

# Critical Consumption:

## Empowering Students to Evaluate Sources in a One-Shot Session on Introductory Consumer Marketing Research

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### Introduction

Instruction in library resources and research for the introductory marketing class is one of the most requested one-shot sessions from the business school at Miami University, a large public school in the Midwest, with around fifteen sessions taught each academic year. The one-shot session outlined here is derived from these classes. Students' main project for the course is to create a marketing plan for a chosen consumer packaged goods product (i.e., food or household items that are repurchased regularly); the library session is designed to help them find the information they will need about consumers for the project. The class is typically taught in person and is structured to allow the librarian to provide an overview of the resources available before giving students time to practice. To familiarize students with the common gaps and biases in consumer marketing data, the demographic characteristics of college students or Generation Z in two databases are examined. Using discussion, students are able to use their own lived experiences to evaluate the data. This helps students develop a sense of what is reasonable to expect in marketing data and further understand that one source will rarely be sufficient for consumer marketing research.

# Planning

## Number of participants

The lesson is planned for a typical class size of 20–30 students per class.

## Audience

The student audience is enrolled in the business school's introductory marketing class, which is required for all business majors. Students in the class are usually sophomores or juniors who have received prior information literacy instruction from a librarian on searching article databases and industry and company databases.

# Preparation and Resources

## Preparation

To prepare for the lesson, the librarian should create a short introductory presentation contextualizing marketing research (example: <https://tinyurl.com/MKTovrv>), curate a course guide on marketing research (example: <https://tinyurl.com/ExpIntroMKT>), and bring copies of the worksheet to class (example: <https://tinyurl.com/exWkTem>) or make it available for download online. An exit slip is optional (example: <https://tinyurl.com/tbilex>). In addition, the librarian will need a computer and classroom projector or large monitor to share the screen. Students will need a laptop or tablet as well as pencil/pens to complete the in-class exercise.

## Resources

- MRI-Simmons University Reporter (paid) (<https://www.mrisimmons.com/>)
- Mintel (paid) (<https://www.mintel.com/>)
- Statista (paid) (<https://www.statista.com/>)
- Mentimeter (free) (<https://www.mentimeter.com/>)
- Google Jamboard (free) (<https://jamboard.google.com/>)
- Padlet (free) (<https://padlet.com/>)

# Description of Lesson/Activity

## Goals/learning outcomes

There are three primary learning outcomes for students at the end of the lesson. Students will

1. develop a picture of the typical consumer of their chosen product based on their demographic characteristics;
2. identify the attitudes and behaviors of the consumers of their chosen product; and
3. recognize the necessity of consulting multiple sources of information to account for bias and gaps in each source.

These learning outcomes are designed to satisfy targeted threshold concepts and skills from the Business Research Competencies (BRC)<sup>1</sup> and the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*<sup>2</sup> (see table 21.1 for alignment).

**Table 21.1**

Learning Outcomes Alignment with BRC and ACRL Framework

<b>Learning outcomes</b>	<b>Business research competencies</b>	<b>ACRL Framework</b>
Develop a picture of the typical consumer of their chosen product based on their demographic characteristics.	Determines the appropriate target population(s) for products or services, based on available content—demographic characteristic content may include age, ethnicity, gender, occupation, and income.	Searching as Strategic Exploration
Identify the attitudes and behaviors of the consumers of their chosen product.	More detailed content about target populations—particularly about their psychographic and lifestyle characteristics as well as preferences and needs—is often only available through specialized vendors.	Searching as Strategic Exploration
Recognize the necessity of consulting multiple sources of information to account for bias and gaps in each source.	Determines consumers' methods for shopping and purchasing—and by extension the optimal channels for selling products or services—based on available content.	Authority is Constructed and Contextual; Research as Inquiry

### Time required

The lesson typically takes place during a 50-minute class.

