

# The Singleton Society

# Targeting the Bridget Jones generation

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This is an extract taken from our nVision UK service. For the full report or for more information please contact:

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## Introduction

Because of shifting demographics and consumer lifestyle changes, Singletons are a growing demographic in the UK. This group of people, although chiefly in their 20s and 30s is not limited to the younger age bracket. They are present across all demographics.

Because they are single, they have more time to spend on themselves and can spend their disposable income rather than having to divide it among a family. As such they represent a lucrative segment for brands and marketers.

This analysis will attempt to define who this segment actually is in order to consider whether a sociologically meaningful category is at work here. Is being single a life stage or a lifestyle choice? How have Singletons' identities and attitudes evolved? What kinds of lives do they now lead and what motivates their consumption choices? We will also explore whether we live in a singlist society and what the potential is for brands to counteract this effect?

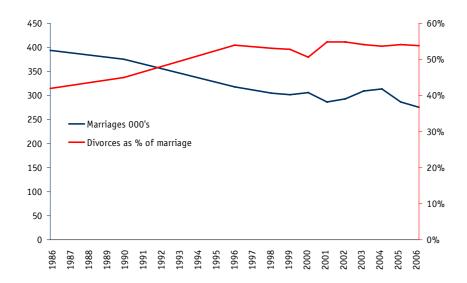
# **Executive Summary**

- Singletons are a growing demographic. There are over 3 million truly single people living in Britain today. There has been a long-term trend away from marriage and the number of marriages in England and Wales has fallen from 394,000 in 1986 to 285,100 in 2005. At the same time, the divorce rate has generally increased (if more recently declined).
- Singletons are mostly present in the younger age groups but that does not mean that they are universally young. 15% of people are single at any one point between the ages of 30 to 60; this represents one in every six or seven people and we are seeing more and more mature single consumers.
- There are a growing number of single person households in the UK and they have particular consumption needs.
- The image of the Singleton has evolved greatly since the 1990s and the era of the emotionally desperate character that was Bridget Jones. There are now many role models for Singletons within every age group, including those who are young and dating (Lindsay Lohan), those who have not yet felt the pressure to settle down (Cameron Diaz), those who have had children and are now dating again like Sadie Frost.
- Single people's attitudes have also evolved and they no longer view their status as a
  depressing fate but instead as more of a lifestyle choice. The American group Quirkyalone
  attests to this shift.
- Single people tend to take more care over their personal appearance and are likely to spend
  more money on products that improve the way they look like: fashion, beauty products and
  gym memberships etc.
- They are also more interested in developing themselves, sampling various hobbies and trying new experiences. They are better integrated into the wider community than their married counterparts and spend more time socialising and staying in touch with others.
- Singletons can struggle with the idea of monogamy but their needs are met with a raft of
  dating websites for all requirements; there are specific sites for gay people, parents, ethnic
  groups or those with pets....
- They still perceive there to be a degree of singlism within society and complain of discrimination within the workplace, feelings of exclusion in social situations and unfair pricing from companies. There is indeed a real cost attached to living alone: higher taxes and supplements for travelling alone are just two examples of this.
- Single consumers represent a lucrative opportunity for brands as they tend to spend their disposable income and are naturally attracted to the latest brands and styles available.
   Some brands have already risen to the challenge and have begun to actively target this demographic.

# 1. Singleton in context

## 1.1. Trend away from marriage

#### Chart 1 Number of marriages and divorce rate



Source: Population Trends, National Statistics/nVision

Base: UK

A major factor influencing the rise of the Singleton is a long-term decline in and volatility of marriage in the UK, witnessed over the last three decades. The number of marriages in England and Wales has fallen from 394,000 in 1986 to 275,100 in 2006. Government projections put the proportion of people aged 45-54 who are married in 2031 at 48% for men (down from 71% in 2003) and 50% for women (down from 72%).

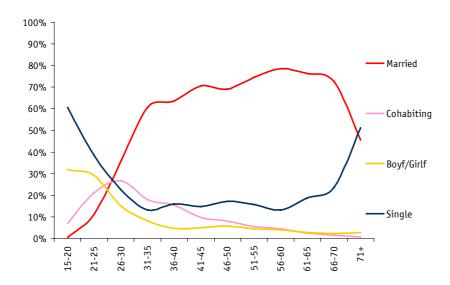
While many do still choose to enter into matrimony, there is a common conception that the contract of marriage is no longer a necessity. Women are more economically-independent and no longer need the financial security provided by marriage; they are also more career-focused and do not put exclusive emphasis on their relationships; young couples may have witnessed the fall-out of parental divorce and are thus discouraged; and high property prices can mean that property acquisition is prioritised over the cost of a wedding ceremony.

