

ONE OF YOUR NEIGHBORS IS A SWINGER: WHY DON'T MARKETING ACADEMICS CARE? INTRODUCING CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGRAMY

Patrick A. Barbro, Rowan University

ABSTRACT

Lifestyle marketing in the lifestyle. Marketing academics have long ignored a group of consumers that represent a growing aspect of the population that provide an opportunity for both businesses and academic research. Consensual non-monogamy (CNM). CNM is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of behaviors in which members of a relationship agree to engage in sexual, romantic, or emotional relationships with other parties. There are many subsets within this group that could provide interesting segmentation opportunities for marketers. Other academic fields have begun to conduct research concerning CNM, but the marketing field has not yet approached the topic nor examined this large and growing set of consumers that likely have unique characteristics making them appealing to both researchers and practitioners.

Perhaps many marketing academics consider the topic taboo or insignificant to add to their research stream, but the author points out that the market is real, growing, and too substantial to ignore despite apprehensions about discussing the topic in our field. Consumer interest and spending related to CNM are on the rise and should be of greater interest to marketers. Consumers that participate in CNM represent a group with significant economic clout as well as unique and sometimes counter intuitive behavioral traits that require further examination. By reviewing the extant research, it becomes clear that CNM, attitudes toward it, and traits of consumers who engage in it, are prominent issues being explored by scholars in several fields. It also becomes clear however that the subject has not yet been embraced by marketing academics or the broader business community. The author calls for further research and provides an agenda and research questions regarding how to approach this long ignored and yet important group of consumers.

Keywords: Consensual Non-Monogamy, Consumer Behavior, Swinging, Segmentation, Consumer Identity.

INTROCUCTION

Marketing academics perform extensive research on even the most esoteric phenomenon, behaviors, and segments of consumers. However, almost no research has been done in our field on a fascinating topic and set of consumers that presents a myriad of research opportunities: consensual non-monogamy (CNM). Reading through a typical consumer behavior textbook one can find page after page describing nuances of consumers based on ethnicity, religion, generation, and gender, yet the substantial segment of consumers that participate in CNM don't appear in our texts or journal articles. The topic has received increased coverage in the media and in other realms of academia (Psychology Today, 2018), but not in the marketing field. More specifically, research has shown that google searches regarding CNM have dramatically increased in the period from 2006 to 2015 (Moors, 2017). Consumers are more frequently seeking information on the subject which indicates that this is a trend marketer need to be aware of and perform research on. CNM is a booming market and blossoming research area, just not among marketing academics thus far. This needs to

change. We research and teach lifestyle marketing to no end, but have not explored what is commonly referred to as “*the lifestyle.*” Why is that?

Perhaps the subject is considered too taboo to appear in mainstream marketing journals and classrooms. Maybe there is just a dearth of researchers in our field interested in exploring the topic. CNM is highly stigmatized (Moors et al., 2015). Perhaps researchers fear transference of this stigma to their research. Whatever the reason, it can’t be argued that the market isn’t big enough to be worth our time. It is estimated that 4-5% of Americans are involved in some kind of CNM (Moors et al., 2015). The swinger’s tourism industry alone is valued at approximately

\$20 billion (Forbes 2016) and this doesn’t even include other aspects of the industry (clubs, parties, websites, apps, etc.). The sheer size of the market and opportunity to examine a large set of consumers that potentially exhibit unique decision making, behaviors, and consumption should garner more attention from marketing researchers.

CNM is an umbrella term used to encompass a broad array of behaviors in which members of a relationship agree to engage in sexual, romantic, or emotional relationships with other parties (Mastick et al., 2014). What may be of particular interest to marketers is that CNM has many subsets, each of which could potentially have nuanced consumer profiles and exhibit varied responses to marketing stimuli. Swingers typically engage in sex with other people in social settings and may exchange partners or engage in group play (Walshok, 1971). In polyamory, members of the relationship typically have multiple relationships that have a romantic or emotional component with multiple people (Mastick et al., 2014). Open relationships involve partners seeking sexual relationships independently from one another (Mastick et al., 2014). While these examples are just a sample of the arrangements that those involved in CNM may practice, they demonstrate the nuanced nature of this market. The following section synthesizes the recent and prominent extant literature to highlight key aspects of CNM research and demonstrate the dearth of business research on the subject.

METHODOLOGY

This article is not empirical research in itself, but a call to other academics to embrace CNM as a future research stream in marketing and other business disciplines. Interest in CNM among both the consumer and researchers has grown immensely in recent years (De Santis et al., 2019). Calls have been made inviting theoretical and empirical research across the social sciences to further explore CNM (De Santis et al., 2019). It has also been noted that little has been done to improve methodological approaches in CNM research (Sizemore & Olmstead, 2017). Yet business disciplines like marketing have yet to embrace the concept and examine how CNM is relevant to consumers and businesses. To demonstrate this need for research in the business domain, a review of the prominent and recent research concerning CNM was conducted. A thorough and systematic review of extant CNM research was published as recently as 2017 (Sizemore & Olmstead, 2017), so to avoid redundancy this review focused on the most recent developments and research that is most applicable to business disciplines. The most relevant recent research found through the review is summarized in Table 1.

