

The single consumer

Journal of Advertising Research; New York; Nov/Dec 2002; Naveen Donthu;David I Gilliland;

Volume: 42

Issue: 6

Start Page: 77-84

ISSN: 00218499

Subject Terms: Single persons

Studies

Psychological aspects

Lifestyles

Market research

Statistical analysis

Market strategy

Target markets

Classification Codes: 1220: Social trends & culture

7100: Market research

9130: Experimental/theoretical

7000: Marketing

Abstract:

This paper profiles the single consumer and investigates how single consumers differ from their married counterparts on a series of marketing-specific psychographic variables. Several propositions based on singles' endeavors to seek active lifestyles and to compensate for feelings of loneliness are proposed and tested. Differences between those who are single by choice and those who are single by circumstance are also investigated. Marketing toward singles must be done with a certain degree of subtlety. They generally do not want to be identified as singles, and some marketers have produced products that have overtly targeted singles only to fail miserably. Marketers interested in targeting singles may consider the form of advertisement used. As opposed to informational, transformational, or emotional advertisements tend to relate to a certain set of psychological characteristics that are anticipated to appeal to the target market.

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[Headnote]

This paper profiles the single consumer and investigates how single consumers differ from their married counterparts on a series of marketing-specific psychographic variables. Several propositions based on singles' endeavors to seek active lifestyles and to compensate for feelings of loneliness are proposed and tested. Differences between those who are single by choice and those who are single by circumstance are also investigated. Finally, advertising and marketing implications regarding singles are discussed.

THERE ARE CURRENTLY over 82 million unmarried adults living in the United States, which represents more single adults as a percentage of the population than at any time in history. Since 1970 the number of singles has increased a total of 85 percent, compared to an increase of only 8 percent of married couples. Not only are there a great number of singles, but they also tend to often possess monetary wealth. In fact, single adults represent more than \$600 billion in purchasing power.

Oddly, little has been written on this large group of purchasers. Given their size, their growth rates, and their purchasing power they are most certainly worthy of study. Academic articles are published on singles in the social sciences, but they have been virtually ignored in advertising and marketing literatures.

The purpose of this paper is to look at how single adults differ from their married counterparts on a series of marketing-specific psychographic variables. Single adults, especially those that are young and single by choice, seek busy and active lives. They are constantly on the go. Some singles, especially those who are single by circumstance, suffer from a lack of intimacy, which contributes to feelings of distress and loneliness. These factors have distinct and significant implications for advertising and marketers. These and other phenomena unique to the single consumer will be examined in an effort to better understand this large and growing market segment. Research propositions are developed and tested on a sample of 761 individuals. Specific managerial implications regarding singles will be discussed and a research agenda will be presented.

WHO ARE THE SINGLES?

Let us first examine the reasons for the recent explosion in the proportion of singles in our population. There are a variety of characteristics that have converged to account for so many singles in America. First, young people are postponing marriage. Instead of marrying young, more women are enrolled in college or pursuing professional careers than ever before. Increasingly, concerns of economic success are causing young people to postpone marriage. Further, changing social values make it no longer necessary to be married in order to have children or cohabitate.

Second, there is a small increase in the proportion of individuals in our society who have chosen to remain single on a permanent basis. They may be put off by the fragility of the institution of marriage or they may simply lack adequate partners for marriage. Whatever the reason, this group of "never married" continues to increase.

Third, the number of divorces in America continues to rise (although the actual divorce rate has begun to recently decrease). Although five out of six divorced men and three out of four divorced women will eventually remarry, the time that they spend between marriages has been growing. Thus, although they may be temporarily between marriages, there are more divorced singles in America than ever before (Buunk and van Driel, 1989).

One of the reasons for the scarcity of existing academic research on singles is the difficulty of obtaining accurate information about the group. Not only is the group rapidly changing due to the temporary nature of the categorization itself (due to marriages, remarriages, etc.), but also singles are very mobile and may shun identification with the group due to the many negative stereotypes that exist (Goerne, 1992).

Negative stereotyping of singles in American culture may be traced back to colonial times when singles were penalized by higher taxes in an effort to produce offspring in the new country (Murstein, 1974). Indeed, the great majority of singles are still penalized even today by paying a higher tax rate than marrieds filing jointly for equivalent levels of income (Nordstrom, 1990). Parmelee and Werner (1978) found that singles living alone are more likely to be categorized as less friendly, colder, less attractive, more private, less extroverted, and lonelier than those living with roommates.

