

Affluent Senior Citizens and Telemarketing Fraud

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Introduction

In America's fast-changing legal landscape, telemarketing is a factor that is often overlooked. In the past decade alone, telemarketing use has seen unparalleled growth. From around 2 to 5 billion calls a month nationwide from robocalls alone (Robocall Index, 2020), the popularity of telecommunication and, more specifically, telemarketing in the 21st Century continues to flourish, and ultimately, so do the complaints regarding its safety. There is undeniable recognition that such has occurred because of the lack of precautions, prevalence of greed, and modern accessibility on the side of scammers; this has posed a varied set of problems for older age groups of the United States participating in telemarketing transactions. Even more so, it has become apparent that the burdens that are now set on older Americans are less than reversible. The absence of research on the enduring impacts telemarketing scams possess on certain groups of senior citizens has resulted in overwhelming, yet unreported, cases of telemarketing fraud (Aziz, Bolick, Klienman, & Shadel, 2008), and no presence of an adequate legislative, financial, or other solution. The problem is as its worst in Nevada, where telemarketing calls are at their 2nd highest level, at 563 million calls in 2019 (Hidalgo, 2020).

With full consideration that senior citizens are more likely to have financial resources, more likely to be isolated, and be most unable to help themselves from a victimized position, research needs to be conducted on how these factors interact with the crime to affect this group of individuals. Past research (Aziz, et. al., 2008, Alves, et. al., 2008) has mainly covered elderly financial exploitation, rather than specifically telemarketing fraud, and has only addressed levels of susceptibility and causes; as such, there remains a gap in knowledge as to how senior citizens fare post-victimization, and more importantly, what they do to rebound. The question remains: To what degree are higher-socioeconomic senior citizens in Nevada affected by telemarketing fraud?

Literature Review

Solicitation and selling over the phone have been a common strategy for businesses to heighten revenue since the late 1980s (Abel, Ely, Janak, Litwin, Schuhmacher, & Sweeney, 2016). The increase in telemarketing call usage has increased over 64% since 2016, accounting for over \$10 billion annually (Siemaszko, 2018, Robocall Index, 2018). There is a very large cause as to why; with today's consumers growing increasingly attached to digital ideas, convenience and lucrativity makes telemarketing an attractive choice. Over time, the highly lucrative approach has availed itself to 40 billion dollars being stolen annually by scammers.

While in general, telemarketing calls were half of all calls received in 2019 (Shaban 2018), robocalls have increased by 46% since 2017, totalling to 26.3 billion calls--10 spam calls per person, on average (Belvedere, 2019). First Orion, a trusted provider of data transparency and phone call solutions, speculates this percentage could increase by 44.6% in 2019. This makes this certain avenue of scamming negligibly more popular than its more personal counterpart. The calls consumers receive are without a doubt flagrant; the Federal Communications Commission reports that of all the complaints filed in the previous year, that the 200,000 complaints filed about robocalls in 2017 make up 60%; such is an increase by more than 1.1 million in the preceding year. These high statistics come with the knowledge that as of recent, the only method to ascertain whether a call is illegal or (un)wanted is to either answer it or let it default to voicemail, in hopes that a message is left (FCC, 2019).

The main reason why telemarketing calls remain as prevalent as they are is because of the immense profitability in the industry. As aforementioned, the entire telemarketing industry accrued \$10 billion in 2017 (Siemaszko, 2018). Even after the national Do-Not-Call List was created in 2006, enabling consumers to block marketers, the industry managed to raise \$393 billion in revenue (Williams, 2007). Even further, 67% of those who seek to scam and profit choose to do so via telecommunication because it is the easiest, especially on the populations they choose. Considering the many ways customers can choose to withdraw and transmit their money today, from brokerages, to bank accounts, to online bill-pay options, telemarketing scammers have more avenues for success than they ever have. The simple conclusion of public officials and researchers has been that federal law has not kept its pace with technology.

Common groups targeted by telemarketing calls are immigrant communities, unsuspecting millennials, and senior citizens (Spector, 2017); senior citizens have it the worst. Characteristics of senior citizens who are scammed are these: the senior is relatively socially active--they do not always confine themselves to the comforts of their own home; such behavior also begets greater success in calls because the victim is more likely to be receptive to a particular product, given their interests. These citizens, more often than not, are well-educated and able to purchase items being sold (Aziz, et. al., 2008). In general, researchers have acknowledged that the issue with senior citizens becoming frauded is not so much the knowledge they possess, but rather the cognizance that senior citizens have when functioning within unfamiliar spheres, like telecommunication, or with vices of their own, like gullibility. There is other literature that challenges the extent of this, citing certain cognitive patterns shared with the elderly--diseases like Alzheimer's Disease (Deane, 2018). Other studies suggest that the most common characteristics of senior citizens who are robbed are that they were specifically male, divorced or separated from their spouse, and college-educated (Alves, et. al., 2008). Above all, however, an elder's naiveté could harm them more than one would assume. It was found that less than 5% of senior citizens thought that a telemarketer could be a criminal (Aziz, et. al., 2008). Even more concerning, over 40% of senior citizens cannot distinguish fraud from authenticity when asked (Aziz, et. al., 2008). These qualities and characteristics all describe what The National Telemarketing Victim Call Center identifies as victims of scammers' "mooch lists."