## Teaching Outline

### Introducing the lesson (10 minutes)

To begin, the librarian introduces marketing research sources using the presentation (<https://tinyurl.com/MKTovrv>) and goes over the content available in the course guide (<https://tinyurl.com/ExpIntroMKT>). This helps reinforce the fact that information can come from both library databases and other online sources. Perhaps the most important thing to emphasize is that it is encouraged to question the validity of the data being analyzed. Statistics that come from trade associations can have clear biases, and marketing data in general is time-consuming and expensive to gather, so it is important to know what can be reasonably expected from data providers.

The next step is for the librarian to guide students through a critical examination of two or three databases. The exact databases used may vary, but they should include demographic information, psychographic characteristics, and retail or e-commerce data. While it is useful for the librarian to demonstrate how to use the database, it is more important to explain what kinds of information it contains and how the information was collected. The librarian facilitates a discussion with the whole class about how this affects the bias and precision in marketing data. Discussion questions and examples of previous responses

are included, but of course, answers may vary. In this lesson, the databases used are MRI-Simmons University Reporter (University Reporter) and Mintel Academic (Mintel).

### MRI-Simmons University Reporter (10 minutes)

Before examining the data in this resource, explain to students that MRI-Simmons University Reporter marketing data is based on the annual Survey of the American Consumer,<sup>3</sup> which collects consumer information from approximately 25,000 people.<sup>4</sup> Once logged into the University Reporter, choose the study for the most recent year and find information on “respondents who are currently college students” located under Demographics-Respondents.<sup>5</sup> There is a wealth of market size information included in the table that will generate (and is explained in the help documentation), but the most efficient method to start evaluating the data is by looking at the Index column (see figure 21.1). Subtracting 100 from the index number produces a percentage that indicates the likelihood of that target population matching the variable being studied. In our college student example, the index number for Ages 18–24 indicates that they are 334 percent more likely than total adults to be a college student. From the table, students can start to see some of the major demographic characteristics of college students (i.e., are they more likely to be men or women, what ethnicity, what income level?).

The screenshot shows the MRI-Simmons University Reporter interface. The title bar reads '2019 Spring GfK Reporter MRI Demographics - Respondent College Or University Student Report'. The interface includes a sidebar with filters for Report Type (Standard), Base (Total Adults), and Detail(s) (Respondent is currently attending college or university). The main table displays demographic data with columns for Target, Base Total '000, '000, % Detail, % Target, and Index.

Target	Base Total '000	'000	% Detail	% Target	Index
Total	248,885	19,530	100.00	7.85	100
Men	120,167	8,513	43.59	7.08	90
Women	128,718	11,018	56.41	8.56	109
Educ: graduated college plus	79,291	5,232	26.73	6.80	84
Educ: attended college	70,694	12,026	61.57	17.01	217
Educ: graduated high school	71,543	1,806	9.24	2.52	32
Educ: did not graduate HS	27,366	467	2.39	1.71	22
Educ: post graduate	28,822	1,478	7.57	5.13	65
Educ: no college	98,909	2,273	11.64	2.30	29
Age 18-24	29,526	10,969	51.54	34.06	434
Age 25-34	44,726	4,984	25.52	11.14	142
Age 35-44	40,631	2,239	11.47	5.52	70
Age 45-54	41,994	1,300	6.66	3.10	39
Age 55-64	41,695	621	3.18	1.49	19
Age 65+	50,414	321	1.64	0.64	8
Occupation: Management, Business and Financial Operations	26,078	1,088	5.57	4.17	53
Occupation: Natural Resources, Construction and Maintenance Occupations	14,141	514	2.63	3.64	46
Occupation: Other Employed	47,617	3,702	18.95	7.77	99
Occupation: Professional and Related Occupations	36,759	4,095	20.97	11.14	142
Occupation: Sales and Office Occupations	32,398	3,806	19.49	11.75	150
HHI \$150,000+	32,806	2,848	14.58	8.88	111
HHI \$75,000-\$149,999	77,514	8,059	31.02	7.82	100
HHI \$60,000-\$74,999	24,407	2,066	10.58	6.46	83
HHI \$50,000-\$59,999	17,881	1,415	7.25	7.91	101
HHI \$40,000-\$49,999	19,089	1,460	7.47	7.65	97
HHI \$30,000-\$39,999	19,969	1,410	7.22	7.06	90
HHI \$20,000-\$29,999	19,049	1,000	5.12	5.25	67
HHI <\$20,000	27,338	2,549	13.05	9.32	119
Race: American Indian or Alaska Native	3,220	203	1.04	6.32	81
Race: Asian	8,151	1,163	5.96	14.27	182