Although most negative stereotypes of this group may be unfounded, some singles in America do suffer loneliness. In fact loneliness is perceived by singles themselves, especially those who are single by circumstance (e.g., death of a spouse), as the greatest disadvantage of being single (Simenauer and Carroll, 1982). Many behaviors by singles may be described as compensating behaviors as they try to cope with loneliness.

Singles live a unique lifestyle. Often well educated and earning good salaries they only have themselves as financial burdens. They also enjoy more free time (which they fill with a variety of self-- based activities) and often have only themselves to satisfy. Singles tend to lead a very active lifestyle.

HYPOTHESES

Active behaviors by singles are all likely to contribute to the following hypotheses.

Convenience-seeking. In searching for new social experiences the single consumer often partakes in a headlong rush of activities. They may often seek the "completely busy life" (Barkas, 1980) to compensate for their loneliness. They fill their time with work (in fact, they tend toward workaholism), exercise, and recreation, as well as less strenuous activities such as education, religion, reading, reflection and introspection, television viewing, and planning (Barkas, 1980). This lifestyle places a premium on time and leaves little room for the waste of time. Further, singles were found to shop more in convenience stores (as opposed to grocery stores or supermarkets) than their married counterparts (Stern, Gould and Barak, 1987). Therefore,

H1: Singles are more convenience-- seeking than non-singles.

Variety-seeking. Stern, Gould, and Barak's (1987) examination of young singles identified them as a restless group. They were characterized by a willingness and desire to seek change and to sample new experiences. The "completely busy lifestyle" indicates that singles will try many new social (and nonsocial) activities (Peplau and Perlman, 1982). Their willingness to try new styles, products, and experiences indicates that they seek variety and change more readily than do their married counterparts. Thus,

H2: Singles are more variety-seeking than non-singles.

Risk aversiveness. By not having the responsibility of families, singles need not be so concerned about the requirements of the continued well being of spouses and children. Their purchase of a house or condominium is generally postponed until after marriage. Further, being single there are generally no requirements to provide clothing and shelter for dependent children. This lack of requirements for monetary funds results in singles tending to have a larger portion of their income available for discretionary use than married individuals with the same income. Having more money available for more risky ventures tends to make the ventures themselves more attractive. Therefore,

H3: Singles are less averse to risk than non-singles.

Price consciousness. As noted above, the lack of family-related costs results in singles often having more disposable income available for discretionary spending than marrieds with a comparable income level (Robey, 1989).

More available income with which to purchase products should positively impact a person's ability to afford the product and his or her perception of how high the object is priced. Thus,

H4: Singles are less price conscious than non-singles.

Innovativeness. The preceding hypotheses imply that singles are less averse toward risk and are more variety-seeking than non-singles. These traits imply a likelihood of product trial (Rogers, 1983) and are consistent with the cognitive style displayed by innovators-propensity toward less observation, planning, and deliberation (Foxall and Haskins, 1986). Thus,

H5: Singles are more innovative than non-singles.

Compensating behaviors by singles are all likely to contribute to the following hypotheses.

Brand consciousness. The impacts of loneliness and isolation are usually negative and often quite serious. Loneliness has been linked to depression, and isolation is strongly negatively correlated with happiness. Singles endeavor to overcome their feelings of loneliness by attempting or developing coping strategies. Often, singles do not have the same network of social support that is generally available from a spouse or child. This lack of intimate spousal and family relationships causes singles to form more intricate casual networks of support in order to increase their overall life satisfaction (Cockrum and White, 1985). This need to create a more widespread network of attachments extends not only to personal relationships but to other relationships as well. Berry (1990) suggests that this desire may extend to brands and feels that singles rely more heavily on brand-name identification than do others. Brands contain functional, experiential, and symbolic benefits (Keller, 1993). Identifying with brands may provide singles, sometimes low in self-esteem, with another level of support--that of the other users of the product brand.

H6: Singles are more brand conscious than non-singles.

Impulsiveness. Impulsive purchases are those that are made due to a sudden and strong desire to purchase a product. Rook (1984) distinguished impulsive purchase behavior from mere unplanned purchases as being accompanied by more sudden, powerful, and emotional urges to purchase. Impulsive purchase behaviors are associated with affective advertising cues. Singles, often desirous of an intimate relationship or an entity that provides more opportunities for intimacy, may be more predisposed to affective appeals of love or belonging. Combined with their variety-- seeking nature, singles may be more willing to purchase products supported by affective-based messages that appeal to their self-image. Thus,

H7: Singles display more impulsive purchase behavior than non-- singles.

