

UPDATING SOME OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF FAMILY LIFE CYCLE THEORY: A TEACHING NOTE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines whether some of the descriptions applied to individuals in different states of the Family Life Cycle by Wells and Gubar in 1966 are still applicable today. Our analyses focused on a sample of 1,567 consumers ages 18 to 39 from the state of Washington. Our research showed that singles in the mid 1980s are more sociable and more experimental than those who are married. The divorced differ from the single and the married; they often have a level of responsibilities similar to those who are married, but have desires for socializing and recreation similar to those who are single.

All Principles of Marketing texts include a discussion of the Family Life Cycle. Marketing students learn that individuals enter the family life cycle as young single people not living at home and then proceed to get married, to have young children, then older children. When the children leave home, the parents are left in the "empty nest." The research cited in most Marketing texts until the late 1980s was first published in 1966 by Wells and Gubar. According to Wells and Gubar, singles are "fashion opinion leaders" and they are "recreation oriented." They buy "basic kitchen equipment, basic furniture, cars, equipment for the mating game, vacations." Young couples begin acquiring consumer durables and when children are added to the household, young parents buy baby food, chest rubs and cough medicines, vitamins, dolls, wagons, bicycles, music lessons, pianos, etc. wells and Gubar do not consider any nontraditional family forms, nor do they concern themselves with those who remain single throughout their lives.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the use of The Gilmore Research Group's database of 3,100 consumer interviews trademarked as The Washington Consumer. This research also would not have been possible without the provision of a summer research grant from the School of Business and Economics at Seattle Pacific University for Professor Regina Schlee.

Later editions of most Principles of Marketing texts such as Schoell and Guiltinan (1990), McDaniel and Darden (1987) and Bennet (1988) also include a "modernized Wells and Gubar diagram. The modernized "family life cycle" by Murphy and Staples (1979); although McCarthy and Perreault (1990) still only include the life cycle also includes divorced individuals as well as those who are married but do not have any children. An even more contemporary view of the family life cycle which includes individuals who remain single through their lives has been proposed by Gilly and Enis (1981). Neither Murphy and Staples (1979), nor Gilly and Enis (1981), however, elaborate in much detail the implications of their model for predicting consumer purchases.

Thus, while the concept of family life cycle intuitively appears to be useful, there is very little guidance provided to students as to how to apply it in marketing plans in light of current changes in the market place. As the Bureau of the Census reports, the proportion of single and divorced adults has been steadily increasing since 1970. In 1970, 16.2% of our population were single and 3.2% were divorced. By 1987, those single made up 21.8% of the population, and the percentage of those divorced had risen to 7.8%. Thus, those who are unmarried represented a larger target market now than they did in the '60s or the '70s. There are also indications that the behavior of singles is changing over time. Wortzel (1976, p. 328) states that "the single adult's household is metamorphosing from a place in which to 'camp out' while waiting for marriage to a setting which to express one's own individuality and one's own accomplishments."

Before we present the results of our research, we would like to briefly summarize other research relevant to this topic. Stern, et. al. (1987) found that singles are more concerned about their image and more likely to engage in recreational activities such as going to the movies, bars and discos than those who are married. A notable difference between singles in the 1980s and the singles described in 1966 is that singles in recent years are

more likely to purchase homes and condominiums, and luxuries such as china and crystal. A similar finding is reported by the Wall Street Journal (May 28, 1986). Although the information in the Wall Street Journal article is mostly anecdotal, its author reaches the conclusion that singles no longer wait to make major purchases. Instead, their purchasing habits "mimic those of the wed." Wortzel in an earlier study (1976) had, in fact, reached similar conclusions.

Miscellaneous other studies reported in American Demographics, however, point to differences between the married and the single. Findings reported in the February 1989 issue of American Demographics provide support for the hypothesis that single men are more image conscious than those who are married. Single men are more likely to be pleased when others pay them a compliment and are more likely to believe that others "judge you by your appearance."

