THE INFLUENCE OF LONELINESS ON THE CHOICES MADE BY CONSUMERS
OF ENTERTAINMENT

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Abstract: *This study explores the complex relationship between loneliness and digital entertainment consumption, shedding light on how solitary individuals often turn to digital media for solace. Drawing upon quantitative marketing research findings and insightful analysis, the study proposes actionable strategies to alleviate loneliness among entertainment enthusiasts, particularly singles. By elucidating these dynamics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of loneliness within the context of entertainment consumption.*

1.   INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper is the result of a quantitative marketing research we conducted to understand the behavior of lonely consumers in terms of entertainment. The research explores how lonely individuals use and interact with different forms of entertainment such as movies, TV shows, social media, YouTube or video games. This could help to develop more effective strategies for content producers and marketers meant to fulfil the needs and preferences of lonely consumers. On the other hand, we mean it as a warning for lonely people who consume digital entertainment in an excessive manner, because big companies can use their vulnerability to manipulate their consumption behavior through advertisements.

Loneliness was a global issue even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Fumagalli et al., 2022). People in modern societies worldwide have explicitly reported their loneliness, which is increasingly prevalent (Pieters, 2013; Kim and Jang, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). Loneliness has been acknowledged as a phenomenon resulting from global societal shifts and changing demographics, including reduced family sizes, fragmented family structures, increased relocation frequencies, growing metropolitan cities, more technology use, and aging populations (Mittal and Silvera, 2018). Prior research has related loneliness to a range of negative health outcomes (heart disease, suicide, mortality, etc.) and psychological outcomes (depression, anxiety, anger, etc.) across life spans and cultures (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006; Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018; Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, loneliness has been viewed as "part and parcel of human" and needs to be alleviated for physical and psychological functioning (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010).

Consumers are not immune to loneliness (Rippé et al., 2018; Dalman et al., 2021). Increasing research attention has been paid to the phenomenon of consumer loneliness (CL) in various contexts (Pieters, 2013; Pittman and Reich, 2016; Tan and Lu, 2019; Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2020; Loh et al., 2021). Despite the proliferation of research on CL, the literature is neither coherent nor explanatory and has provided an inadequate understanding of CL. Furthermore, little research has investigated the main issues and provided a holistic view of the research evidence to understand CL.

2. CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE FIELD

2.1 THE INTERPRETATION OF LONELINESS

A look into the classical literature on loneliness cannot overlook the 1973 contribution by Robert Weiss, who distinguished between "the loneliness of social isolation" and View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk brought to you by core provided by Studies and scientific researches. Economics edition (Faculty of Economic... Schiau 61 "the loneliness of emotional isolation", two distinct feelings, brought about by two distinct situations: either the lack of a significant and supportive social network, or the lack of close, intimate relationships. In their seminal 1982 work, Peplau and Perlman theorize that loneliness is due to a discrepancy between

the individual's desired relationships and the relationships available to them. Research has revealed that loneliness it can be culture-specific, can depend on socio-economic factors, age and gender. Although loneliness is experienced among individuals of all ages, certain studies suggest older adults are particularly vulnerable to social loneliness (Donaldson & Watson, 1996). However, there are studies that point out loneliness is also experienced by other age groups (Victor et al. 2002). A 2001 U.S. study found that young adult and older adult participants did not differ in terms of emotional or social loneliness (Green et al., 2001); A 2004 U.K. study by Berguno, Leroux, McAinsh, and Shaikh found that 80% of children aged 8-10 reported feeling lonely and isolated at school (2004); In a meta-analysis, Pinquart and Sorensen quote studies that find only 5% - 15% of older adult study participants to declare ever feeling lonely (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001; see also Prince et al., 1997). Loneliness can also be strongly felt by a student population that has moved away to university and living away from family members (Wilcox et al. , 2005), throughout the process of adjusting to major life changes (Rokach & Brock, 1997) and dealing with a lack of financial capital (Halleröd & Larsson, 2008) – all situations characteristic to a young university student population. Clearly, there is evidence in the research literature that the issue of loneliness across the lifespan requires further investigation. One explanation for these differences is that older adults face an array of difficulties brought on by the ageing process, which are correlated with a sense of loneliness: reduced social activity (Aartsen & Jylhä, 2011), an absence of friends and family (Savikko, 2008; Drennan et al., 2008), living alone, bereavement and widowhood, and lower education (Tilvis et al. 2011, Aartsen & Jylhä, 2011). One other perspective is the socioemotional selectivity theory by Carstensen (1995), who argues that older adults focus on the most important of their social interactions and are selectively limiting social interaction to close others. A 2011 study found that the reported level of loneliness is consistently higher in Eastern Europe than for Western European and Northern European countries, across all age groups, with the former communist countries having the highest level of loneliness (Yang & Victor, 2011). This could be explained by the shift in society following the fall of communism. Migration is also a phenomenon that could influence feelings of loneliness across all age groups. According to the official 2011 population census by the Romanian National Statistical Institute, 3.6% of the total population was