Marriage has lately also been on the receiving end of some considerable bad press. Nicky Falkof, in her book Ball & Chain: The Trouble with Modern Marriage, goes so far as to say that marriage is actually detrimental to women, stating that married men do less housework than their wives (and their co-habiting male counterparts) and, in those cases where the marriage descends into discord, women suffer greater psychological damage than their husbands. She describes marriage in the

following way: "...marriage itself – a bloated, aged, outdated institution, which consistently screws women over while selling them a snake oil vision of romance."

## 1.2. Age structure of singletons

#### Chart 2 Legal marital status, by age



Source: British Household Panel Survey/nVision

Base: 15,000 respondents aged 15+, UK, 2004

One of the common myths surrounding singletons is that they are all young. In the chart above, the BHPS data allows us to look at relationship status by age. Unlike most other surveys, the BHPS asks whether legally single people have a girlfriend or boyfriend allowing us to distinguish between people with and without partners of any kind. We can define Singletons as those who are either in non-cohabiting relationships or who are truly single. The two can be grouped together because their lifestyles are similar and they both behave very differently to people in cohabiting and married relationships. As a general rule, they are more focused on themselves, independent and have busier lives with more leisure activities and social interaction. They are also less home-focused.

The data reveals that relationships change according to the different age brackets. The proportion of truly single people is at its highest between the ages of 15 to 20 (60%). It then progressively tails off; for instance, 13% of people in their early 30s are single and then between the ages of 30 and 60, this rises to 15% of people who are single at any one point: this is equivalent to 1 in every 6 or 7 people and compared to the 1950s model, is a high figure. Although singleton status is naturally skewed towards the young as younger people tend to be keener to experiment before settling down, it is a myth that it is restricted to them.

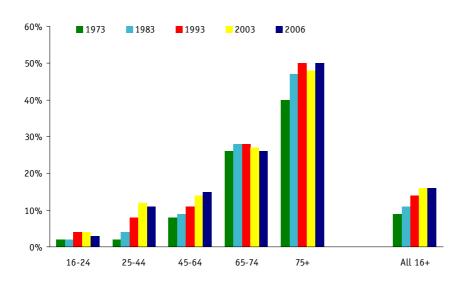
We are seeing more and more mature singletons. People are getting married later in life and as a result are often staying single well into their thirties and sometimes forties. Furthermore, marriage is often no longer a prominent life goal. Older consumers who have been married do not want to settle for a relationship that they feel is not right; they are more likely to get divorced once the children have left the nest. This is accentuated by the fact that women have greater alternatives than they used to thanks to their economic independence.

Research regarding dating websites confirms these findings. Amanda Christie, co-founder of the dating website Mysinglefriend.com states: "41% of our active users are aged between 31 and 40, and 80% of people who left the site last week because they had met someone were over 30. Being over 35 no longer means that you have missed the boat; there are plenty of opportunities for the older age groups to meet people, date and enjoy the single scene."

Overall, then, one in four 25-40 year olds are truly Singletons, that is to say that they do not have a partner in their lives, which equals over 3 million people living in Britain today. This important and growing life-stage is one which will increasingly need to be addressed by market, brands and appropriate communications.

## 1.3. Single person households

Chart 3 Percentage of people living alone, by age



Source: General Household Survey, National Statistics/nVision

Base: GB

The number of single person households has been steadily growing for years as a result of demographic and consumer lifestyle changes. The growth has been most notable amongst the 25 to 44 and the 45 to 64 age groups as a result of the factors that have already been discussed in this report such as marriage taking place later on in life, lower marriage rates, higher divorce rates and the economic independence of women. Those over 75 are by far the most likely to live alone and within this age bracket, women outnumber men largely because they often outlive them.

However single person households should not be bundled together since they can display very different characteristics. Many young consumers simply choose to live alone as an aspirational life choice before settling down with a chosen partner; these consumers may well be in the more affluent social and economic sectors of society and, by having money and no dependents, form an important target group for marketers. They will behave in very different ways to those individuals who have separated from their partners out of necessity rather than choice and who may struggle to afford the higher costs attached to living alone.