Although the articles cited do not by any means exhaust all the research that has been done on the consumption patterns of individuals who are single and divorced as compared to those who are married, the number of studies conducted on this topic is relatively small. There are currently few elaborations of the implications of the modernized family life cycle for marketing planning in textbooks. Thus, in our research we want to explore two questions. First, in what ways do those who are single, married, and divorced differ from each other in the 1980s? This obviously has implications for marketing to those groups in the 1990s. And, second, what are the implications of these differences for marketing planning? Our research, however, is not a complete assessment of the implications of the modernized family life cycle for consumer purchases. Instead, we hope to provide readers with some more guidance as to some of the criteria used by singles, the married and the divorced in their consumer purchases than is currently available in marketing textbook.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our sample consists of 1,567 consumers ages 18 to 39 living in the state of Washington. This sample is part of a mail panel of 3,100 Washington consumers collected by the Gilmore Research Group in 1985. The panel was recruited through a telephone survey in which respondents underwent a six-minute series of questions, including an invitation to participate in a consumer panel.

The original sample for the telephone survey was a purchased listing of residential telephone numbers proportionate to households across Washington. The "plus-one" random-digit method was applied so that unlisted and nonpublished households could fall into the sample. A total of 7,193 respondents completed the telephone survey, and 4,325 agreed to accept a panel questionnaire through the mail, for a 60% acceptance rate. A gift box of products made in Washington was offered as an incentive.

The panel questionnaire was a 22-page booklet consisting of about 900 data points, covering both individual and household characteristics and behaviors. The questionnaire was pretested in a focus group setting, taking people about 45 to 60 minutes to complete. A postcard reminder was sent to nonreturns, and telephone follow-up calls were made in counties where return was slow. The final panel of 3,100 represents a 72% response rate of those mailed, 43% of those first contacted by telephone. The entire telephone-mail process was completed between August and the end of December, 1985. Data are stored at Gilmore Research Group in an accessible database file under the name, The Washington Consumer.

We limited our analyses to those ages 18 to 39 in order to minimize possible interactions between the effects of age and marital status, as they affect consumer attitudes and behavior. When Wells and Gubar (1966) first tested the implications of stage in family life cycle on consumer purchases, people were moving from the one state of family cycle to the next by fairly predictable ages. Most got married in their early twenties, had children shortly after that, and so on. Currently many people get married in their late twenties and do not have children until they are in their thirties. Consequently, we felt that comparing singles in their twenties and thirties to married couples in their fifties would confound differences caused by stages in the family life cycle with differences caused by the social attitudes of these two very different generations. Thus, our analyses were confined to members of the "babyboom" generation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We focused our analysis on six dimensions: (a) willingness to experiment, (b) sociability, (c) concerns about appearance, (d) convenience, (e)

attitudes towards money and credit, and (f) participation in recreational activities.

Our analysis included both attitudinal and behavioral indicators of each of the concepts examined. Responses to the attitudinal questions were rated on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for strongly disagree with the statement, and 5 stands for strongly agree. Z tests were performed to determine which pairwise comparisons between the groups were significantly significant at the .05 level (two tailed tests). On the tables reporting significance levels, the letter A stands for statistically significant differences between singles and the married, B stands for statistically significant differences between the divorced and the married, and C stands for statistically significant differences between singles and the divorced.

Our analysis of the data indicate that single adults are significantly different from those who are married in all these categories. There was less consistency as to how divorced individuals differ from the married and the single. On some of the dimensions examined, the divorced individuals differ from the married and the single, in other categories they are more like the married. The results of our analyses are summarized below by category.

1. Willingness to experiment: Singles are significantly more likely to be risk takers, to want to try new things (Table 1). This is exhibited in a greater willingness to try new things such as gourmet foods, sushi, espresso, and to go to "up tempo" restaurants. Singles also seek more excitement than those who are married. When on vacation, they want to stay away from the beaten path. Instead, they want to try things that are novel and exciting. The attitudes and behavior of the divorced with regard to willingness to experiment are less predictable than those of the single. The only indicator where they were more experimental than those who are married is with regard a generalized willingness to take risks (Table 1). The divorced, however, are less interested in gourmet food than the single or married, and they are not significantly different from the married or the single in any of the other indicators of experimentation we used.
2. Sociability: The unmarried (single and divorced) are more interested in meeting others

and going to parties than the married (Table 2). They are also significantly more likely to be involved in active recreational activities such as snow skiing, racquet sports, jogging/running, hiking, and to work out in a health club or at home. Those who are married are significantly more likely to consider themselves "homebodies" and to derive a lot of their entertainment from watching TV. The married are also significantly more involved in home related or family related activities such as house projects, gardening, playing games, camping with a camper or an RV, and are more involved with church or service organizations.