**Figure 21.1**

MRI-Simmons, 2019 Spring, Demographic Respondents-College or University Student.

At this point, the librarian should pause from modeling how the database functions to lead a short discussion.

*Discussion question:* Are you surprised by these general demographics, or do they match your expectations?

In previous classes, students have mostly agreed that the demographics match their predictions, although they are sometimes at first surprised by the high percentage of students with a household income of less than \$20,000. It makes sense to them once it

is explained that some respondents reported their personal income and not the overall income of their family.

After the discussion, return to the demonstration and sort by the Index Column (see figure 21.2) to put the highest index numbers at the top. This will display what media interests are popular with college students. (To go back to the original sort, just click on the Index Column twice more.)

Target	Base Total '000	'000	% Detail	% Target	Index ±
Total	248,885	19,530	100.00	7.85	100
Age 18-24	29,526	10,066	51.54	34.09	434
Social Media: Tumblr	8,103	2,077	10.64	25.64	327
Social Media: Twitch	7,938	1,889	9.67	23.79	303
Social Media: Reddit	15,070	3,265	16.72	21.66	276
Websites/apps: BuzzFeed	17,759	3,679	18.84	20.71	264
Social Media: Snapchat	52,512	10,665	54.61	20.31	259
Social Media: Twitter	35,357	7,015	35.92	19.84	253
Websites/apps: Answers.com/WikiAnswers	9,894	1,911	9.78	19.31	246
Websites/apps: Yahoo! Answers	8,911	1,633	8.36	18.33	234
Websites/apps: Popsugar	2,686	481	2.47	17.93	228
Magazines: Psychology Today	3,225	568	2.91	17.61	224
Websites/apps: BleacherReport.com	10,921	1,897	9.71	17.37	221
Educ: attended college	70,694	12,026	61.57	17.01	217
Websites/apps: nytimes.com	30,775	5,238	26.82	17.02	217
Television Channels or Networks: Adult Swim	20,929	3,518	18.01	16.81	214
Websites/apps: USA Today.com	20,258	3,302	16.91	16.30	208
Social Media: Instagram	81,268	13,194	67.55	16.23	207
Magazines: The Economist	2,093	337	1.72	16.08	205
Television Channels or Networks: Freeform	18,335	2,934	15.02	16.00	204
Websites/apps: wsj.com	20,053	3,181	16.29	15.86	202
Television Channels or Networks: TeenNick	5,752	895	4.58	15.56	198
Websites/apps: Vevo	3,995	617	3.16	15.44	197
Websites/apps: Lyft	13,529	2,042	10.45	15.09	192

**Figure 21.2**

MRI-Simmons, 2019 Spring, Demographic Respondents-College or University Student.

Allow students a minute or two to look through the results, then ask them to think about the following discussion questions.

*Discussion questions:*

- Do you agree? Are these areas you are interested in also?
- What else would you include in this list as top media sources for college students?
- What would you leave off or move down the list?
- What do you think are factors that contribute to any differences you see?

Students are typically more surprised by the media interests than they are by the general demographics. They usually feel that Instagram and Facebook play a stronger role in their lives than what is reported, and new viral apps like TikTok do not show up at all. This is a good opportunity to emphasize that the data is from the previous calendar year and that social media trends change rapidly and might not be best captured by this particular survey.

