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Consumption and the Ideal Life

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ABSTRACT

This article explores individuals' beliefs of what constitutes an ideal life. The objective was to provide insight into the extent to which the consumption of goods and services factors into perceptions of how life should be. In total, 36 interviews were conducted in three countries - Australia, the USA, and the UK. In each country twelve interviews were conducted with individuals covering multiple age, gender, and occupation categories. Far from wishing for lottery wins or increases in status and possessions, most interviewees expressed significant satisfaction with their current lives. The findings suggest that satisfying relationships with family and friends dominate perceptions of an ideal life, with products and possessions being of significance second only to these relationships.

ARTICLE

Introduction

This study explored individuals' beliefs of what constitutes an ideal life, the objective being to provide insight into the extent to which consumption figures into their perceptions of how life should be. The impetus for this study is the increasing awareness of the importance of understanding consumers' general life priorities rather than just focusing on consumption patterns relating to specific products. Paralleling this appreciation of the need to look more broadly at consumption is a growing concern among marketing academics about a range of issues including environmental degradation, increasing materialism, polarising wealth, and the effects of unsustainable consumption on future generations. Such problems suggest that the societal marketing approach is not being commonly adopted by marketers.

In the light of increasing concern among consumer researchers perhaps it is time to explore whether consumers are primarily concerned with their immediate individual desires over and above other personal and social issues. Do they have insatiable appetites for consumer goods to the extent that other life issues pale into insignificance? This article explores these questions by reporting the outcomes of interviews with consumers where the focus was on their priorities and values rather than their product-related needs and wants. By asking consumers about their ideal lives it was possible to explore the extent to which consumption is (or is not) perceived to be integral to a satisfying life.

Method

In total, 36 interviews were conducted in three countries – Australia, the USA, and the UK. These three countries share a common cultural heritage and thus could be expected to show similarities in life priorities while also reflecting the differences associated with their particular circumstances. The choice of these countries was based on the extent to which they appear to mimic each other politically and culturally, thus indicating their assumptions of shared value systems and an inter-dependent future. Their similarities are evident in their close proximity on the United Nations (UN) Human Development Index. Australia is ranked 3rd, the US 8th, and the UK 12th. This indicates that they share comparable standing in terms of GDP per capita, life expectancy, and education levels.

Twelve interviews were conducted in each country. The Australian interviews were conducted in Perth, the US interviews were conducted in New York, and the UK interviews were primarily conducted in London and its outlying areas. In each location individuals were sought who both originated from that city and who had recently moved there from other locations within the country. In this way the findings are not purely indicative of the cultural norms of a particular city. Interviewees were recruited to cover multiple age, gender, and occupation categories (including retired and unemployed) to obtain broad insights rather than detailed accounts relevant only to a particular sub-segment.

The semi-structured interviews commenced with broad, open-ended questions that invited interviewees to discuss themselves and their lives in any way they saw fit. The objective was to elicit spontaneous mentions of attitudes and behaviours relating to consumption prior to specific questions about favourite possessions towards the end of the interview. An interview guide was used to

ensure all topics of interest were covered at some stage during the interview. The interviews were taped and the transcriptions subsequently imported into NVivo for coding and analysis.

Findings

There were some apparent differences in the ways individuals from each of the three countries approached the projective task of imagining their ideal world. The American interviewees seemed more comfortable with the exercise and tended to provide detailed data more quickly. The British and Australian interviewees were less prone to providing expansive responses and took some time to warm to the task. There were, however, strong similarities in the responses provided across the three countries. The major findings are outlined below.

Contented and grateful

Far from wishing for lottery wins or increases in status and possessions, most interviewees expressed significant satisfaction with their current lives. The British were particularly contented, with several stating that it was impossible for them to contemplate or describe a life any better than the one they were presently experiencing:

Question (Q): If you could have your ideal life, the perfect life, any life you wanted, how would it be?

Response (R): I wouldn't change it.

Q: You wouldn't change a thing?

R: No, I would never change it (UK, female, 18-35).

This is not to say that products did not feature in people's descriptions of their ideal lives – they often did – but other elements dominated. Interviewees generally considered themselves to be fortunate and privileged in some way. Privilege was perceived in relation to a range of factors including their family lives, the jobs they hold, or the areas in which they live. There was some talk of the evils of terrorism, religion, and politics, but these issues were largely considered to be outside their individual control and therefore not to be dwelled upon. There was a strong sense that life could be much worse, as it is for countless others, and as such it would be inappropriate to want much more than they have. This led

some to nominate the opportunity to undertake charity work as an aspect of an ideal life. The Americans in particular emphasised the need to contribute to the less fortunate:

If I didn't need to work I would probably do something for charity... I think it comes from having been happy with what you have done to a point and now you are at a point where you want to help others, and it is just a gratifying feeling (USA, female, 36-55).

If I could afford to I would help others who needed the money. I have always got a thing for them (UK, male, 56+).

