU and USA the authors decided to classify as “old” when they reach 45 and to use 55 years as the delineation age. Thus, they differentiate “younger elderly” (40 to 55 years) from “older elderly” (older than 55 years).

3.3. Sample

Depending on quoted convenient sampling method total 400 questionnaires (200 each to male and female) were distributed to elderly (older than 45 years). 225 (56.25 %) of them were returned. After deleting the semi-filled ones 210 (52.5 %) questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS statistical program.

136 of the respondents were female (64.8%) and 74 male (35.2%). The mean age was 55.6 with a standard deviation of 6.82 with the majority having a college degree (59.5%) and classifying themselves as middle (51.0%) or upper-middle class (31.4%). The demographic data were collected to understand the sample better, and were not used in preceding analyses. Table 1 shows the demographics of the study.

Table 1. Demographics

	Female			Male			Sample Total
	Younger Elderly	Older Elderly	Total	Younger Elderly	Older Elderly	Total	
Frequency (n)	65	71	136	32	42	76	210
Percentage (%)	31.0	33.8	64.8	15.2	20.0	35.2	100.0
Age (Mean)	50.2	59.8	55.2	50.3	60.6	56.1	55.6
Age (Std.Dev.)	2.9	5.7	6.6	2.7	6.2	7.1	6.8

3.4. Measures

A multi-item questionnaire developed by Jahn et.al. (2012) was used in this research. All items were translated to Turkish and then back translated into English to increase face validity and were measured by six-point Likert-type scales ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (6). Where necessary, authors refined items to adapt to the context (i.e., bottled water brands) through group discussions, and pretested the scales ($N = 30$).

Commitment was measured with four items (e.g., “I have been appreciating this brand for a longer period of time and will do so in the future”), trust with three indicators (e.g., “I have confidence in my bottled water brand”), self-concept connection using four items (e.g., “I proudly show my decision for this bottled water brand”), partner quality with three indicators (e.g., “This brand shows a continuing interest in me”). The means, standard deviations, and correlations of the model constructs are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations of the constructs

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
(1) Self-concept connection	3.51	1.40	(.93)			
(2) Partner quality	3.30	1.34	.685***	(.90)		
(3) Trust	4.23	1.26	.592***	.597***	(.88)	
(4) Commitment	3.78	1.39	.728***	.722***	.681***	(.94)
(5) Age	55.55	6.82	.219**	.259***	.293***	.314***

Note: Values on the diagonal represent alpha coefficients.
 *p <0.05, **p <0.01, ***p <0.001 (two-tailed tests); N=210.

3.5. Findings

Commitment is effected by self-concept connection, partner quality and trust on one side and by gender and age on the other side among 210 respondents, and 68.7 % of the variance is explained (Model 1). Depending on the results the effects of the partner quality (0.305 vs. 0.233) and trust (0.346 vs. 0.233) are higher, and the self-concept connection (0.248 vs. 0.446) is lower on the commitment to the bottled water brand by women than men (Model 2 and 5).

The effects of the self-concept connection (0.358 vs. 0.205) and partner quality (0.315 vs. 0.224) have higher, and the trust (0.262 vs. 0.470) has lower effect on the commitment to the bottled water brand by younger elderly women than older elderly (Model 3 and 4).

The effect of partner quality on commitment is significantly higher for the older elderly then younger elderly ($\beta=0.674$, $p=0.000$) among respondents (Model 7). Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression analysis results

Variables	General	Female			Male	General	General	General
		All	Younger Elderly	Older Elderly				
		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3				
β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	B
Control variable								
Gender	-0.092*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Age	0.088*	0.117*	X	X	---	0.201***	0.154**	0.122*
Main effect variables								
Self-concept connection	0.326***	0.248***	0.358**	0.205*	0.446***	0.679***	X	X
Partner quality	0.293***	0.305***	0.315*	0.224*	0.233*	X	0.674***	X
Trust	0.290***	0.346***	0.262*	0.470***	0.233*	X	X	0.634***
Interaction variables								
R2	0.687***	0.734***	0.629***	0.524***	0.591***	0.567***	0.543***	0.477***

Notes: *p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

The effect of self-concept connection on commitment is significantly higher for the older elderly than younger elderly ($\beta=0.679$, $p=0.000$) among respondents (Model 6). Hypothesis 2 is supported.