From this screen, ask students if they can see any information about the survey methodology. Answers will vary, but if they are stymied, show the help documentation located under the question mark icon. Explain to students that just because the methodology might be difficult to find, that does not mean that the data is automatically untrustworthy, and, in fact, the data from the Survey of the American Consumer is highly trusted and is incorporated by other marketing data vendors in their own products.

## Mintel (10 minutes)

After discussing University Reporter, the librarian should transition to Mintel. Explain that the reports in Mintel have demographics, market shares, and forecast data, but where they really shine are answering questions about consumer attitudes and motivations. Students will compare between these two databases how college student demographics are detailed. Find the Marketing to Gen Z report (see figure 21.3),<sup>6</sup> which is the closest correlation to the University Reporter data. This reinforces that there is not always a direct match to data across different products.

**Marketing to Gen Z: Incl Impact of COVID-19 - US - May 2020**

"Life was already stressful for **Gen Z**, but the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will only amplify the stress and uncertainty that teens and young adults face. As they learn **to** define themselves as individuals and embark on new lives as independent adults, disruptions **to** high school and postsecondary education and a bleak job market will define this generation and who they become as adult consumers."

— **Kristen Boesel, Senior Lifestyles ...**

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29th September 2020

"COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on Generation Z. Many high schools have yet to resume in-person classes, college campuses are closed or enacting social distance precautions and unemployment rates for young adults are nearly twice the national average. All of these factors will have Generation Z reconsidering their college ..."

**Report Timeline**

[Newer Reports](#)

**Figure 21.3**  
Mintel Reports US, Marketing to Gen Z, 2020.

Ask students again if they can see any information about the survey methodology, which is located through a green button labeled "Methodology." Review the methodology page with students, pointing out that the data they just examined from University Reporter is also used in Mintel reports. Keep in mind that the goal of this lesson is not to dive deeply into the survey methodology itself, but rather get students accustomed to checking for methodology information and reasonable sample sizes and data collection methods.

In the report itself, the data is presented in a more holistic and narrative format. Go to the Consumer section and select "The Consumer—What You Need to Know" and look at the high-level statements about Gen Z. Mintel also includes a Databook that can be examined. Go over the "Personal Preferences" and "Trust in Information Sources" questions with the class and point out where students can view the underlying demographic data for each survey question.

At this time, stop the demonstration and ask students to reflect on the data they just saw and share their views on the following questions.

*Discussion questions:*

- How is this data different than what we saw in the previous database?

- Does this data about Gen Z's habits and preferences match your own experiences?
- How might you use this information for marketing purposes?

In previous classes, students have noted that this data is not as specifically tailored to college students and that there is much more information about feelings and beliefs. They also noticed that the data doesn't track specific media in the same way as University Reporter. Students often say they can use this information to understand how to appeal to Gen Z by tapping into their emotions.

### **Discussion wrap-up** (5 minutes)

After examining the two databases, prompt students with the following discussion questions:

- What did you notice about how easy or difficult it was to find the sample size and methodology?
- Why do you think this data is not available for free?

Most students in previous classes have appreciated that both databases have clear acknowledgment about sample sizes (in University Reporter through the color red and in Mintel in the embedded charts and data). They will also frequently indicate that the reports are valuable because of the extent of information collected and how in-depth it is.

### **Practice** (15 minutes)

Once the databases have been discussed, students are instructed to begin conducting research on their chosen product. The worksheet guides them through using the databases and the course guide (<https://tinyurl.com/exWkTem>). Group work or working with a partner is encouraged but is not strictly necessary. The librarian meets with each group to offer advice for the best databases and resources to use depending on the product being researched as well as to answer any questions.

The session concludes after the practice. If desired, an exit slip evaluation can be distributed (<https://tinyurl.com/tbilex>).