Of the calls targeted at senior citizens, a few similarities remain clear. One of the most recurring and successful methods of callers is spoofing, in which callers manipulate their ID to look like a phone number calling locally, whether that be from a relative or neighbor; the stratagem is that there is likely an increased chance the potential victim will pick up because the caller seems to be familiar. At that point, it is paramount to understand that calls are often targeted to specific people. The clientele is based off of a report of a customer's history of donations and subscriptions. Also largely considered are the best time to call their customers during the day, their friends, and problems that the specific person or audience has collectively had in the past (Siemaszko, 2018).

With this in mind, this case study proves to distinguish itself from others because it examines the effects that this specific fraud had on senior citizens extensively. The sample pool is limited to senior citizens who are at or above the age of 65, as most other research used in this paper is consistent with that age (Alves, et. al., 2008; Aziz, et. al., 2008). The current gap in research on this topic is highly concerning; this type of elderly financial abuse is the most common, but by far least studied (Peterson, 2014). Since preceding studies have largely only been focused on the causes of telemarketing fraud (James, Boyle, & Bennet, 2014; Nerenberg, 2008; Petersen, 2014, etc.), this research study on short-term and long-term impacts serves to explain not only how victims fared after their interaction with the scammer, but also whether they were impacted at a traceable point later in their life. It, therefore, fills a gap in information. Most research on this topic is also considerably dated, with the peak amount ranging from the 1990s to the late 2000s. With these conditions, the study gathers new qualitative data through recorded interviews. More specifically, it obtains narratives of six senior citizens from three different higher-socioeconomic communities in Nevada. The analysis will not mention the names or living communities of any participants to protect their anonymity and prevent any potential bias.

The contributions made by this study is important, as it is telling of the longstanding effects a scam has on a person, their family, and future interactions. It is testament to how resilient senior citizens are in the world after their

victimization. With this knowledge, authorities or, perhaps, curious and proactive families of those affected may understand that the effects of cooperating with a scammer are enduring and, often, damaging. This could be instrumental in beckoning legislators to improve either state or national laws, as well as other enforcements and engagements, on telemarketing communication, or communication in general; as aforementioned, the rules and regulations of the United States have not matched the speech at which technology has been evolving. It can also be used to prompt physicians and other doctors to spot potential victims of this crime during or after it has happened in an interest to guard against the impacts found. Additionally, because of the awareness it might receive, groups that produce the betterment of elderly welfare might feel compelled to work toward change on this issue, specifically. Altogether, the results of this study change what is currently known of the senior citizens who are impacted by telemarketing fraud.

Methods

The study is a case-control study, wherein I directly considered the outcomes of an individual's circumstances, without following them over time. They are primarily employed to attain an in-depth understanding of an issue with-real life context (Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, & Sheikh, 2011). I selected senior citizens to interview who have experienced a loss of \$100 or more via a fraudulent phone call. I not only transcribed the narrative interviews, but also ask detailed questions to ascertain the authenticity of the participant and their claims, and then followed with a thematic analysis for all participants. The employment of narrative interviews is particularly advantageous because it allows for the combination of social contexts and personal life stories. Its unstructured nature allowed the interviewee to restructure incidents from their point of view, highlighting the ways the fraud experience impacted them, directly connecting to their answer to the research question (Corbin & Morse, 2003). This permitted for a thematic analysis to occur, wherein not only were the aforementioned open-ended questions included, but I also minded the frequency with which certain patterns arose; thus, allowed me to "exploit clues in ordinary discourse for what they tell us about shared cognition" (Quinn, 1997). I compared the severity to which senior citizens have been impacted by telemarketing scams, whether financial, emotional, or other. A case-control study was optimal for such research because it provided a handful of participants to describe their own experiences in the words and time they necessitate (Ryan, Bernard, 2000). This approach afforded deeper and more complex understandings to be had by myself and ultimately achieves the crucial findings of similarities and dichotomies in the severity to which telemarketing fraud has impacted senior citizens. This case study, in particular, focused itself on the experiences of six senior citizens living in various retirement communities in Nevada. As a note, these interviews were conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic hit Nevada, in between the months of December 2019 and February 2020.