The impacts of this overall increase in single person households include pressure on the available housing stock and particular consumption patterns.

# 2. The image of the singleton

#### 2.1. Role models for singletons

#### Chart 4 Singleton role models of all ages

Young and dating







Post - children dating





Couples who never marry





Source: nVision Base: UK, 2008

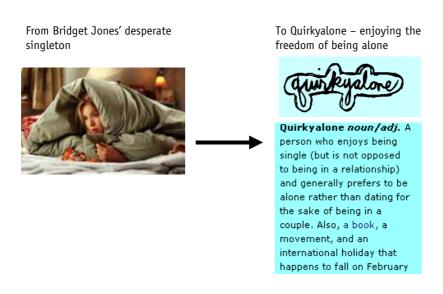
For the most part, we have moved on from the image of Singletons as sad Bridget Jones figures who are desperate to find a partner and are only single because they cannot find anyone. Singledom is increasingly viewed as a positive lifestyle choice and people no longer feeling obliged to be in a relationship for the sake of it. Being single is a period of life that is increasingly celebrated in its own right rather than being feared as a void that needs to be filled. It is often seen as a necessary period where one can focus on oneself as an individual, develop oneself and experience new things.

There are plenty of examples in the media of celebrities who are single and who appear to be perfectly happy about it.

It is not that these people are never in relationships or do not want to be but the difference is that they feel secure enough to be alone. These role models are present in every age category and amongst both men and women. At the younger end of the age spectrum, there are celebrities like Lindsay Lohan and Josh Hartnett who appear to be perpetually dating and reluctant to attach themselves to one person; then there are people like Cameron Diaz and Denise Van Outen who are single and happy in their thirties and do not appear desperate to settle down; there are also celebrities like Sadie Frost who have been married and had children but who are now dating; and finally there are mature couples who are older and have been together for years but have never felt the need to formalise their relationship through marriage. An example of the latter group is Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins or Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell. Their stories may be the stuff of a million celebrity magazines but there is nothing trivial about the positive role-modelling they offer to different Singletons in different age categories.

#### 2.2. The shift in attitudes of Singleton

#### Chart 5 The evolved image of singletons



Source: nVision Base: UK, 2008

So being single is no longer perceived as a depressing fate but as more of an active lifestyle choice. A group has been set up in the United States for Singletons or people with "singleton attitudes". The members of the group are not opposed to being in a couple but they are happier alone than in an unhappy relationship. The description of the group is: "Quirkyalone is not anti-love. It is pro-love. It is not anti-dating. It is anti-compulsory dating. We prefer to be single rather than settle. We spend a significant chunk of our lives single because we hold relationships to a high standard. Are Quirkyalones loners? Not necessarily. Quirkyalones often value friendship very highly. But we do value occasional solitude." Quirkyalone is even gaining recognition as a neologism that refers to people who enjoy being single.

Singletons are often quite happy to be single and in many cases appreciate the benefits afforded by their independence; they have more time to spend on themselves and on leisure activities. The media agency Carat did some research on the topic of Singletons by interviewing more than 12,000 adults in England, Scotland and Wales; they defined as Singletons as those who were divorced, widowed, separated or otherwise not in a relationship and not planning to get married or move in with a

partner in the next twelve months. The research revealed that when asked what one thing would improve their lives, only one in six Singletons said "finding a partner" compared to a third who answered "a large sum of money"; 60% of those surveyed believe that single people are as happy as couples. Respondents mentioned the following upsides to being single: having more time to spend on hobbies (76%), being more spontaneous (62%) and having more close friends (53%).

The singles did acknowledge that they had experienced some feelings of loneliness at certain key times such as Christmas, Valentine's Day, New Year and sometimes on Saturdays when there tended to be a heavy media focus on families and couples. These times may create an opportunity for brands to play a role in Singletons' lives and create an emotional tie with them.

# Further contents of this report

- Singleton lifestyle
- More attention to their appearance
- Higher leisure participation
- Food habits
- Fewer social ties
- Singletons and monogamy
- Gay lifestyles
- Singletons and consumption habits
- Perceived singlism
- The cost of being a singleton
- The eco-threat of singletons
- Splashing out
- Brands talking to the singleton demographic
- Conclusions

This is an extract from the report 'The Singleton Society' from our nVision UK service. For the full copy of this report or for further information please contact Clare Staunton on <a href="mailto:clares@futurefoundation.net">clares@futurefoundation.net</a> or call +44(0) 203 042 4747.