

Empty Nest Couples: Lifestyles and Typology

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Abstract

Lifestyle is a construct that makes it easier to understand consumers' behaviour, since it involves ways of life and results from past experiences, as well as from personal features based on current situations. It influences the consumption habits of individuals and their families. Accordingly, the aim of the current article is to analyze the lifestyle of individuals who belong to the empty nest couple group. The participants were Brazilian and chosen according to their activities, interests and opinions. Thus, we adopted the exploratory and descriptive design, and followed qualitative and quantitative aspects. According to the results, there are many lifestyles and they can be divided in three groups: the elitist, the politicized and the popular one. Elitists prioritize education and the consumption of cultural and organic products. The politicized group is aware of its political rights and duties. The popular group practices common habits such as playing soccer, watching TV shows and eating industrialized food.

Introduction

The consumption choices made by consumers in traditional societies are dictated by status, caste or village. People in consumer societies are freer to select goods, services and activities generated by the social identity they express to others (Barbosa and Campbell, 2006). Their consumption practices define who they are, whom they want to be identified with or want to avoid. The lifestyle, based on a marketing perspective, enables classifying people according to what they like to do, to how they spend their time and available income, mainly when it comes to activities, interests and opinions (AIOs) (Blackwell *et al.*, 2011).

Such approach results from the article by Plummer (1971), who sought to learn about the activities, interests and opinions of twelve thousand housewives and from twelve hundred American household heads. The activities are associated with manifested actions such as purchasing in a determined store or talking to someone about a service the person has liked or disliked. The interests are associated with the level of excitement that accompanies special or continued attention on certain events, topics or goods. The opinions are related to a verbal or written response after a question or an agenda is introduced (Blackwell *et al.*, 2011).

Studies involving AIO were pioneers in investigating consumers' lifestyles. These studies were reviewed, soon after they were released, due to the lack of theoretical sophistication. Thus, subsequent studies have added to the AIO construct of theories of personality and individual values (Lastovicka, 1982; Mitchell, 1983; Khale *et al.*, 1986). However, these constructs do not cover lifestyle complexity, since it is a dynamic socio-

cultural construction influenced by social, cultural and historical contexts (Holt, 1997).

The AIO construct has become quite popular among researchers, despite its criticism and limitations. Gonzalez and Bello (2002) lists more than 20 studies that have used it up to the year 2000. Recent studies associated AIO and individual values to feature consumers' lifestyles. You (2011) suggested a scale for lifestyle on the Internet. His scale was similar to that by Lee *et al.* (2009), who measured consumers' preferences on the net; and to that by Spillan *et al.* (2007), who investigated the effects of lifestyle and ethnocentrism on Indian consumers; as well as to that by Tao (2006), who compared the lifestyle of Taiwanese and Americans.

Thus, understanding consumers' lifestyle helps defining a target market that goes beyond the mere demographic descriptions and/or the option for a certain product, creating a new market vision, positioning a product; communicating the attributes of the product; developing strategies and addressing political and social issues (Blackwell *et al.*, 2011). There is lack of studies in this field in Brazil, although the importance of the psychographic approaches in these researches is acknowledged. Most of these studies are conducted by advertising agencies or by global companies and, unfortunately, they are not available to the academic community. The aim of the current article is to fill this gap by taking into consideration that the family is one of the main socialization environments. Family is the primary social institution and, along with other factors, it is responsible for the transmission of beliefs, ideas and meanings in society (Kreppner, 2000).

Contemporary families live in a society based on fragmented and heterogeneous daily routines, which makes it difficult

thinking life universally. The aforementioned family changes can be observed in studies conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). These studies deal with family in a broader sense, not only through blood ties, but also through residence status in the same household. They show increase in the number of people living alone and 'clusters' of people living in the same house, without any family ties. The standard family showed three major changes in recent decades, namely: substantial drop in size, from 3.6 people in 1996 to 3.0 in the survey conducted in 2011; increased number of single mothers; increased number of people who are the family references (between 1996 and 2006, the number of women who held the head of the household position increased by 79%, whereas, during the same period, the number of men holding the same position increased by 25%). However, families with children still prevail in the Brazilian society: 46.3% (IBGE/PNAD, 2011).

These family configurations are often studied according to the logic of their lifecycles. These studies were used and pioneered by Sociology in the mid-1930s (Murphy and Staples, 1979). The first marketing effort in the consumers' behaviour field dates back to 1954 (Wells and Gubar, 1966; Murphy and Staples, 1979).