living abroad, especially adults of working age, which means that many younger adults may have limited direct contact with their parents who have moved abroad to work.

Loneliness has been defined as "subjective feelings of social isolation" (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). By its very nature, loneliness is a unique and intensive unpleasant emotional experience characterized by social connection deficits. The current literature has conceptualized this construct in two main ways (Sinha and Wang, 2013). The first approach views loneliness as a unidimensional construct that remains constant across various contexts (Russell, 1996). The other conceptualizes loneliness as a multidimensional construct composed of two main subdimensions [i.e., social loneliness (SL) and emotional loneliness (EL)] (DiTommaso and Spinner, 1997; Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). EL results from deficits in emotional attachment to significantly intimate others (e.g., family members, romantic partners), whereas SL derives from a shortage of desired social networks or groups (e.g., friends and colleagues) (Russell, 1996). At the heart of a set of socio-emotional states, loneliness has garnered increasing attention from academia and public authorities during the past two decades. Research on CL has a relatively short history (Kim et al., 2005; Hu and Jasper, 2006; Arpin et al., 2015).
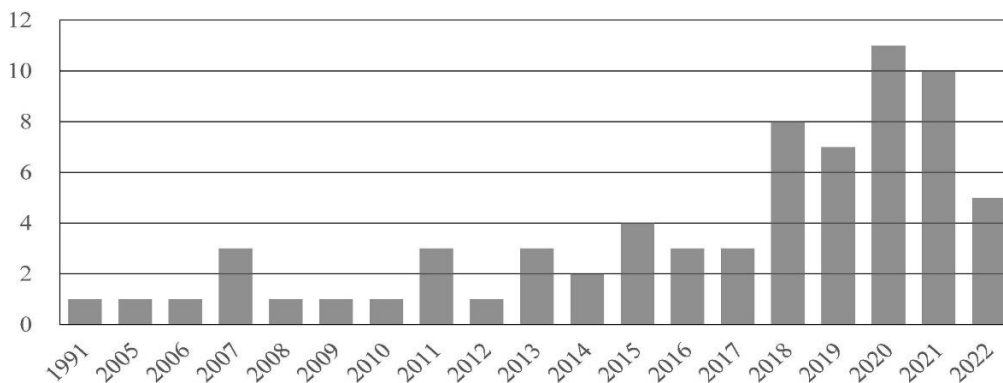

Fig.1 - Number of articles between 1991 and 2022.

2.2 LONELINESS AND CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR

The literature has examined the influences of loneliness in consumption contexts, such as the type of purchase (Pagan, 2020; Yang et al., 2021), consumption behavior (Yang, 2016), social

experience and interaction (Kim et al., 2005; Her and Seo, 2018). Previous studies have also explored the role of loneliness in consumer experiences (Loh et al., 2021), attitudes (Yii et al., 2020), affects (Chen et al., 2021), preferences (Reid and Reid, 2007), and behaviors (Arpin et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2020). Moreover, CL has been investigated as a mediator or moderator in explaining consumer behaviors (Berezan et al., 2020; Pade and Feurer, 2022). Studies on CL are driven by the idea that relationship deficits in consumers' daily lives play important roles in their attitudes, cognitions, affects, and behaviors (Mead et al., 2010; Lee and Hyun, 2015). Thus, the marketing literature has recently begun to shed light on CLs and pay increasing attention to the distinctiveness of lonely consumers (Rippé et al., 2018; Berezan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). However, work on CLs remains scattered among various research fields, thus providing an inadequate understanding of the role of loneliness in the consumer journey.