Given the emphasis that is often placed on the Western world's insatiable appetite for consumer goods, it was unexpected that greater ownership of possessions should not feature to any great extent in interviewees' accounts of their ideal lives. Instead, the bulk of the concern was with the quality of relationships with loved ones, especially among the female interviewees. Those not in a long-term partnership expressed a desire to meet "the right person", and most of those without children looked forward to a time in the future when they could have a family of their own. Immediate family members were referred to constantly, and to a lesser extent extended family members and friends were described as being critical to the enjoyment of life.

I always thought that was the most important job you can have - to be a mother and raise your children well. I really have a great life. I think family is the greatest asset you can have. So my ideal life has always revolved around family, happy families. And that includes extended families (Australia, female, 36-55).

Related to the desire for strong and satisfying relationships with family and friends was a yearning for more time. Particularly for those juggling work and family commitments, trying to meet their obligations while ensuring adequate "quality time" for themselves and others was considered problematic: "I suppose I would like to have the time more than anything else" (UK, male, 18-34). Similarly, space was an issue in terms of its ability to facilitate rewarding interactions with others. People, time, and space appeared to blend to constitute an environment in which interviewees believed they could be most happy:

If things were ideal we would have a little bigger place for a little bit more room for our family, and I would have a little bit more free time to spend with them (USA, male, 35-55).

One area of dissatisfaction that tended to emerge after some discussion was employment. Almost half the interviewees spontaneously raised their jobs during their interviews, with most expressing boredom or lack of autonomy as factors preventing them from enjoying their work. Some expressed a preference to avoid work altogether in their ideal lives, but most acknowledged that they would rather stay employed but in a more rewarding position or career. Some women who had halted their careers to have a family indicated that they missed this aspect of their lives.

While money was often mentioned, it was typically in the context of desiring a constant and reasonable income stream that would be adequate to ensure they and their loved ones could be free from the stress of financial insecurity. Interviewees tended to qualify that they did not want excessive amounts of money, just enough to be comfortable:

I would wish for my own space, a pleasant home, a healthy family, money sufficient to provide for their needs, and the time to watch them grow (Australia, male, 18-35).

Now, What Would I Like?

As noted above, interviewees' descriptions of their ideal lives centred mainly on relationships rather than possessions. Many interviewees did, however, at some stage of their interviews mention some product that they felt could enhance their lives. Such mentions were typically brief and delivered in a less heart-felt manner than discussions of the elements of an ideal life described above.

Travel, houses, and cars (in order of importance) were predominant amongst those consumption-related items nominated. In terms of travel, some interviewees from each country expressed the desire to see more of the world and experience other cultures. For some this was mostly about briefly escaping their hectic lives and enjoying some rest and relaxation, but for others it appeared to be rooted more in curiosity and the desire for novel experiences. Houses were important for their role as the location in which family interaction and socialising occur, as was apparent by the word

'home' being used more frequently than the word 'house'. Houses were also valued for their aesthetic appeal. Wanting a "nice" house tended to be a female desire, particularly among those living in New York who (unsurprisingly given the high-rise nature of much New York housing) emphasised how a nice home would be spacious. References to houses sometimes included the desire to undertake renovations to improve the look and functioning of their homes, although this was more apparent in the Australian data. Mentions of cars as features of an ideal life were fewer in number than either travel or houses and were more common among men.

Discussion and Conclusion

What was most striking in the data was how unambitious interviewees were in their descriptions of their ideal lives. No mansions and chandeliers, no cruises on the Riviera, just everyday aspirations – most of which they felt they had already realised. There are various possible explanations for this finding. In the first instance, people living in the US, the UK, and Australia are among the most affluent in the world, and thus are likely to have access to most things they need and want. Compared to those living in the developing nations they are unlikely to experience poverty and hardship. This alone, however, does not explain the high levels of satisfaction reported as others have noted that wealth is not necessarily positively related to happiness. Perhaps the massive increase in media usage across the world that has been blamed for escalating wants through the portrayal of conspicuous consumption has had the twin effect making those in affluent countries more aware of their relative good fortune.

These findings are not meant to present conclusive evidence or otherwise of the extent of materialism in these three countries. Instead, they constitute a very broad and initial attempt to provide insight into how consumers compare their current lives with their ideal lives and what they consider to be of most importance to them. Such insight has the potential to sensitise us to those aspects of consumers' lives that can be improved with existing and prospective goods and services. It can thus benefit those marketers who have the foresight to recognise the value of understanding the broader life goals of their target markets. Interviewees' emphasis on relationship aspects of their lives suggest that products that enhance family life and facilitate connections with loved ones may be appreciated in the marketplace. Similarly, communications that firmly align products with the joys of human interaction may touch a communal chord.

The findings also have the potential to assist consumers through education and empowerment. The close alignment in interviewees' minds between their current and ideal lives indicates that they may be ready to focus on "big picture" issues that require them to consider the longer term requirements of the societies in which they live. Consumer researchers have an important role to play in providing consumers with the information they need to understand the implications of their choices. Similar to the societal marketing concept, the notion of consumer education as a legitimate role for consumer researchers had its heyday in the 1970s. Both ideas may yet have their day in the sun if consumers and marketers are ready to focus on societal level issues.

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