

## Explaining the Deterioration of Elderly Consumers' Behaviour through the Broken

### Windows Theory

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## Introduction

This research aimed to show that a negligible but visible sign of ageing and physical decay in older consumers, namely the lack of front teeth, is a precursor of a progressive decrease of the quality and quantity of their consumptions. From a broad point of view, this idea is consistent with Wilson and Kelling's (1982) *Broken Windows (BW)* Theory, according to which small signs of disorders – for instance a broken window – left unattended lead to a generalised process of urban decay and invite serious forms of crime. In the specific case of the loss of front teeth, it is reputed that people suffering from this minor ailment may be victims of social stigmatisation (cf. Macia et al. 2009), develop a negative perception of themselves, feel not motivated to engage in regular dental care, and care about themselves in general. In line with the general principle of the BW Theory, this may result in a progressive deterioration of such individuals' daily habits, including consumption.

To investigate this phenomenon, this study compares the purchase decision-making process (Bassi and Guido 2006), utilitarian/hedonic shopping motivations (Guido 2006; Tauber 1972), emotional states aroused by the shopping experience (Machleit and Eroglu 2000), and materialism (Belk 1985) of older consumers who visibly miss their front teeth with those of individuals who do not display this feature. The former are here referred to as “Broken Windows” (BW) consumers, the latter as “Non-Broken Windows” (NBW) consumers.

## Methodology

One of the authors surveyed 204 older consumers aged between 60 and 90 living in a medium-sized Italian city. One hundred of these consumers, classified as BW subjects, visibly missed their front teeth, whereas the others, classified as NBW subjects, did not suffer from this ailment. They filled in a questionnaire structured into three sections and measuring answers on 7-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree). The first section investigated respondents' *purchase decision-making process*, in particular: i) respondents' capacity to clearly identify their consumption needs (Need recognition); ii) the ease with which they found information about products/services (Information search); iii) their tendency to compare different purchase alternatives (Products/service comparison); iv) the ease with which they made a purchase decision (Purchase decision); and v) the ease/difficulty they experienced in using the purchased products/services (Usage). This section also included questions that investigated how BW respondents' consumption behaviour changed since the loss of front teeth ("Since I lost my teeth.." "...I feel less motivated to purchase new products/services"). The second section assessed respondents' utilitarian and hedonic shopping motives (Guido 2006; Tauber 1972). Specifically, to assess *utilitarian* shopping motives, respondents were asked to express their agreement with items such as "I love to hunt for bargains", whereas, to assess *hedonic* shopping motives, respondents were asked to express their agreement with items such as "I enjoy hanging out with friends at the mall". The third section investigated the emotions respondents felt

during their shopping experiences, specifically, the sense of *pleasure*, *arousal*, and *dominance* over the shopping environment. The fourth section of the questionnaire investigated respondents' *materialism*, by measuring their *possessiveness*, *non-generosity*, and *envy*.

### Results

Compared to NBW subjects, BW subjects resulted less capable of clearly identifying their consumption needs and less interested in searching for information about products/services, and comparing different purchase alternatives. The two groups did not differ with respect to the ease/difficulty experienced in making a purchase decision. However, compared to NBW subjects, BW subjects proved to experience more difficulties in using the products/services they purchased (Table 1). We also established that, since BW subjects lost their teeth, they felt less motivated to purchase new products/services, less interested in collecting information about products/services and comparing diverse purchase alternatives, less confident when making a purchase decision. They also experienced difficulties in using the purchased products/services, reduced their consumptions, and the overall quality of the products/services they use worsened.

BW subjects proved to attribute less importance to utilitarian motivations than NBW. On the opposite, BW subjects attributed higher importance to hedonic motivations than NBW (Table 2). BW subjects also proved to experience higher levels of pleasure and arousal than

NBW subjects. The two groups of respondents experienced an analogous sense of dominance over the external environment. Finally, as regards materialism, we found that BW subjects seem more possessive, ungenerous, and envy than NBW subjects.

Table 1

Differences in the consumption decision-making process of BW and NBW subjects

	BW		NBW		Comparisons		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p	$\eta^2$
Need recognition	23.21	5.49	27.92	5.93	26.42	.00	.11
Information search	31.43	1.04	40.40	1.01	36.78	.00	.15
Product/service comparison	58.65	.92	67.43	.90	44.65	.00	.18
Purchase decision	39.89	.55	39.27	.54	.61	.43	.00
Usage	41.52	.71	47.09	.70	29.63	.00	.13

Note:  $N_{(BW)} = 100$ ;  $N_{(NBW)} = 104$ ; BW = Broken Windows subjects; NBW = Non-Broken Windows subjects; covariates: age, gender, income, education.

Table 2

Utilitarian/hedonic pursuits, emotional states, and materialism of BW and NBW subjects

	BW		NBW		Comparisons		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p	$\eta^2$
<i>Util./Hedon. motivations</i>							
Utilitarianism	57.33	1.34	89.33	1.32	279.231	.00	.58
Hedonism	176.08	28.10	114.75	32.48	216.08	.00	.52
<i>PAD</i>							
Pleasure	33.39	.55	27.13	.54	62.41	.00	.24
Arousal	30.42	.68	21.01	.67	93.70	.00	.32
Dominance	28.22	.443	24.31	.43	38.63	.00	.10
<i>Materialism</i>							
Possessiveness	49.53	6.09	45.99	6.11	38.63	.00	.16
Non-generosity	31.53	6.51	28.39	6.19	9.030	.00	.04
Envy	40.74	11.02	24.56	8.20	129.79	.00	.39

Note:  $N_{(BW)} = 100$ ;  $N_{(NBW)} = 104$ ; BW = Broken Windows subjects; NBW = Non-Broken Windows subjects; covariates: age, gender, income, level of education.

### Discussion and conclusions

This research ascertained that the loss of front teeth seems to determine a deterioration of older consumers' behaviour. Compared to NBW subjects, BW subjects appear more focussed on the epicurean and ludic side of shopping as they proved to prize hedonic shopping motivations. Thus, it seems that BW consumers' seek to cope with the negative feelings and sense of stigmatisation (Levy 2003), connected with the loss of front teeth by pursuing hedonic goals. In line with these results, we established that the loss of front teeth shape BW subjects' search for emotional wellbeing and materialism. Indeed, compared to NBW subjects, BW subjects proved to experience higher levels of pleasure and arousal during their shopping experiences and to be more materialist.

Considering that the progressive deterioration of BW subjects' consumption may have detrimental consequences on these consumers' health and general wellbeing, private and public organisations could undertake opportune initiatives to counterbalance the negative effects connected with tooth decay. First, health-care organisations and public bodies could design ad hoc programs for older consumers aiming to promote tooth care. They could launch social marketing campaigns targeted to these consumers and incentivise dental care, for instance, through discounted medical rates. Second, consumer organisations could seek to increase manufactures and distributors' awareness of BW subjects' peculiar consumption patterns, so that they would develop market approaches able to improve these consumers' wellbeing. Third, manufactures could design products/services that can be easily used by BW subjects and provide post-purchase services aimed to guarantee a proper use of their

products. Whereas, in order to simplify these consumers' buying decisions, distributors could deliver clear and easily understandable information about products/services, and opportunely instruct their salesperson to assist and advise BW subjects in order to help them select the products/services more suitable to fulfil their needs.

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