They have since developed different types of classifications to analyze the lifecycle of a family; one that stands out is the proposal by Wells and Gubar (1966), which remains to this day. According to these authors, the lifecycle of a family is segmented into: young single; newly married without children; full nest I (youngest child under six years old); full nest II (youngest child over 6 years old); full nest III (the head of the household is over 45 years old and has dependent children); empty nest I (the head of the household is over 45 years old, works, without dependent children); empty Nest II (the head of the home is retired, without dependent children); single and working; and single and retired.

Accordingly, we intend to herein answer the following question: what are the main lifestyle features of empty nest couples that live in large Brazilian cities and belong to various economic classes? This question is justified by the studies about lifestyle that allow segmenting this group according to its way of life. Such segmentation has managerial implications since it can facilitate the adequacy of goods and services supplies such as leisure and entertainment, gastronomy and healthcare, among others, according to the profile of these couples.

Method

This article is an excerpt from a larger study about the lifestyle and consumption practices of family arrangements. So far, only heterosexual couples with double income and no children (DINC), and empty nest couples have been studied. These two family arrangements were first chosen because they are experiencing similar situations, for example: they do not have children in the house (the first group has no children, and the children no longer live in the house, in the second group) and their purchasing power is similar. Both groups have more income available to invest in consumption.

We used an integrated method or multi-method in the present study and it requires using many different research methods

and techniques (Creswell, 2009). Thus, we applied two research strands: the qualitative and the quantitative one. Initially, we conducted a qualitative and exploratory survey through in-depth interviews and direct observation of seven couples. Three couples from the empty nest segment I (the head of the household is over 45 years old still works and has independent children), four from the empty nest segment II (the head of the house is retired and has independent children); both groups belonged to different economic classes. This stage of the research took place between June and July 2013, and it was conducted by the authors of the present article in the homes of the respondents. The interviews lasted approximately 60 min and each member of the couple was individually interviewed to demonstrate the uniqueness of each subject. The content of the interviews was recorded and transcribed. The couples were chosen out of convenience, the interviews were booked by phone and the interviewer was one of the current authors. A semi-structured script including the views of empty nest couples about different subjects was adopted. The script was divided in three main topics: general approach (family, marriage, couples and children); consumption practices and lifestyle, which encompassed activities, interests and opinions. We first investigated how to define family, marriage and life as a couple. Second, we clarified consumers' experiences and their meanings. Finally, we questioned them about daily activities, weekend activities, topics of interest and political opinions.

The second stage of this study addressed a descriptive approach from a quantitative point of view in order to point out certain population features or phenomena, as this approach encompasses the largest and most representative samples, and is broadly used in the marketing field (Perin *et al.*, 2000). The present empty nest sample included 65 couples and followed the same profile defined in the qualitative study. Data collection took place in January 2014 in the workplaces and homes of empty nest couples and each spouse was individually interviewed.

Initially, the interviews were scheduled by phone and email, the data collection instruments were pre-tested and the researchers responsible for conducting the field interviews were trained. The fact that the interviews were individual made it easier for the 65 couples to fully answer the questions assessed in the current study. The instrument was developed according to the results obtained with the qualitative approach and to the adaptation scale suggested by Finotti (2009). His scale contains 31 variables divided in five sections, namely: food, personal life, natural environment, home and political positions. The first block of questions aim at identifying the respondents. This instrument includes a mix of open, closed, simple choice, multiple-choice and scalar questions.

We used a Likert scale and applied the 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'no opinion', 'disagree' and 'totally disagree' alternatives to the scalar questions (Chagas, 2000). It was done to investigate how often these couples go to restaurants, if they would agree or disagree with paying more for pesticide free food and if they would consume organic foods or eat for pleasure, regardless of health, etc. The couples were questioned about satisfaction with their jobs or school, their opinion about studying as a long-term investment, the possibility of living in another country, their opinion on the importance of status, etc.

They were also asked if they often host friends and if home decor means comfort rather than style or fashion. They were argued about their political positions, where they stand on the political spectrum, if they usually vote for people and not for the parties, if they discuss politics with their friends, etc.