Narrative Interviews

To be more specific, narrative interviews were uniquely ideal for this case study because of its natural permissiveness. Researchers have traditionally used them to encourage and stimulate the interviewee to tell about the experience in question (Crowe, et. al. 2011), precisely because the interviewee is the one leading the conversation. With this in mind, it is important to discern that the interviewer is still responsible for some structure. The preponderance of narrative interviews begin with preparation and initialization, and then move to main narration and questioning, wherein a chronological order of the account is maintained. It should be noted that the phase following questioning only permitted "why" to be asked to effectively maximize input and end the interview. Interviews with the six senior citizens reflected this order. It follows that this was the correct method to utilize since the case study's purpose was to compile narratives.

To sort potential interviewees into participating interviewees, a target group was aligned. Chosen participants had to be 65 years of age or older; this age was chosen to maximize the compatibility of this study with previous studies (Alves, et. al., 2008, Aziz, et. al., 2008). Participants must have also been residing in a retirement home in

Nevada. Retirement homes in higher socioeconomic communities were used to determine eligibility of status in an attempt to refrain from violating privacy. In order to protect privacy, each participant is denoted by "Participant" and then the order in which I interviewed them--Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on. Nevada was chosen because it has been recognized to be one of the epicenters of senior citizen telemarketing fraud, at 563 million robocall scams in 2019 (Hidalgo, 2020). Moreover, chosen participants must have been able to demonstrate the ability to consistently recall and communicate information, as well as have been affected by over \$100 by a telemarketing scam in the past 10 years. This provided a minimum threshold for considering financial impacts and also guaranteed that the participants were affected recently, recognizing that the development of technology is ever-evolving. Interviews with the six senior citizens were coordinated after this recognition. With a total of six interviews, participants were selected from a range of affluent communities in Nevada, determined by the area's average home value of at least \$300,000.

To ensure my safety and the comfort of the participant, the interview was conducted with an accompanying adult and in an area that best suits the participant; the strategy in this is to provide an environment where the interviewee does not feel pressured or out of place, risking that the questions might provide some disquiet. All questions the participant had were answered honestly and directly. In these interviews, the participant was told only to release as much information as was, principally, necessary, and secondarily, within their realm of comfort.

By the end of each interview, the I obtained narratives detailing the type of scam, the events that unfolded during the scam, the degree to which the interviewee suffered financially, emotionally, etc., and what their experience compelled them to do, if anything. To most effectively do this, a total of nineteen open-ended questions were compiled and asked periodically throughout the interview. These can be found in Appendix A. The questions were categorized by lifestyle, incident, and result. Lifestyle and incident questions provided situational context to the severity of the scam on the participant. Lifestyle questions offered an opportunity for senior citizens to discuss any outstanding circumstances worth mentioning that were not inquired about during the vetting process; it also gave me a better understanding of the participant's susceptibility to telemarketing scams, as it relates to how they inadvertently suffered later. Incident questions inquired about the participant's actions, the scammer's actions, and the transaction that occurred, but were only exactly asked if the participant did not make any mention of it; otherwise, I followed up with a "why" question, as previously explained. Result questions were used to have the participant describe the feelings and responses that followed the incident. This provided me with a better comprehension of what the severity of the impact of the telemarketing scam was, relative to other interviewees.

Thematic Analysis

Once all six interviews were conducted, they would have to be analyzed thematically before interpreting their patterns and other results. Thematic analysis required that I examined data within and across the set to find recurring patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen to better denote the most prevalent ways higher-socioeconomic senior citizens have been affected by this issue. This analysis advanced the research paper by allowing greater breadth and depth, rather than any quantitative answer from six participants.

Because the research question asks about personal impacts of telemarketing fraud, the themes were divided into long-term and short-term impacts, then the more specific corresponding ones that fit within them. The short-term and long-term impacts indicate both that different individuals experience the peak effect of their exchange at different times and that time changes what kind of impacts they experience. In interviews, although senior citizens did not explicitly give dates of certain experiences, their references made clear which points of the past few years they were speaking of. Some experiences senior citizens cited were omitted because they were a result of previous calling experiences, rather than telemarketing scam in question. References to these tendencies have been explained in the literature analysis portion of this paper. Once short-term and long-term experiences were differentiated from one another, each senior citizen's experiences were further sorted into other categories: secrecy, caution, proactive steps, less financial stability, and continuity. This process later enabled me to interpret the themes, their explanation, and deeper

meaning; because of this, the extent of the impact telemarketing fraud has on senior citizens was able to be discovered, interrupted, and explained.