Author(s) and Year	Key Findings & Constructs
Sizemore & Olmstead (2017)	The majority of CNM research focuses on behavior with less known attitudes toward and willingness to engage in CNM
Moors (2017)	Americans interest in CNM significantly increased in the 10-year period from 2006-2015.
Moors et al. (2017)	The benefits of family, sex, trust, love, communication, and

	commitment are not exclusive to monogamous relationships and can be experienced in CNM relationships.
Sizemore & Olmstead (2018)	Regarding participation in CNM among young adults a greater proportion of women and heterosexuals were found to be unwilling to participate, men were more willing to participate, and sexual minorities were more open minded to the idea of CNM.
Wilt et al. (2018)	Swingers show higher life satisfaction than average. Sexual variety and meeting people socially were the prominent reasons for engaging in swinging.
Ka et al. (2020)	Sociosexual behavior influences attitudes toward CNM and is moderated by avoidant attachment.
Mogilski et al. (2020)	Life history theory can be used to explain moral objection to CNM. Women in CNM relationships report higher levels of social and ethical risk taking.
Hompson et al. (2020)	Young adults demonstrate a positive implicit association with monogamy and a neutral implicit association with CNM. Implicit associations with CNM lead to willingness to allow a partner to engage in CNM, but not their own interest.

In reviewing recent CNM research two things become clear. First, the research is limited to the fields of human sexuality and psychology with no known research examining those who participate in CNM as consumers. Second, many of the constructs and methods are either identical or similar to those commonly used by marketing researchers. For example, Sizemore & Olmstead (2018) used a mixed methods approach including both qualitative content analysis and quantitative survey data. These methods are among the most commonly used by marketing researchers as well.

Survey and experimental data are commonly used by consumer behavior researchers. Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002) used survey data to determine why consumers participate in online communities. As willingness to participate is a prominent question for CNM researchers, the use of similar methods for similar questions demonstrates how marketing is a good fit as a destination for the next step in CNM research. Kozinets et al. (2010) used content analysis of online blogs to determine aspects of the community such character narrative and communal norms. This too demonstrates the similarity between marketing researchers and CNM researchers in terms of both methodology and constructs of interest.

Both of these examples consider consumers in an online context. CNM participants have an active presence in online communities through websites and apps specifically catering to CNM consumers. The CNM website swinglifestyle.com for example has over 5 million visits per month. This type of active online community provides an opportunity for other methodologies commonly used by marketers. For example, Barbro (2019) uses experimental research to analyze how the type of imagery presented, and selfies in particular, influence product evaluation.

Similar techniques could be used to examine the effectiveness of imagery used by online CNM communities. Mudambi & Schuff (2010) collected a large set of online review data from amazon.com to determine what makes an online review helpful. Given the volume of online CNM content available, researchers could analyze the features and content present to establish the drivers of interreaction among CNM participants. This brief review of recent CNM research clearly indicates significant overlap in the skillsets of CNM and marketing researchers and indicates opportunities for future research in marketing focused on this unique set of consumers. The next following section provides suggestions and poses questions as to how marketing researchers can effectively bring CNM research into the business world.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

As demonstrated in the prior section, all of the recent research regarding CNM has been in the context of human sexuality and psychology. This section will explore and discuss how the extant research can be integrated with the field of marketing and poses potential research questions for marketing scholars to consider.

We already know some demographic information about those involved in CNM that would be of interest to marketers. While there are many subsets of CNM, the population appears to have fairly homogenous demographic traits (Rubin et al., 2014). The CNM community is largely white, college educated, and upper-middle class with 90% describing themselves as having above average incomes and education (Rubin et al., 2014). Both heterosexuals and sexual minorities are equally likely to participate in CNM relationships (Rubin et al., 2014). While these types of demographics are usually of interest to marketers, our typical psychographic profiles generally don't consider a consumer's sexual relationship dynamic simultaneously. Based on existing research, this leads to an interesting question for potential future research:

RQ1 Would a set of consumers in traditional relationships exhibit the same behaviors that a comparable set of consumers that engage in CNM would?