The effect of trust on commitment is significantly higher for the older elderly than younger elderly ($\beta=0.634$, $p=0.000$) among respondents (Model 8). Hypothesis 3 is supported.

It is found that the commitment to the bottled water brands is significantly higher ($p=0.033 < 0.05$) for elderly women than elderly men among the respondents (Table 4). Hypothesis 4 is supported.

The self-concept connection, partner quality, trust and commitment levels are significantly higher ($p= 0.000$ for all of them < 0.05) for older elderly than younger elderly women only (Table 4). No significant differences are found between younger and older elderly men.

Table 4. t-test analysis results

		Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)
<i>Female</i>		3.93	1.38	
<i>Male</i>	Commitment	3.51	1.57	0.033
	Younger Elderly	3.05	1.39	
	Older Elderly	4.14	1.18	0.000
	Younger Elderly	2.68	1.18	
	Older Elderly	4.08	1.11	0.000
<i>Female</i>		3.50	1.34	
	Older Elderly	4.86	0.94	0.000
	Younger Elderly	3.10	1.31	
	Older Elderly	4.70	0.92	0.000

4. Conclusion

In this study, it was observed that elderly consumer orientation significant difference between the Turkish bottled water brands. The main focus of this research is to provide insight into the under-researched field of younger and older elderly men and women's brand attachment. The aim of this paper is to analyze the effect of self-concept connection, partner quality and trust on commitment for the older elderly and younger elderly.

Additionally the differences among gender are searched. The empirical work tested this core proposition via a survey involving 225 respondents over the age 50. 136 of the respondents were female (64.8%) and 74 male (35.2%). The mean age was 55. Participants were divided into two groups; men and women. Depends on the results commitment is effected by self-concept connection, partner quality and trust on one side and by gender and age. The effects of the partner quality are higher, and the self-concept connection is lower on the commitment to the bottled water brand by women than men. The effects of the self-concept connection and partner quality have higher, and the trust has lower effect on the commitment to the bottled water brand by younger elderly women than older elderly. While the self-concept connection, partner quality, trust and commitment levels are significantly higher for older elderly than younger elderly women no significant differences are found between younger and older elderly men.

The findings of this research support the theoretical assumptions. It is worth noting that very few studies in the fields of Psychology and Marketing have examined differences in attributions between older and younger subjects.

Considering the growing importance of the elderly market together with the likelihood that there are important differences between blame attributions made by the elderly and by younger adults, it seems clear that empirical research investigating blame attributions in the elderly can make a valuable contribution to the field of marketing.

Furthermore the research shows either the significant differences between elderly women and men or the significant differences between older elderly and younger elderly women. Hence this research has contribution both science and business. The authors believe this article contributes to the neglected field of studying older consumers in the marketplace.

Consequently, businesses are interested in knowing how this segment can be best served in the marketplace. This research suggests that firms that focus on older consumers which a continual growing market segment.

A good deal of the interest in the business of aging has been stimulated by demographic change: in 1900 just 4 percent of the population was elderly (65 or older) 11 percent in 1980, and 24 percent is forecast for 2050 (Hurd, 1990).

Moreover the group of age over 50 consumers is not homogeneous with regard to brand attachment. In general, for the older elderly, *what a brand does* in terms of how it behaves as relationship partners appears to be more relevant.

In this paper a strong impact of partners' quality was found on affective commitment. The importance of partners' quality for the older elderly segment can be used to reach these consumers.

The results suggest that advertising strategies emphasize one brand's quality and understanding relationship partners are more likely to be well received with commitment by these consumers.

The findings and results of this research can pull for the business and the marketing management while they prepare marketing mix and promotional strategy for the target market and for -especially- elderly market segment.

5. Further Research

If the findings of this research can be accepted as provocative, in that case, they raise additional research issues.

Given the strong effects of brand attachment shown here, additional research is needed on how marketers can enhance brand attachment (by fostering brand–self connection and prominence).

In addition, further research might examine the relative impact of brand attachment and brand attitude strength on several metrics of brand equity future research might also examine the relative impact of brand attachment and brand attitude strength on several metrics of brand equity.

More comprehensive further research in this field can discovered for both men and women elderly consumer more significant and more deeply and more comparable findings and results.

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