The data collected in the field were inserted to and analyzed in the SPSS software. Data processing was done through Cluster Analysis (a set of statistical techniques whose goal is to aggregate respondents, products or entities depending on their features, i.e. demographic and lifestyle features of empty nest couples). Subsequently, we applied the non-hierarchical clusters – K-means technique, which seeks to classify a set of categories in homogeneous groups based on the similarities and differences between them. This technique is applied to the original data and to part of an initial division based on a predefined number of individuals. The formed groups must meet the internal cohesion criteria and set heterogeneity between groups (Quintal, 2006). We made the option for three partitions in the present study, namely: to agree, to be unresponsive or to disagree with a statement on the suggested scale (Hair *et al.*, 2005).

The original variables (compare the housing, the political positions and the eating habits) of the scale were kept in order to delimit the clusters, according to Lucas *et al.* (2014). We identified the clusters and conducted a confirmatory qualitative analysis to ratify the results of the previous steps and to further clarify the grey areas (Sampieri *et al.*, 2013). Six interviews with representatives from the groups identified in the survey – elitists, politicized and popular – were conducted in this stage of the study. Two representatives from each cluster were selected to assure fairness between the groups.

Analyzing and discussing the results

Initially, we presented the three groups identified through the non-hierarchical method of K-means, according to their positions – favourable, neutral and discordant – regarding the food, personal life, natural environment, home and political position variables (Tables 1 and 2).

Cluster 1 is the most representative in percentage, 50.77% of the sample and it was followed by Cluster 3, 33.08%. The less representative cluster was Cluster 2, 16.15% of the sample. We employed the chi-square test for nominal variables and the *t*-test average for the intervals in order to identify the significant differences between groups. Initially, we analyzed the demographic features of the respondents.

The three clusters are demographically homogeneous. The differences between them are restricted to gender, income and education. Women prevail in Cluster 1, they have higher education

Table 1 Number of cases

	Number of cases	Percentage
Cluster 1	66	50.77
Cluster 2	21	16.15
Cluster 3	43	33.08
TOTAL	130	100.00

Source: Research, 2014.

level and greater purchasing power. There is a balance between genders in Cluster 2, balanced purchasing power and high education level. Most of the individuals in Cluster 3 are men with lower education level and lower income. The configuration of these groups reflects characteristics of the Brazilian society. According to IBGE data, women have higher education level than men. Women, between 18 and 24 years old, represent 15.1% of attendance in college, whereas men account for 11.3%. It is also true at high school, wherein women between 15 and 17 years old account for 52.2% attendance, against 42.4% of men (Centro do Professorado Paulista, 2014). However, there is no way to understand the lifestyle of these respondents and/or of these target markets just through demographic variables; thus, we looked for a new configuration. This is the reason why targeting the empty nest couples is a unique proposal, because it emerged from the data analysis conducted in the present study. It allowed analyzing the herein studied segment based on a new approach, as well as pointing out opportunities for entrepreneurs and researchers who are interested in this target audience. We identified three clusters based on these aspects: the elitist, the politicized and the popular one (Table 3).

Cluster 1 – elitist: formed by women with higher education and income level who use to read and have healthy eating habits. They are willing to pay more for organic products, to avoid transgenic products, to control their weight and to prioritize education. Cluster 2 – politicized: it is composed of representatives of both genders who have a particular interest in politics and affinity to left-wing politics, vote for parties rather than for people and who like to discuss this subject with friends and family. Their political positions have imposed them some sanctions in respect to their careers. However, many do assert their beliefs, assume the condition of protagonists in favour of the common good ahead of non-profits and work for the excluded. Cluster 3 – popular: it is made up of men with lower education level who do not read, who like sports – especially soccer. They are conservative, close to the bottom of the pyramid, accommodated, do not invest in their education, work in the segment of services as drivers, doorkeepers, etc. (Table 3).

Table 2 Demographic features of clusters the difference is not statistically significant

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
Gender	61% women	52% male and 48% female	65% men
Education level*	47% High school level 53% University or more	60% High school level 40% University or more	75% High school level 25% University or more
Economic class	77% belong to the middle class and 23% to the higher classes	81% belong to the middle class and 19% to the higher classes	67% belong to the middle class 26% to the upper middle class and 7% to the higher classes

Source: Research, 2014.