In the contemporary world, loneliness has become an increasingly present and pressing problem, with a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of individuals. According to recent studies, approximately one-third of the global population experiences loneliness to some degree (Holt-Lunstad, 2020). In the context of these alarming figures, it is essential to investigate how loneliness affects consumption behavior which concerns a psychological need (such as entertainment).

2.3 LONELINESS AND ENTERTAINMENT CHOICES

Previous research shows there is evidence to suggest that loneliness can influence our preferences and behaviors in everyday life, including the entertainment choices. Psychological studies have shown that lonely individuals may tend to turn to forms of digital entertainment that allow them to escape into imaginary worlds or find comfort in solitary activities (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). This happens because their initial need is for entertainment, more precisely for the traditional forms of entertainment, the ones that involve physical presence and interaction (such as going to the cinema, a concert, the theatre etc.). Thus, in the absence of people with whom they can connect, lonely consumers turn to digital entertainment. Specialized literature confirms that the consumption of entertainment can serve to compensate for the lack of social interaction and reduce the feeling of loneliness (Chen & Feeley, 2014).

In addition to the direct implications for individual well-being, there are also concerns about the impact of loneliness on public health and social cohesion. Epidemiological studies have linked loneliness to an increased risk of various physical and mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, obesity, and heart disease (Holt-Lunstad, 2017). Single people have also been found to be more prone to unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption (Steptoe et al., 2013).

In this context, it is vital to explore how entertainment can play a role in addressing this public health issue. Previous studies have highlighted the potential of entertainment to provide a form of escapism and create a sense of connection and community, even in the absence of physical interaction with others (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993). For example, participating in online communities dedicated to shared interests or virtual events can be an effective way to reduce feelings of isolation and promote a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it is very important to realize that there is a close connection between leisure activities and mental and physical well-being, and previous research proves that participation in leisure activities influences the subjective and objective well-being of the individual (Pressman, 2009).
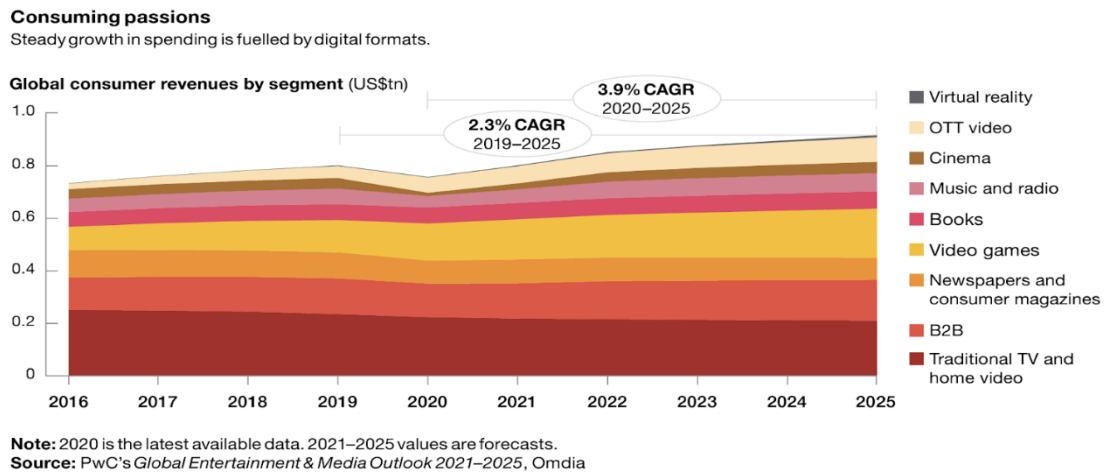

Fig.2 – Global consumer revenues by segment

Moreover, in the last two decades, excessive use of Internet has been considered as public concern and a growing body of literature has explored this phenomenon (Kim & Davis, 2009). Excessive

use of Internet is characterized as the obsessive activity that individuals have trouble placing appropriate limits on it and they exaggerate the value of the participation pleasure (Young, 1998). It has been found that excessive use of Internet leads to negative outcomes for individuals and their psychosocial well-beings and lives are affected (Young, 2004). For instance, it interferes with other important social practices of individuals and induces conflicts with family members and friends (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014b).