As per intuition and guidelines, choosing to employ a thematic analysis was the best step to take post-interviews because of its encouragement to look both broadly and narrowly at the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The concern with thematic analyses are that they are often poorly demarcated; as such, it should be noted that I was vigilant against including unfounded analyses and "anecdotalism" (Bryman 1988), wherein the researcher chooses to discuss particularly idiosyncratic observations.

Results

Five narrow, recurring themes were established from the six interviews conducted. I sought to discern participants by not only including overarching similarities, but also including how and why certain participants did not fit into the theme. The theme definitions and explanations are as follows:

Definitions and Summary

Recurring Theme #1 - Secrecy

For the purposes of this study, secrecy is defined as the desire and effort to preclude others from detecting any acts involving correspondence that were successful. This also includes the attempt to prevent others from further understanding the occurrence once they have detected the correspondence. This theme is not limited to short-term or long-term impacts, though they are discerned between participant experiences in the explanation below.

Participants 2, 5, and 7 explained that for a short time after their incident with a successful telemarketing scam, they endeavored to keep their situation a secret. Participant 5 stated that they "didn't tell anyone" because of "familial ridicule." Similarly, Participant 7 articulated that, "It wasn't worth it to...admit I listened to a stranger." The differences between participants within this theme is that some chose for their situation to remain a secret-post scam because they were embarrassed, similarly to the cause policy analyst Linda Alves (2008) acknowledges, and others chose for their situation to remain a secret because those were the instructions of the scammer and they knew no better; the former is attributed to Participant 5 and the latter is attributed to Participant 2. Participant 7 cited both reasons.

Recurring Theme #2 - Caution

Within this study, caution is defined as careful forethought meant to minimize risk. It is not limited to the short-term or the long-term, acknowledging that a participant can have caution to how they handle the situation directly after the incident and years ahead of any other incident.

Post-scam caution was another theme commonly cited by the participants. Participants 1, 5, 6, and 7 explained their heightened discretion as a result of being a victim of telemarketing fraud. Chief among the similarities within this theme were that participants would "double check next time" they "get a call." Not surprisingly, no participant in their description of how they exercised caution different from this statement in their overall explanation. As such, the participants' experience with telemarketing fraud increased their amount of caution to a large degree.

Recurring Theme #3 - Proactiveness

Proactive steps are defined as measures taken by the participant to prepare for or control an undesirable situation; in this case, they are anticipatory that they will receive another telemarketing fraud call. In this case, the theme is limited to a long-term impact because proactive steps cannot logically be taken prior to the incident that impacts the participant.

Participants 1 and 6 were among the participants who aimed to entirely prevent falling victim to telemarketing fraud again. In particular, all participants registered with the National Do Not Call Registry, with both participants

citing that they did not want to risk mixing up an unsolicited call with a real one in the future. Insofar as alerting others about their intentions with telephone calls, Participant 6 mentioned that they warned their family about the dangers of telemarketing calls; naturally, they were not among the participants that kept their status with telemarketing fraud secret.

Recurring Theme #4 - Less Financial Stability

While financial stability overall has a very broad definition, this study only takes into account the participant's personal financial stability; hence, less financial stability is defined as the impaired financial state of the participant, relative to its previous condition and the participant's description. This can be considered under both short-term and long-term perspectives.

Participants 1, 3, and 7 described that their financial position after the incident was "considerably below" what it was previously; Participant 7 insisted they were "significantly affected." Participant 1 and Participant 3 stated their losses were in the thousands, while Participant 7 admitted theirs were in the hundred thousands. In general, all participants mentioned various efforts they took to attempt to financially rebound, notably so because the fraud impacted their retirement savings; only one successfully has successfully rebounded. Of all impact themes, this was perhaps the most enduring. To a considerable degree, telemarketing fraud impacted the financial stability of several senior citizens.

Recurring Theme #5- Continuity

This theme is strictly bound to long-term impacts, as it is understood that continuity happens over time, and not directly after any incidence. Continuity, in this research paper, is defined as becoming a victim to telemarketing fraud again within the aforementioned 10-year span.

The last overarching theme established in the six interviews was the prevalence of continuity in receiving and cooperating with telemarketing calls. Participants 2 and 3 were among those who admitted to still not only picking up calls, but also making transactions. Though for different reasons, these two participants claimed that they have made more than two transactions with a telemarketer. The distinction between the two participants is that one continues to pay money to one party and the other continues to send money to different parties upon being contacted. Participant 2 does this consistently and Participant 3 does this sporadically. Participant 2 inserted that their cause was for "love," while Participant 3 stated they continued participating in these calls because, despite them losing "a few thousand," they felt they were being judicious about their purchases. It should be noted that, when asked, Participant 3 informed me that they suffered from mild dementia.