Television-viewing behavior. Peplau and Perlman (1982) identified a second coping behavior to loneliness as attempting to reduce the need for social contact. Reducing the need for contact means that singles may choose activities that are best accomplished alone, such as watching television. Further, heavy television viewers tend to select programs of affective or emotional content. Many singles may resort to watching a great deal of affective-- based television as a method of selective mood enhancement due to negative self appraisals.

H8: Singles view television more heavily than non-singles.

METHODOLOGY

In order to collect the data for this study, 20 trained interviewers called 2,000 household telephone numbers selected randomly from a large city's telephone book. Each of the 20 interviewers was assigned one or more letters of the alphabet and was asked to randomly pick 100 names to create the respondent pool. Seven hundred and sixty-one interviews were completed successfully, with the remainder either refusing to participate or not available.

All questions were pretested on a convenience sample of 45 graduate students to ensure that they were easily understood and that respondents could complete the survey in a reasonable amount of time. When telephoned, respondents were first asked some general question about their television-viewing habits, including the number of hours per week they spent watching television, followed by some general demographic questions, including marital status. They were then asked questions which comprised the psychographic scales. These scales have been used previously in other studies (e.g., Donthu and Garcia, 1999) and have very high reliability. The scales are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Two-group t-tests were conducted for each of the hypotheses. Group 1 respondents were single (N = 302), while Group 2 respondents were married (N = 459).

RESULTS

All of our hypotheses were accepted with the exception of H_i. Results of the hypothesis tests may be found in Table 2.

It was anticipated that single consumers would be more convenience-seeking than non-singles since they were interested in maximizing their free time and were more inwardly focused. Although this relationship was found to exist, it was not significant and H_i is rejected. There is no statistical difference between how singles and non-singles seek convenience.

Singles are hypothesized to be a restless group of individuals who are continually seeking of experiences. This restlessness shows up in their high inclination for variety (mean 3.9 versus 3.1), thus H₂ is accepted. Single consumers have more money to spend on disposable items than do their married counterparts. This excess of available funds makes them less likely to be averse to risky investments than non-singles (mean 2.4 versus 3.6), so H₃ is accepted. Higher levels of available income were hypothesized to more than offset scale economics and tax bias toward single purchasers and results in singles being less price conscious than non-singles (mean 3.5 versus 4.2), and H₄ is accepted.

The acceptance of H₂ and H₃ indicate that the single consumer is more innovative than their married counterpart. Consumers who are more risk accepting, seek more variety, and are more impulsive tend to display a higher level of innovation. In fact singles are more innovative than non-singles (mean 3.6 versus 3.1), and therefore H₅ is accepted.

TABLE 2

Singles are strong brand identifiers, possibly because they use relationships with brands to help replace some of the intimacy that might be lacking in many of their lives. Singles were more brand conscious than non-singles (mean 3.6 versus 3.0), so H₆ is accepted. Impulsive purchases often have an emotional or affective cue as antecedent to the purchase. It seems likely that since singles are more impulsive than non-singles (mean 3.5 versus 2.5, therefore H₇ is accepted), they may be more susceptible to these emotional appeals. It has been found that singles often suffer from low self-esteem, which is thought to contribute to their watching more television than non-singles. H₈, which states that singles watch more television than non-singles, was also accepted (mean 19 hours per week versus 15 hours per week). It is quite possible that they watch programs intended to elevate their moods, although this was not tested.

SINGLE BY CHOICE VERSUS SINGLE BY CIRCUMSTANCE

In the above analysis all singles were treated as one group. The fact is that all singles are not the same. A young single male in his 20s is very different from a 60-year-old widow whose spouse recently passed away. While there are many ways of slicing the single population, a major differentiating factor is whether a person is single by choice or is single by circumstance.

A single person's attitudes and behavior is going to be largely influenced by whether they chose to be single or whether they were forced to become single (e.g., death of a spouse). A person who is single by choice is likely to engage in behaviors that typify an active lifestyle, while a person who is forced to be single by circumstance is more likely to engage in behavior to cope with (or compensate for) loneliness. Hence:

H9: Singles who are single by choice are more likely to engage in active (and hedonic) behaviors (e.g., convenience-seeking, risky, less price conscious, variety-seeking, and innovative), while, singles who are single by circumstance engage in compensating behaviors (e.g., television watching, impulsiveness, and brand consciousness).

To test the above hypothesis, the 302 singles were divided into two groups. One group consisted of singles who have never been married or individuals who are divorced (255) and singles who were married before but are now single due to the death of their spouse (47). They were labeled as single by choice and single by circumstance. The results of the twogroup analysis are presented in Table 3.