3. METHODOLOY

The method of research of our study is the quantitative marketing research, using the questionnaire as a data collection tool. The questionnaire was distributed in electronic format (Google forms), in the online environment. It includes 14 questions, of which: the first three questions focus on better understanding the preferences of the people surveyed; questions four and six include five levels of preference (from 1 – not at all, to 5 – very often), to be able to identify both the preference and the intensity of this preference; questions eight and nine are meant to identify how much time our respondents spend on the phone and on physical activities, and the last questions are for identification, such as: gender (predominantly female), age (average age being 18-21 years), marital status, occupation and monthly income.

While applying the questionnaire, during the data collection stage, we encountered a major problem: for the first question, with the multiple answer option, we could not extrapolate the data in Excel and draw any conclusions. Also, some of the questions initially chosen were much too personal, which made the respondents feel embarrassed to answer, and the open questions did not seem easy to answer. Thus, initially we had fewer respondents (53) and some questions remained unanswered. To solve these problems, we first had to approach the issue in a much simpler and more direct way and avoid repeating mistakes in the marketing research, as we had done before (we removed questions with overly detailed and similar answers like: "I like playing computer games alone/I like playing computer games with friends"). Another mistake was offering answer options that were open to interpretation from person to person, which doesn't lead to accurate marketing research (for example: "How often do you attend events (concerts, theater, festivals, etc.) in your city? A. Often B. Occasionally C. Rarely D. Never"). People are different, and each has

their own perception of reality. These answers only led to ambiguity regarding the amount of time spent at festivals. After several analyses, we came up with the final version of the questionnaire, which was successful. This version prompted respondents to answer intuitively, which allowed us to analyze the results more concisely. Four of the most important questions were displayed as follows:

1) How important do you consider digital entertainment to be in our lives (social media, Netflix, video games, YouTube, etc.)? (rated from 1 to 5)

2) How much time do you spend on your phone/computer outside of work hours daily?

    A. Less than an hour

    B. 1 hour - 2 hours

    C. 2 hours - 4 hours

    D. 4 hours - 8 hours

    E. More than 8 hours

3) To what extent do you enjoy meeting new people? (rated from 1 to 5)

4) What do you like to do when you have free time?

    A. I relax at home

    B. I enjoy a quiet walk

    C. I spend time with others (family or friends)

    D. Other

3.1 DETERMINING THE SAMPLE SIZE

The sample size is calculated as n, assuming a confidence level of 90%, with a margin of error of ±5%, to have a value of $z = 0.93$. Women drive 70% of all consumer purchasing decisions (Forbes 2019), and they are usually the target audience for most promotional campaigns often present in entertainment areas such as movie theaters, festivals, concerts etc. or digital entertainment (Tik Tok, Netflix, YouTube) .Taking into account the fact that over time there has been an increasing evolution of the share of men in the total consumers, this share has been supplemented by a percentage of 5% for the quantitative marketing research. Thus, the maximum value of the standard deviation is considered for the case where the share of women is approximately 65%, and that of

men is approximately 35% of the total analysed sample. Thus, p = 65% and q = 35% and the following formula is used: n = sample size; p = percentage of female responses in total cases; z2 = the square of the Z coefficient, corresponding to the confidence level; q – 1 – p = percentage of male responses in total cases; E2 = the square of the allowed error expressed as a percentage.

$$N = \frac{z^2 \times q \times p}{E^2} = \frac{(0.93)^2 \times 35 \times 65}{5^2} = \frac{0.8649 \times 2275}{25} = \frac{1967,64}{25} = 78,70$$

3.2 SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The data collection period was between April 2, 2024 and April 16, 2024. The quantitative marketing research was conducted on a sample of 80 respondents. The analyzed sample shows a gender distribution consisting of 59 females, i.e. 73.8% of the sample, and 21 males, i.e. 26.3% of the sample.

