The Single Consumer: Avoiding Tradition and Extending the Self

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The single person represents a growing population; yet, at times, a single person may find him or herself surrounded by a marketplace that promotes couplehood and disengages the single consumer. As one instance, Valentine’s Day is an annual event that celebrates the institution of the couple. At more frequent events (e.g., weddings, attending a restaurant or movie), a single person may feel incomplete or out of place. Thus, via multiple qualitative methods, we seek to: 1) understand and explain single consumers’ experiences and identity-reflecting purchases, and 2) to apply the theory of the extended self (Belk, 1988) by showing how a lack of possessions and or experiences with a romantic partner may contribute to a single consumer’s feeling of an incomplete self.

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### The Single Consumer: Avoiding Tradition and Extending the Self

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Due to increasing divorce rates, the popularity of the single lifestyle, and marriages later in life, there is an escalating need for a focused understanding of single consumer. The single person, defined as one who lacks a serious romantic relationship or a “sex and everything else partner” (DePaulo 2006), may find him or herself consuming in a world that is geared towards the married or otherwise attached consumer. By the general populace, the single person is perceived as incomplete (DePaulo 2006), abnormal (Waehler 1996) or not yet adult (Schwartzberg, Berliner, and Jacob 1995); by the government, the single person is defined by what he or she is not—married (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). Essentially, the single person is perceived as lacking, which then may carry over to their self-perception. This may become particularly apparent during marketplace events geared for couples (including Valentine’s Day), which may prompt single people to seek out possessions that proudly state their single status. Else, the event may prompt singles to revert to the private sphere of consumption and avoid the public marketplace, celebration of certain holidays, or attendance at events.

We suggest that singles are sometimes faced with a “lack of self”, or a perceived missing part of the self as triggered by not having a spouse or other romantic partner at various marketplace events or holiday celebrations. A single person may find him or herself surrounded by a marketplace that promotes couplehood and disengages the single consumer. As one instance, Valentine’s Day is an annual “event” that celebrates romance and the institution of the couple. At more frequent events (including weddings, informal gatherings of coupled friends, or even simply attending a restaurant, movie, or other such public arena), a single person may at times feel incomplete or out of place.

How does the single consumer respond to Valentine’s Day and other marketplace events positioned towards couples, and how does he or she adjust his or her own identity in accordance? Here, we seek to advance understanding of single consumers via assessments of their attitudes and their symbolic, identity-reflecting purchases. Specifically, we maintain two objectives: 1) to understand and explain single consumers’ experiences and identity-reflecting purchases, and 2) to extend the theory of the extended self. Just as things or experiences that single people have or exchange reflect and contribute to their identity, we show how the things people do not have or exchange also reflect and contribute to one’s identity.

To reach the objectives, we employ multiple qualitative methods, including open-ended projective questionnaires of single consumers, depth-interviews, and observations. We extend theory to show the meaning associated with singles’ purchasing and non-purchasing during various markets that cater to non-singles. For instance, during Valentine’s Day, many single consumers elect not to buy, receive, or exchange traditional romantic items (e.g., cards, roses, chocolates, upscale dinners) (Close and Zinkhan 2006). Just as possessions reflect the identity of the possessor, and in turn contribute to that identity (Belk 1988); we find that a lack of these possessions/traditional exchanges reflects the identity of the single person. Further, lack of attendance or participation at events where a romantic partner or date is common also reflects and reinforces the single person’s identity.

On the one hand, some singles opt-out of such traditional purchases because they feel excluded from the market. By not exchanging the traditional items for Valentine’s Day, the single consumer reinforces their identity as a single person. A lack of these possessions (albeit often temporary possessions, such as flowers or chocolates) contributes to the single person’s identity. On the other hand, some single people receive or exchange items to embrace or announce their singlehood. For example, some single consumers wear t-shirts that say “single and proud”, or go to sponsored parties that are “singles only”. We aim to understand single’s possessions in terms of the meaning invested in them by the purchaser (Belk 1988).

As both Bateson (1982) and Belk (1988) note, people may incorporate others into the extended self. Belk argues that “If other people are apart of our extended selves, it follows that there should be a sense of self-loss during divorce and at the death of a spouse, child, or close friend” (156). Singles may experience jealousy as a fear of loss of part of the self to another person. In turn, they may feel personal injury when someone who has been incorporated into the extended self is hurt or offended in some way.

Our findings are potentially moderated by the individual’s perception of their single status and the type of single that they are. The classification of singles includes: divorced, separated, widowed, and never-married. Of those that have never married, there are three subgroups: the transitional, the permanent, and the unwilling single (Barkas 1980). Transitional singles view their single status as a stepping stone to coupled status. They fully expect to be in a coupled relationship at some point in the future. The permanent single is actually committed to his or her single status and finds great joy in living as a single person subject only to her or her own whims. The unwilling single is one who views the single status as a temporary one but, as of yet, has been unable to find someone to be un-single with.

In continuing research, we propose that the unwilling single is more likely to exhibit a “lack of self” than the transitional or permanent single. These are also probably the singles who will be the most affected by days and events such as Valentine’s Day and deal with social comparison in an alternative manner (e.g., by avoiding the formal marketplace traditions, by impulsively seeking Mr. or Ms. Right Now). We also expect that the permanent single is more likely to seek out the “single and proud” items. In other words, the permanent single will refuse to be defined by what he or she is not and, instead, seek to reinforce the single self at such times through various consumption activities and possessions. Here, the self is not missing a part. The unwilling single, on the other hand, may use various consumption activities fill in the part of the self that is missing.