Spinsters and Bachelors: Negotiating the ‘Single’ Identity in a Couple-Orientated Marketplace

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This paper explores a neglected area of single identity and its consumption contexts. We consider how singleness is constructed as a reflexive project within the marketplace, which privileges the heteronormativity of coupledom. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with 10 British adults who reveal the alienation and empowering dimensions of ‘being single’.

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Spinsters and Bachelors: Negotiating the ‘Single’ Identity in a Couple-Orientated Marketplace
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This paper endeavours to shed light on the neglected and often ‘unspoken’ narratives of ‘single’ adults. In particular, we focus on the narratives of British singletons as they attempt to make sense of their lived experience of ‘being single’ in a marketplace that upholds the ideal of couple relationships. In his pioneering paper, Wortzel (1977) stresses the importance of studying the ‘single life-cycle’ in consumer research, which promises to illustrate consumption practices and symbolic exchange of goods that are orientated towards “personal growth and enriching personal experiences” (pp. 324). Meanwhile, census data and national surveys consistently highlight the growth of the single population (Euromonitor 2012), indicating that ‘singleness’ is becoming a chosen way of living (Stein 1975; Budgeon 2008) and a reflexive project of the self (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Santore 2008). In Britain, the single population has increased by 14.5% between 1971 and 2011, while single-person household has reached 7.7 million in 2011 (ONS 2012).

Since Wortzel’s publication, there is surprisingly little research exploring the ‘single’ self-identity and how this is negotiated through consumption experiences. We argue that such an oversight mirrors broader marginalisation of ‘singleness’ as a troubled cultural category (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). Accordingly the marketplace is structured within what Berlant and Warner (2000) call ‘heteronormativity’ – a framework that defines and reproduces practices that privilege heterosexual coupledom (Budgeon 2008). Such a framework persistently espouses the ideology of marriage (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004) and the nuclear family (Byrne 2003). This is often encapsulated through the ‘imaginary of intimacy, coupling and kinship’ (Budgeon 2008:306). Consequently, heterosexual familism constitutes a reference point from which one’s intimate lives are judged (Byrne 2003). Hence, the single self is rendered ‘pathological’ (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003) and deviant (Sandfield and Percy 2009).

In recent years, sociologists have commented on the transformation of intimacy in Western societies (Giddens 1992). This is engendered by the deinstitutionalisation of marriage (Cherlin 2004) and the dissolution of the ‘patriarchal nuclear family’ leading to the emergence of the ‘brave new family’ (Stacey 1998) - which encompasses a diversity of postmodern living arrangements (such as cohabitation, single parenthood, non-heterosexual partnerships, stepfamily). However, van Every (1996) argues that such pluralisation of kinship serves only to reinforce the ‘family’ as a unit of analysis (Budgeon 2008:306) and thus, silences the voices of those who fall outside of the convention of couplehood and parenthood. In consumer research, we witness a burgeoning body of work exploring the consumption experiences of contemporary married women (Thompson et al 1990), working parents (Thompson 1996), single fathers (Harrison et al 2012), mothers (The Voice Group 2010). This study aims to reinstate the ‘voices’ of ‘single’ individuals as they assert their self-identities and manage their life projects outside of the heteronormative framework.

According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:22), modern individuals in Western society are thrown under the condition of individualisation, where identity is no longer tied to a ‘given’ tradition; rather it is reflexively ‘worked upon’ as part of one’s biographical project. Drawing on Bauman’s Liquid Love (2003) and Gidden’s Confluent Love (Giddens 1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim observes how the impermanence of interpersonal relationships in modernity has heightened individuals’ freedom to fashion their interpersonal relationships. In other words, both singlehood and couplehood are elective biographies, chosen by individuals to fit into their personal narratives. This potentially creates an emancipatory space where single individuals are able to carve out their significance and remove the stigma attached to singleness. However, Budgeon (2008) argues that this involves individuals being able to position themselves in relation to cultural meanings that are available.

This paper explores the extent to which individuals are able to transcend their marginalised position of ‘being single’ and how they draw on available cultural resources to construct a biography that reflects their struggles, agencies and triumphs. Drawing on the hermeneutic tradition (Thompson 1996), phenomenological interviews were conducted with 10 single adults (aged 22-40, 5 men, 5 women) to illustrate how participants construct emic meanings pertaining to ‘being single’ and how these are negotiated through various consumption contexts. A thematic analysis of the research findings reveals 2 overarching themes, which depict how (1) the single self is experienced as marginalising/self-actualising and how (2) the marketplace constitutes an alienating/emancipating space in relation to the heteronormative frame of reference.

Firstly, our participants consistently defend against the prevalent narrative that constructs the single self as problematic while at the same time attempting to assert their ‘singleness’ as a self-actualising project (Theme 1). Their narratives evokes stereotypical images of single women as ‘spinsters’, ‘crazy cat lady’ and ‘desperate’ while single men as ‘lonely’, ‘mama’s boy’ and ‘sleazy’. Bridget Jones and Mr. Beans embody the stigmatised dimension of singleness. Their salvation is predicated on finding Miss/Mr. Right that ideally culminating in marriage. For some participants, previous experience of couplehood/marriage is often rife with disharmony and feeling of disempowerment. For them, choosing to live a single life is empowering as it engenders a sense of personal development and freedom. In spite of this, all our participants continue to experience a sense of ‘alienation’ and social exclusion.

This sense of alienation is often intensified through their participation in the marketplace (Theme 2), which they considered to be orientated towards couple relationships. From single supplements to 2-for-1 promotional deals, our participants experience the marketplace as an oppressive space that (1) exploits their vulnerability (e.g. dating services), (2) makes conspicuous their stigmatised position (e.g. dining alone in restaurants) and (3) discriminates against their single status (e.g. single supplements). Yet, most participants are able to creatively appropriate cultural and interpersonal resources to (1) circumvent the marginalizing forces of the marketplace (e.g. sharing promotional deals with friends) and (2) cultivate new rituals that celebrate their singleness (e.g. pampering as self-gift). In sum, this paper contributes to consumer research by exploring the under-theorized area of single identity and its consumption contexts. Our findings illustrate that singleness is a reflexively negotiated identity project, enacted by individuals to manage and fashion their interpersonal lives against the prevailing ideology of couplehood.
REFERENCES