4. RESULTS

To analyze the data collected through the distribution of the questionnaire, we exported the data to the Excel program, where, with the help of the filtering option, we made the correspondence between the marital status and the answer to each question. Thus, starting from the first question, we analyzed the answer with the highest percentage (43.8%), namely "I relax at home" and the marital status, and we concluded that 75% of people who relax at home are single.

For the second question, we analyzed the first three answers, namely: "I watch movies and series" (32.5%), "I relax" (22.5%), "I play" (11.3%) corroborating it with the marital status. For the first and third questions, the results were consistent with the specialized literature, i.e. the fact that 88.5% of respondents who watch movies and series are women, and 56% of those who play games are men. Moreover, 75% of women who play are either married or live with their partner, which may mean that their partner influences their preference for games.

On the other hand, 80% of men who play are single and the other 20% are in a relationship or married. The low percentage may be explained by the stability and responsibility that come with marriage. For some men, a healthy marriage means finding emotional support, motivation and

fulfillment. In what concerns the second answer, i.e. "I relax", we found that among the people who relax when they stay at home, 44.4% are married, and 55.6% are in a relationship. This fact indicates that when people get involved in love relationships, each partner must consider the preferences of the other one, and they have so many things to do together that, when they get home, they just want to relax. This was also proven in past research. Romantic relationships are an important contributor to well-being, impacting both physical and mental health (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008). To sustain these relationships over time couples often engage in shared leisure activities, which aid in the development of shared interests; create opportunities for couple identity development, healthy communication, and conflict management; and increase relationship satisfaction (e.g., Berg et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 2006). In fact, the importance of examining leisure activities in romantic relationships has only increased over time, with both the proportion of time and the rate of shared leisure activities having increased over the last several decades (Voorpostel et al., 2010). The existing literature has focused on how couples' time spent on shared leisure, independent leisure, and their satisfaction with each of these contribute to romantic relationship quality (e.g. Berg et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 2006). However, leisure activities may not exclusively occur alone or with one's partner, but in a variety of different social contexts (i.e., with different individuals or groups present). In the current research, we consider how frequently leisure activities occur in the presence of various social groups, whether leisure in each context contributes to romantic relationship quality, and whether group leisure activities may be particularly beneficial for those experiencing lower relationship quality. Additionally, leisure is only one type of behavior among a host of relationship behaviors that have been linked to relationship quality (e.g., Berg et al., 2001; Dobson et al., 2020; Gulledge et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2006; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004).

For the following three questions (3 to 5), the results show that only 22.7% of the people who want, much and very much, to meet new people are single people, which means, contrary to expectations (i.e. single people want to meet new people) that only a minority of single respondents want to meet new people, resulting in the majority resigning themselves to loneliness. By filtering questions four and five we discovered that 11.4% of respondents who want to meet new people to a great and very great extent are introverts, which means that those who want to meet new people

(88,6%), also have the abilities to do so because they are extroverts. Only 11.4% of those who are uncomfortable with social interactions are also willing to step out of their comfort zone and initiate communication and interaction.

Analyzing the responses to question seven, we discovered that most respondents consume digital entertainment for a period of 2 to 4 hours but consume traditional forms of entertainment between 2 and 4 hours weekly, indicating that today's technological accessibility predisposes people to a lack of effort to initiate social interaction.

5. SOLUTIONS

We believe that one solution to the abovementioned situation is the creation of online communities for entertainment enthusiasts. These communities could be social media discussion groups or discussion forums, depending on consumer preferences and interests. This would allow single consumers to connect with others who share the same passions and share entertainment experiences and recommendations.

At the same time, we believe that the organization or participation in social events would help single and/or lonely consumers to interact and socialize with others who share the same interests in digital entertainment. These events could include movie watching, video game tournaments, or other recreational activities that encourage social interaction in a comfortable and fun environment. Finally, we propose to provide resources and support for managing loneliness in the context of digital entertainment. This could include providing information and advice on how to find the balance between digital entertainment and social interactions, promoting technologies and platforms that facilitate social connection, and providing emotional support and counseling for those experiencing intense feelings of loneliness.