As expected, single by circumstance were older than single by choice. Interestingly, and as hypothesized (H9), single by choice engaged in more active and hedonic lifestyles: convenience-seeking (3.8 versus 3.5), low price consciousness (3.4 versus 3.8), low risk aversion (2.2 versus 3.0), innovative (3.7 versus 3.3), and variety-seeking (4.0 versus 3.5). The single by circumstance group participated in more compensating and coping behavior: watching television (20 versus 17 hours per week), impulsiveness (3.6 versus 3.5), and brand consciousness (3.8 versus 3.4). All differences were significant except for impulsiveness. We only had directional support for impulsiveness.

TABLE 3

Figure 1

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We can offer a picture of the single consumer as one who engages in active lifestyles. They maintain high levels of activity and seek new challenges, accomplishments, and experiences. This seeking behavior leads them to search for new avenues of fulfillment. They seek convenience and variety and are willing to innovate into new and untried products in order to obtain this fulfillment. This seeking behavior allows them to expose themselves to new relationships and product opportunities in their quest. This is especially true for those who are single by choice.

Second, singles may engage in compensating behaviors to make up for a lack of intimacy in their lives. They desire more intimate identification with an individual and compensate for this lack of identification by forming large networks of friends. Part of this behavior is their tendency to identify more closely with brand names, possibly allowing the lifestyle depicted by the brand to be a reflection of their own. By choosing a certain set of brands they may be assuring themselves of their lifestyle. These singles may desire to fill some emotional gaps in their life. Affective messages and television shows may appeal to singles, as is indicated by their tendencies to watch a lot of television and display impulsive purchase behaviors. This is especially true for those who are single by circumstance. Figure 1 provides a framework for the findings of this study.

Marketers and advertisers wishing to capitalize on selling opportunities to singles will be able to apply much of the information uncovered in this study. Singles have a set of psychographic characteristics, which make them more appropriate targets for certain products or types of products.

With high-income levels, high tax rates, usually no dependents, and low risk aversiveness, singles may desire certain financial services. Tax-planning services and tax-free investments may be needed to reduce the high overall tax rates that singles are required to pay.

Singles with high incomes may be willing to invest in short-term-growth strategy stocks that tend to have more volatile returns. Financial investment packages targeting high growth and protected taxes appear ideal for the average single investor.

As singles continue to age, and the current ratio of singles to non-singles continues to grow, more will search for living accommodations of a more permanent nature. Again, with high disposable income levels singles may be willing to invest in homes, town homes, or condominiums.

Combine higher disposable incomes with an indulgent consumer group and it seems obvious to target upper-scale luxury goods to singles. Imported foods or wines, furniture or other household furnishings, and jewelry and clothing are examples of products that singles would purchase as being reflective of the lifestyle that they seek.

Marketing toward singles must be done with a certain degree of subtlety. They generally do not want to be identified as singles, and some marketers, such as Campbell's with their Soup For One, have produced products that have overtly targeted singles only to fail miserably.

Given singles' high level of brand consciousness, they may gain utility from being able to identify strongly with brands of their choosing. Thus, marketers should take advantage of a potentially brand-loyal customer by offering frequent-buyer or other programs that would tend to endear the customer to the marketer's brand.

Singles are both seekers of variety and innovators. This suggests that marketers of products with intentionally short life spans may find singles to be valuable targets. Producers of items that are sold on short-term promotional bases and then canceled or otherwise changed (some packaged food products, clothing fashions, automobile models) may benefit from singles' need and willingness to sample new things.

Having a positive attitude toward risk means that singles will be willing to take chances on products. Products sold through direct channels such as direct mail or catalogues or the internet may find a potential audience in single consumers.

Finally, marketers interested in targeting singles may consider the form of advertisement used. As opposed to informational advertisements, transformational or emotional advertisements tend to relate the product to a certain set of psychological characteristics that are anticipated to appeal to the target market (Puto and Wells, 1984). This more affect-based form of advertising may find a certain success with singles given their apparent desire for more emotional appeals.

Probably the greatest contribution toward research in this area could be the further segmentation of the singles' subgroups. There obviously is a great deal of difference between the young, single, recently graduated white-collar worker and a divorced mother of three existing on a subsistence income. While we only focus on single by choice and single by circumstance groupings, future research should delve more deeply into these subgroups in an attempt to find how the subgroups differ from one another. We suggest the following: Men versus Women, Singles with No Dependents versus Singles with Dependents, Differences in Age, and Living Alone versus Living with Others.

[Sidebar]

... singles may be more willing to purchase products supported by affective-based messages that appeal to their self-image.

[Sidebar]

Combine higher disposable incomes with an indulgent consumer group and it seems obvious to target upper scale luxury goods to singles.

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