The literature provides anecdotal evidence suggesting that examining the CNM community in the context of marketing literature would be a fruitful endeavor. Garcia-Rada et al. (2019) explored how consumers in romantic relationships consider the preferences of their partners when making purchase decisions. A key finding in their research was that when a consumer's preferences conflict with those of their partner, consumers are likely to sacrifice their own preferences to satisfy their partners when the choice concerns a product that will be consumed jointly (Garcia-Rada et al., 2019). They also found that consumers make choices oriented toward their partner's preferences when the purchase is hedonic in nature (Garcia-Rada et al., 2019). It is worth noting the participants in this research were simply in romantic relationships, but dynamics of these relationships were not explored nor reported. When considering related concepts in the context of CNM, some results suggest that these findings may not hold true.

In the context of swinging, it could be argued that participating in sexual acts with parties outside the relationship is a joint consumption experience. The purpose of female bisexual behavior during swinging is thought to be done to enhance the experience of their male partner as it has been shown that men enjoy threesomes with a female and their female partner more than a threesome with a male (Bentzen & Træen, 2014; Wilt et al., 2018). This would be consistent with the idea that partners in a romantic relationship yield to their partner's preferences in a joint consumption decision. However, it has also been argued that women engage in bisexual activities for their own benefit rather than that of their partner (Wilt et al., 2018). This runs contrary to the idea that it is a partner's preference that leads to the decision to engage the behavior. Those involved in non-traditional relationships experience positive feelings from their partner being involved in a rival romantic relationship and these feelings can lead to relationship satisfaction (Wilt et al., 2018). In this case, choosing to participate in CNM to achieve positive feelings of their own may run counter to the idea that a partner in a romantic relationship would focus more on their partner's preferences than their own during joint consumption. Obviously, there is a difference between partners in a romantic relationship choosing what toppings to have on a pizza they will share that night and deciding who they will engage in a threesome with, but the commonalities in the decision-making process suggest that CNM may add a new element to the existing stream of research. This leads to some interesting questions for future research:

RQ2a Does involvement in CNM influence consumer decision making?

RQ2b If so, how do consumers that practice CNM profile differently than those in traditional relationships?

RQ2c How could marketers utilize and analyze these differences?

Researchers have explored the use of non-traditional families in advertising and found that their portrayal can influence consumer attitudes and affect how they feel about a brand (Ruggs et al., 2018). More specifically, they show that imagery depicting same sex couples versus traditional couples can elicit different responses from different sets of consumers (Ruggs et al., 2018). Imagine a married male/female couple with children. This would likely be considered a traditional family and we would expect them to respond in line with what prior research has shown us about traditional families. Now let's say that same couple engages in CNM. Are they still a traditional family? Would other consumers still view them as a traditional family if they knew about their lifestyle? Would this couple still respond to marketing and behavioral stimuli as prior research would expect a traditional family to? Research has begun to address similar questions concerning the LGBTQIA+ community and the findings suggest that there are differences in consumer responses to traditional versus non-traditional families. This suggests that there may be differences when considering the CNM population, though approaching these issues in the context of CNM remains an opportunity. Potential research questions to address this issue include the following:

RQ3a How do other consumers view consumers, products, and services that are associated with CNM?

RQ3b Would consumers view these relationships, products, and services positively or negatively?

RQ3c Would the context in which they encounter them be a significant factor?

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While these limited examples are intended to spur thought and demonstrate that CNM has the potential to be a viable and intriguing research stream in the marketing literature, there are many more possibilities. The issues and constructs around CNM currently being researched by scholars in other fields provide a natural fit for marketing researchers. A significant amount of CNM research concerns the characteristics of those who participate, the drivers of willingness to participate, and the attitudes toward CNM. Marketing academics have specific expertise in analyzing these issues in the context of brands, products, services, and consumers. This suggests that marketers may not only be able to effectively introduce CNM to the business literature, but also collaborate to create interdisciplinary research with existing CNM researchers. Using their expertise in analyzing the impact of socio-economic characteristics on consumption, marketing researchers could add value to the field by helping to understand what CNM participants look like as consumers, and what drives their willingness to participate in CNM to begin with. This potential future research would unlock information and understanding of a unique set of consumers benefiting both managers and researchers alike.

By understanding the behavior of consumers and the psychological and situational aspects behind it, marketing scholars are uniquely positioned to leverage this expertise to better understand the consumption behavior associated with CNM and the drivers behind CNM itself. In doing this, researchers will also be able to inform managers and the business community to the unique characteristics of this significant market segment. Online consumer behavior and online reviews in particular could serve as a robust area for future CNM

research given the deep pool of existing research on online word of mouth and the strong online presence in the CNM community; particularly considering the existence of online reviews of potential CNM partners. Limitations certainly exist. It will be challenging to identify appropriate samples of consumers to collect data from given the taboo nature of CNM. Social desirability bias may discourage consumers from identifying as CNM participants, thus making reliable data hard to assemble.

Despite this issue, CNM remains a desirable potential research stream for the field of marketing. Through the examples presented and questions posed here, it seems quite possible that one of your neighbors is a swinger and that marketing academics should care.

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