3. Concerns about appearance: Although this is one of the dimensions differentiating the single from those who are married in the original Wells and Gubar study (1966), we had very few questions in our data set regarding the importance placed on fashion and appearance. The only questions regarding the importance of image for the three groups referred to automobile selection (Table 3). Thus, we are able to gauge the importance of image to these groups on a very limited basis. Nevertheless, as expected, singles are significantly more likely to believe that a car is more than a means of getting from one place to the next and they are also a little less concerned about the gas mileage of a car as opposed to its styling. On both of these indicators, the divorced are not different from the married.
4. Concern for convenience: Although singles expressed a higher level of concern for convenience overall than the other two groups, all three groups exhibit some similarities (Table 3). All felt that after a busy day, they prefer to go out for dinner rather than cook at home. Singles are more likely to go out than the other two groups. All three groups also prefer to make things from scratch whenever possible - although the married have a higher level of preference for making things from scratch than the other groups.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF SINGLE, DIVORCED AND MARRIED

<u>Indicators of Experimentation</u>	<u>Single</u>	<u>Divorced/ Separated</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Significant Comparisons</u>
I really like to try new things.	4.48	4.45	4.43	n.s.
I don't go on vacation to rest; I want it to be for excitement.	3.72	3.61	3.50	A
Gourmet foods don't really interest me.	2.82	2.91	3.12	A, B
I believe everything is changing too fast today.	3.05	3.27	3.42	A
As a rule, I don't believe in taking risks.	2.83	2.91	3.38	A, B
<u>Types of Restaurants</u>				
<u>Preferred</u>				
Steak/Steak Houses	61.7%	60.3%	70.8%	A, B
Fresh Seafood	65.1	65.2	64.9	n.s.
"Gourmet Hamburgers"	52.8	45.1	46.0	A, C
Pasta	40.1	31.9	30.4	A, C
Barbecue	48.0	48.0	40.6	A, B
Sushi	12.3	8.8	7.0	A
Espresso Bars	26.0	19.6	11.4	A, B
Desserts or Pastries	49.8	40.2	40.5	A, C
<u>Style of Restaurant</u>				
<u>Preferred</u>				
Family/Casual	75.7%	82.8%	92.2%	A, B, C
Fine Restaurant	74.6	67.0	68.9	C
"Top of the Line"	33.7	26.5	24.9	A, C
Neighborhood Restaurant	64.1	64.7	57.5	A, B
Buffet or Cafeteria	28.6	31.6	36.0	A
"Up-Tempo"	54.3	41.9	25.3	A, B, C
<u>Consumption at Least Once a Month</u>				
Frozen Entrees	36%	39%	31%	A, B
Reduced Calorie				
Frozen Entrees	18	12	12	A
Gourmet Ice Cream	35	25	20	A, C
Specialty Imported Cheese	27	17	19	A, C

A = significant difference between singles and the married at the .05 level.

B = significant difference between divorced and the married at the .05 level.

C = significant difference between singles and the divorced at the .05 level.

n.s. = no statistically significant difference

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF SINGLE, DIVORCED AND MARRIED

<u>Sociability</u>	<u>Single</u>	<u>Divorced/ Separated</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Significant Comparisons</u>
I generally consider myself a homebody.	3.25	3.47	3.59	A
I like meeting new people when I travel.	4.39	4.48	4.21	A, B
Going to parties and being with friends is important to me.	3.76	3.62	3.14	A, B
I get most of my entertainment from watching TV.	2.70	2.76	3.00	A, B
<u>Recreational Activities</u>				
Athletic Workout	58.2%	53.2%	41.2%	A, B
Boating - Sail	16.7	9.3	8.9	A
Boating - Power	18.1	18.5	17.8	n.s.
Bicycling	35.5	28.2	28.4	A, C
Camping - Tent	43.3	39.8	38.6	n.s.
Camping - Camper/RV	10.3	13.0	22.9	A, B
Jogging, Running	20.6	15.3	13.2	A
Hiking, Backpacking	30.9	28.2	22.5	A, B
Hunting, Fishing	25.9	31.5	29.3	n.s.
Swimming	41.1	42.1	45.0	n.s.
Snow-skiing	28.7	27.5	19.9	A, B
Water-skiing	12.4	11.6	12.8	n.s.
Racquet Sports	27.3	17.6	16.2	A
Team sports	21.3	17.1	15.9	A
Arts/Crafts	29.1	36.1	35.8	A, C
Cooking/Entertaining	43.6	44.9	43.0	n.s.
Motor Trips	46.5	44.0	48.1	n.s.
Music (participation)	23.8	21.3	19.1	n.s.
Reading	49.3	51.4	50.7	n.s.
Children's Activities/ Games	20.9	35.2	42.9	A, B, C
Gardening	27.7	33.8	41.8	A, B
House Projects	42.2	46.3	51.0	A
Church/Volunteer Work	17.0	21.3	32.9	A, B
Other	13.2	14.3	10.2	B