In modern era, in which digital conection seems to dominate, and where the life rithm becomes more and more alert, loneliness became a major concern for a lot of people. However, the way people percieve and experience loneliness may vary from one person to another and the relation between entertainment and loneliness is a complex one and often underestimated.

6. RESEARCH LIMITS

Loneliness could be perceived differenlty based on multiple persons (personality type, life experience and environment). What may be interpreted as a lonely experience for one individual, it could be an opportunity for reflection and relaxation for another. For example, an introverted individual might find solitude more comfortable and suitable for reflective pursuits or artistic creation, while an extrovert might find it more difficult to manage and seek more social interaction. The effects of loneliness can vary and include some negative consequences, such as depression and anxiety, as well as potential benefits, such as the development of creativity or deep self-reflection. Studies have shown that how a person perceives and manages loneliness can significantly influence how it affects their well-being.

Modern technology can play a dual role in managing loneliness. On one hand, online social platforms and other forms of digital entertainment can provide a way to connect with other people and share experiences, thereby reducing the feeling of isolation. On the other hand, excessive use of technology and exposure to negative or alienating content can exacerbate or even amplify feelings of loneliness.

Societies and cultures are differ significantly from one to another regarding the attitude they impose about loneliness and how individuals are supported or stigmatized when faced with it. For example, in some cultures, loneliness may be percieved as a normal experience and even valued for occasional reflection and introspection, while in others, it can be perceived as a sign of failure or lack of socialization.

It's important to realize that loneliness and entertainment are interconnected in a complex way and that there is not only one solution to solve this problem. However, we should be concious about other individual experiences and offer support and emphaty in order to promote authentic connection and overall wellness.

7. RESEARCH IMPACT AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This research highlights the significant role that individual preferences and marital status play in shaping leisure activities and their impact on romantic relationships and social behaviors. By analyzing the data from the questionnaire, we found strong evidence that relationship status heavily

influences leisure activity choices, such as the tendency for single individuals to engage in solitary activities like gaming or relaxing at home. In contrast, those in committed relationships or marriages were more likely to share leisure activities, underscoring the importance of these activities in developing and maintaining relationship satisfaction. These findings are consistent with existing literature that suggests shared leisure activities foster deeper connection, mutual understanding, and emotional fulfillment within relationships. Additionally, our research shed light on social interaction tendencies, revealing that only a small percentage of single individuals actively seek new social connections, contrary to expectations.

The findings of this research offer valuable insights that advertising companies can leverage to create more targeted and effective marketing strategies. Understanding that marital status significantly influences leisure activity choices enables advertisers to design campaigns that resonate more deeply with specific audience segments. Advertising companies can use this knowledge to tailor their messaging for each group, promoting gaming products, streaming services, or personalized relaxation-oriented products to singles, while emphasizing shared experiences, couple-oriented games, or subscription services for couples when targeting those in relationships.

A promising future research direction would be to explore the role of digital leisure activities in shaping relationship dynamics across different age groups and cultural backgrounds. As our findings indicate a strong correlation between relationship status, gender, and leisure activity preferences, further investigation could examine how these patterns evolve in younger versus older generations, particularly in the context of rapidly changing digital technology.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Following the research we have carried out, we have found that digital entertainment can become a way to compensate for the lack of human interaction. People may watch movies, series, play video games, or scroll the social media to feel they belong to a virtual community, or to feel connected to characters or other people through entertainment platforms. As a result, they can be much more vulnerable to any type of marketing strategy that can be carried out on the respective platforms. As already shown, loneliness has become a personal and social issue nowadays. It may

lead to excessive consumption of entertainment, which can become harmful to mental and physical health.

Too much time spent in front of a screen or isolated in the virtual world can aggravate feelings of loneliness and prevent the development of real interpersonal relationships. It's important for lonely people to find a healthy balance between digital entertainment and social interactions in their lives. Participating in social activities or looking for ways to make real connections with other people can complement the entertainment experience and contribute to a more fulfilling and balanced life. Following the research, we realized that the entertainment marketing strategy can be adapted according to each individual, and single people are much more easily influenced.

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