Limitations

There are a multitude of limitations within this study. Foremost, this was indiscriminate of whether the participants suffered a disease, like dementia, or not, though it was vigilant to take it into account; the searcher wanted to capture the full picture of affluent senior citizens in Nevada, and consequently had to sacrifice degrees of accuracy with certain participants.

Second, elderly individuals are empirically less likely to reveal a personal misstep or problem, whether deliberately or unconsciously (Crowe, et. al. 2011). Much of this can be attributed to selective memory and to shame, suspiciousness, and lack of knowledge (Alves, et. al., 2008). As such, the low number of participants that were able to be interviewed was another limitation. Because of this, there is possibility that this study underestimates the degree to which this specific demographic of senior citizens are impacted by telemarketing fraud. With this in mind, precautions were taken to maximize participant honesty; among these were interviewing face-to-face, so as to consider non-verbal communication, and securing a location where participants were free to speak openly and without judgement. Both measures reinforced trust and professionalism, allowing for greater faith in confidentiality.

Accordingly, sample size was one of the largest impediments in this study. Because the number of senior citizens willing to be interviewed and recorded was meager, it was difficult to obtain more than six participants. This partially shaped the study to be a qualitative one, rather than a quantitative one, since a small pool was not enough to obtain an accurate depiction of the state of senior citizens and telemarketing fraud in Nevada. There was, however, ample opportunity to comprehend and detect themes that would not have been previously known to a researcher.

The amount of research available approaching this study was also a large limiting factor. With research on elderly financial abuse and, more specifically, telemarketing fraud, already being sparse and insufficient, I had to default to some of the only available literature on the topic, dating as far back as the 1990s. This did not impact the study much, however, because while technology has advanced, the reported methods scammers use have not drastically changed.

Finally, this study was administered in one western state, in one region. I believe that it was nonetheless a valuable assessment with full regard to the fact that Nevada is an epicenter for telemarketing fraud. I was keen to only include participants that fit the description of “higher socioeconomic” and “senior citizen.”

Discussion of Results

I underestimated the impact both singular and repeating incidents had on participants. Rather than negligibly affected finances and low caution, the trends detected in this study prove the contrary: senior citizens, especially as it concerns financial stability, caution, and--to an extent--proactiveness, are largely affected by telemarketing fraud. A considerable portion of participants (at least 2/6), disregarding those who did not admit to certain truths, conceded that their telemarketing incident had made them 1) a less financially stable individual, 2) a more cautious individual, 3) a more proactive individual. Other, less noticeable trends affirm the presence of the secrecy and continuity involved in these interactions.

While these findings on the surface may seem obvious, it is absolutely crucial to acknowledge the amount of varying, vague, and contradicting evidence that currently exists on this subject.

As such, the implications of this study are far-reaching. Most significantly, they expose a systemic misunderstanding that more educated, affluent individuals are better prepared and equipped against the invasive approaches scammers take. Illnesses of old age and lapse in reasoning are indiscriminate to socioeconomic status unless precautions take place. Second, the results propose a discussion between the severity of scams and their correlation to caution, and whether increased hardship leads to proactiveness with telecommunication. Third, the utter number of detected themes advance the cause for researchers to be more astute about the relationship secrecy, caution, proactiveness, financial stability, and continuity have with telemarketing scams.

These determinations are particularly useful when considering what future analysts, legislators, and even victims should do to prevent senior telemarketing scams. Not only are senior citizens less cognizant of their decisions than many give credit for, but they also become victims of fraud willingly (Participant 2 and, to a degree, Participant 3), whether in concert with compulsion or indifference. With this and many other detected themes in mind, physicians, legislators, and others would do well to develop methods to identify and stop victimization when they see it. Physicians and other doctors ought to receive help to be able to discern whether their patient is troubled by understanding the key characteristics of a victimized senior, notably so since financial abuse and distressing health outcomes have an established link (Wong & Waite, 2016). Legislators ought to begin crafting laws, like Senator Jacky Rosen’s TRACED Act, to prevent these incidents from happening at the unprecedented rate they are. Banks and credit card companies, among other agencies, ought to train and encourage their employees to act when they suspect exploitation. Without a doubt, future research can be done to find out the relationships the aforementioned themes have with a senior citizen’s overall susceptibility to these crimes, along with working toward some solution--be it legal, personal, or other--that helps alleviate its effects.

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