A = significant difference between singles and the married at the .05 level.
 B = significant difference between divorced and the married at the .05 level.
 C = significant difference between singles and the divorced at the .05 level.
 n.s. = no statistically significance

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF SINGLE, DIVORCED AND MARRIED

Concerns about <u>Appearance</u>	<u>Single</u>	<u>Divorced/ Separated</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Significant Comparisons</u>
To me cars are simply a way to get where I want to go.	2.69	2.94	2.95	A
The kind of vehicle a person has reflects their personality	3.50	3.27	3.36	n.s.
A car's gas mileage is more important to me than its styling.	3.31	3.52	3.52	A
<u>Appreciation of Convenience</u>				
I'd rather spend extra and get products that require less preparation.	2.92	2.90	2.81	n.s.
Saving time is more important than saving a little money.	2.92	2.87	2.87	n.s.
When I've had a busy day, I often go out for dinner rather than cook at home.	3.42	3.38	3.21	A
I like to make most things from scratch, rather than buy prepared.	3.42	3.48	3.72	A, B
<u>Attitudes about Money</u>				
There is nothing wrong with taking a loan to pay for luxury items	3.56	3.46	3.27	A
Using credit cards is not a satisfactory way of making purchases.	2.86	3.00	3.02	n.s.
It's important to me to have guaranteed interest rate on investments.	4.04	4.22	4.11	C

A = significant difference between singles and the married at the .05 level.
 B = significant difference between divorced and the married at the .05 level.
 C = significant difference between singles and the divorced at the .05 level.
 n.s. = no statistically significant difference.

5. Attitude about money: Although singles are significantly more likely to believe there is nothing wrong with taking a loan to pay for luxuries than the other groups, all in our sample have a positive attitude towards taking out a loan for luxuries. On the other hand, when it comes to investments, all three groups demonstrate a conservative orientation towards money because they desire a guaranteed rate of return for investments. The most conservative of the three groups with regard to wanting a guaranteed interest rate for investments are the divorced (Table 3).
 - e) Recreation oriented businesses: Singles form a significant market for businesses providing active or outdoor recreation.
 - f) Packaged foods industries: Singles and the divorced form a significant market for gourmet foods such as super-premium ice cream and imported cheese. Although the unmarried have lower incomes, a greater proportion of that income is spent on discretionary purchases and luxuries. In contrast, the married spend a higher proportion of their income on their homes and their children.

MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

Thus, our research findings indicate one's marital status has a significant effect with regard to attitudes and behavior in adults ages 18-39. In this section we would like to point to some of the industries or businesses that could potentially benefit the most by considering their target customers' marital status in their marketing and advertising plans.

- a) Restaurants: The unmarried are more willing to try novel, exotic, and gourmet restaurants. Also, since the unmarried are more interested in meeting new people, restaurants that allow social interaction between the patrons are more likely to be popular with this group.
- b) Financial institutions: Singles are more willing to take out loans for "wants" or luxuries as opposed to "needs." Such banking products as a Personal Line of Credit which can be used to pay for vacation travel, for wardrobe enhancement, etc. may appear especially attractive to this group.
- c) Car Dealers: Singles will show a preference for sportier cars, if they are affordable. Designing payment plans appropriate to this group may make such vehicles affordable to them.
- d) Travel related businesses: Singles and the divorced are significantly more likely to want to meet new people when they travel, thus plans that provide opportunities to meet other travelers are especially appealing to these groups. Singles are also more attracted to travel plans that take them off the beaten path and provide a sense of adventure.

In summary, our research findings indicate that there are significant differences between the attitudes and consumption patterns of babyboomers who are married, single or divorced. Singles have maintained many of the same attitudes they had in the original Wells and Gubar study in 1966; they are still the most recreation oriented group. We also found that singles are more likely to take risks than either the married or the divorced. Married babyboomers in the mid '80s, however, have the guidelines we provide in this article for targeting these consumer groups will be useful to marketing students and practitioners.

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