Table 3 AIO (activities, interests and opinions by clusters)

Factor	Variables	Cluster 1: Elitist	Cluster 2: Politicized	Cluster 3: Popular
Activities	Average of books read per month	54% one	47% one	61% one
Interests	Informative about their area of expertise	47%	52%	Do not have this habit
	Areas in which they stay informed about	41% politics	52% politics.	40% sports
	What they enjoy	39% economy 38% music and 35% literature.	38% literature.	62% soccer
Opinions about food	They would pay more for food without pesticides	76%	63%	30%
	They see no problem in consuming genetically modified food	24%	48%	40%
	Try to maintain a healthy diet	90%	81%	46%
	They control nutrition to control their weight	80%	62%	14%
	They seek to consume organic food	60%	52%	16%
	They eat for pleasure no matter if it is healthy or not	15%	14%	57%
Opinions about their homes	Often entertaining friends at home	76%	30%	57%
	Try to have their favourite leisure items at home	86%	81%	72%

Source: Research, 2014.

Data in Table 3 identify the main features that distinguish the elitists. Their behaviour is linked to their cultural capital as it is shown in the confirmatory analysis, when one of the respondents talks about his/her spending habits 'I want that book, I want that information, or that course (...) 'I love going to New York, I go to bookstores and stay there relishing myself with all the things.' Reading is an activity that reflects the group interests in their area of expertise, politics and economy. The books supply to their needs of updating and/or to their professional qualification, 'technical books, because I have a very high demand (...) try to always keep myself updated.' This group also expressed particular interest in music – a manifestation of culture: 'I have photos of me playing the piano that I cannot even remember (...) because my mother was a teacher and I always had a very good ear for music.' Music is a manifestation of culture and the piano is an instrument traditionally linked to higher income audiences (Barros, 1998).

Elitists also prioritize their diet in order to preserve their health and keep their body weight. They claim to consume organic products and are willing to pay more for food without pesticides. This behaviour reveals their concern with food, so that they can age with dignity. This question is relevant as life expectancy is increasing among Brazilians. According to IBGE (2014), in 2003 the mean life expectancy was 71.3 years, in 2012 it increased to 74 years. Furthermore, it should be considered that there is a close connection between income, education level and healthy eating (Smith, 2011). After all, these individuals have more access to information, prepare meals at home, prioritize fresh food and some have domestic employees who help them in these tasks. It is also possible stating that gender influences the concern with health, since women seek guidance from doctors and specialists to preserve their health and well-being. Due to cultural reasons, women tend to add more value to the aesthetics of the body, the primacy of aesthetics, a slim figure, is a value among Brazilian women, even among more mature women.

The analysis further identifies that the elitists consider the house a synonym for home-space and for family life, a place to host friends and for recreation – the environment in which they most like to be. The importance given to the house/home raises

the question of gender, because of the social role assigned to women, who often take care of the house, and organize the meetings between friends and family. The house, in this perspective, is the proper place for these events; it offers privacy and is where peoples' personal life unfolds. The home grounds the identity of this group as a member of a community, the house is more than a place to live in, it has a central meaning (Buttimer, 2015).

The elitists show to be apolitical, they vote for people, not parties; they do not believe in any politician, at their social gatherings they use policies as guides, support social causes and do so independently. It substantiates the Brazilian scenario: the discontentment of the population with the rulers, with corruption, and with the lack of public policies focused on infrastructure and on the general welfare of the population. They believe that there is a crisis, since a significant portion of the population does not feel represented by politicians and/or parties (Oliveira, 2014).

The politicized individuals comprise men and women, as well as middle-classers, given their purchasing power and their schooling (most of them just finished high school). This group of individuals distinguish from others due to their affinity and involvement with politics, they look to stay informed about the subject, believe in politicians and even vote for parties, whereas individuals from other groups vote for candidates. They assume political views tuned with left-wing politics. The in-depth interviews allowed observing that this group was affected by the military dictatorship installed in Brazil between 1964 and 1984. The respondents reported difficulties to build their careers because of their political views. They said to be often labelled as communists; thus, many cannot find work because the companies fear sanctions by hiring them.

This political position also extends to the way they conduct their private lives. One of the respondents claimed that she and her husband had been criticized for the way they educated their only son. Although they had the resources to live in another neighbourhood, they elected for periphery, to stay where they lived with drug dealers and addicts. Their son studied in a public school, the idea was to keep him free. In her words: 'We

decided to create a free child by not awakening in him many desires (...). He studied in a public school (...) his friends were from the village (...) was a child who went to the cinema and theater a lot, and used to read since young age'.