## **Transferability**

### **Substitute databases**

There are several marketing resources that provide demographic information that could be substituted depending on local availability, listed here alphabetically:

- Claritas My Best Segments Zip Code Lookup (free) (<https://claritas360.claritas.com/mybestsegments/#zipLookup>)
- Euromonitor Passport (paid) (<https://www.euromonitor.com/>)
- RKMA Market Research (paid) (<https://www.rkma.com/reports.cfm>)
- Simmons Insights (paid) (<https://www.mrisimmons.com/>); this is a separate product from MRI-Simmons University Reporter

### **Ability to transfer to online or to in-person**

This lesson could be adapted to online learning in several ways depending on if the session will be taught synchronously or asynchronously. For a synchronous class session, the first part of the lesson could be conducted with the librarian sharing a screen. To facilitate

discussion, polls embedded in the video conferencing software or quick answer online apps like Mentimeter can be used in lieu of asking students to speak out. Students could then be sorted into breakout rooms to complete the exercise in small groups with the librarian dropping into each one to answer questions.

For an asynchronous class, an online module with pre-recorded videos going over the presentation, course guide, and databases could be created with students asked to respond to the discussion questions and each other on a shared online bulletin board app like Padlet or Google Jamboard. The practice exercise could be completed independently, or for more collaboration, it could be turned into a shared online document that students could answer collectively, and it would allow the librarian to make comments on their work.

## To different class sizes or audiences

The lesson is easily scaled down to a smaller audience and could feature more in-depth discussion. Suggested questions for further discussion:

- Why do you think people are tracked by age/generation?
  - Potential answers: Answers will vary but could include because it is convenient—ages are tracked by the Census Bureau and our education system, it gives you a rough idea of spending power, and generational marketing has become an accepted industry standard.
- Do you think that's the most useful way to evaluate consumer habits?
  - Potential answers: Answers will vary, but point out that it might be just as important if not better to consider other aspects of a consumer's background, such as gender, ethnicity, or interests they have specified in social media accounts, if available.
- Most of the data found in library databases come from surveys conducted by mail or online. How do you think this data would compare to data collected from social media and store loyalty programs?
  - Potential answers: Answers will vary but may include that social media data is more personalized, or that store loyalty programs have more precision since there is a direct match between the buyer and the product. It is also useful to point out that surveys are more widely available and can have more breadth.

To adapt the lesson to a larger class size, the time required to speak to all students in small groups needs to be considered. In the discussion portion, ask students to respond to the discussion questions in a think-pair-share with their neighbor or use Mentimeter or similar applications to gather responses from all participants and summarize the answers with the whole class. This will still allow all students to participate in the discussion without significantly increasing the length of the discussion.

The two databases used in this lesson contain a great deal of information and many other avenues for exploring it beyond what is presented here. Other marketing classes might choose to focus on different demographic groups, media consumption habits, or lifestyles. While these might be harder to analyze from students' lived experiences, asking open-ended discussion questions can still be a useful method for assessment.

## Endnotes

1. “Business Research Competencies,” Reference and User Services Association, 2019. <https://www.ala.org/rusa/guidelines/business-research-competencies>.
2. *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/files/issues/infolit/framework.pdf>.
3. “University Internet Reporter Tutorial,” MRI-Simmons, 2016, [https://smartsystem.mrisimmons.com/UniversityReporter/Document/University\\_Internet\\_Reporter\\_Tutorial.pdf](https://smartsystem.mrisimmons.com/UniversityReporter/Document/University_Internet_Reporter_Tutorial.pdf).
4. “Simmons National Consumer Survey,” Simmons Market Research, 2020, <http://simmonssurvey.com/>.
5. Demographics-Respondent-College or University Student [Base: Total Adults] [Data set], MRI-Simmons (Spring 2019), <https://www.mrisimmons.com/>.
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