Nowadays, the scenario in the country has changed, but some politicized individuals remain faithful to their beliefs, they engage in social causes of non-party political nature to work for the excluded and try to rescue the citizenship of this population. One respondent emphasized his experience as a member of an agency that produces community newspapers: '... a communication agency (...) citizenship and education to reveal what society does not see. Populations that do not have their history recorded (...) the homeless, prostitutes - decide the titles, agendas, I just edit and coordinate groups.'

The popular group is predominantly formed by men with elementary or high school education who do not read, who like sports, especially soccer. This group belongs to the basis of society. These individuals have conservative attitudes, and their marriage follows traditional ways – women are responsible for the education of children and the man takes care of family provisions. Most of them still have an active professional life – they fit into the empty nest profile I. They made sacrifices to educate their children, to provide them with education, although they are not particularly interested in it. This lack of interest in education is observed during an in-depth interview, at the confirmatory stage, the respondent states '(...) I stopped studying and had a lot of encouragement, but, thought I don't need to, I'm earning well, what do I need to study more for? ... for what I am doing it is enough.' However, the attitude is different when it comes to their children, they endeavoured to make sure that their children get higher education, which, in their view, allows future comfort and higher quality of life.

Another feature of the popular group is the lack of care with the quality of the food; they fail to control their weight, their behaviour may be associated with their social class. Studies conducted by Brazilian researchers indicate that people with lower incomes tend to eat worse, they eat more industrialized products, soft drinks, and do not eat fruits and vegetables (Santos *et al.*, 2013). It is also associated with gender since men often worry less with their health, and they do not seek medical advice (Gomes *et al.*, 2007).

Final considerations

The aim of the current study was to analyze the lifestyle of individuals who compose the empty nest couples group and who live in a big Brazilian city. Demographic features alone do not allow fully understanding the profile of these couples since they are homogeneous in respect to age, ownership of assets and education. The lifestyle of these couples influences all their spending habits, the elitists have refined tastes, prioritize reading, travelling and consuming cultural and organic products. The politicized ones are dispossessed, concerned with social contexts and have anti-consumption attitude. The popular group consumes mass media information – television, like soccer and junk food.

Despite the fragilities of the AIO construct – activities, interests and opinions (AIO) – and the disregard for the social, cultural and historical contexts these groups live in, there is no denying about their contributions to the segmentation of the market, par-

ticularly when it comes to specific groups such as the Brazilian empty nest couples. Accordingly, one has to ask: How can the lifestyle of Brazilian empty nest couples be distinguished from that of other couples in the same condition, in other countries? Thus, the Brazilian empty nest couples invest in travelling and in leisure, they prefer to keep close ties with their children and, although they live in different households, they often have family lunches. Some couples take care of their grandchildren and provide financial support to their children, they pay for grocery expenses, prepare meals, do the kids' laundry and often purchase houses for their children to live in. Thus, the empty nest concept does not fully apply to Brazilian couples, because contrary to what is expected at this stage, the nest is still full.

Among the managerial implications of this new Brazilian empty nest couple classification, we highlight its contribution to the targeting of these consumers according to the uniqueness of each cluster since there is no single lifestyle, but several. Consequently, by following this typology, companies can tailor their offerings to the interests of each cluster. After all, these consumers do not behave the same way and it affects their choices. For example, companies can offer services focused on health care, particularly programs focused on preventive medicine, to Cluster 1 – elitists. There is no way to adopt the same strategy to Cluster 3 – popular, since they seek doctors only in critical situations; therefore, companies should focus on supplying curative medicine and emergency services to this cluster.

There is association between empty nest couples and population aging; the proportion of elderly, which now reaches 9%, will go up to 14% in 2018 (Brazil will join the group of countries classified as 'aged'). Thus, the speed at which the population is aging in Brazil is higher than that experienced in France, for example. The European country doubled its elderly population from 7% to 14% in 115 years (1865–1980). This reversal in the age pyramid, due to increased life expectancy – It was 43 years old in 1945, and in 2010, 73 years old. Simultaneously, there was birth rate reduction in recent decades – the mean number of children a woman was expected to have by the end of their reproductive life was 6 in 1975, and this number fell to 2, in 2005 (Portal do Envelhecimento, 2014). These data illustrate the importance of the studied group since most of the participants in the study belong to this age group. It suggests that marketing managers need to remain attentive to the features of this segment.

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