Voluntary Simplicity, Downshifting, and the Market Mythology of Simple Living

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Voluntary simplicity, a lifestyle of minimal, ethical, and ecological consumption, has been a relatively invisible form of consumer resistance, both in the real world and, perhaps as a consequence, in consumer research. This research (1) integrates prior research on the lifestyle, highlighting problems of typology; (2) develops a conceptual model of simple living as market mythology that untangles the simple living ideology from the voluntary simplicity lifestyle; and (3) delineates a variance framework of simple living myths. Managerial implications for advertising, entertainment, and corporate communications are also discussed.

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Voluntary Simplicity, Downshifting, and the Market Mythology of Simple Living
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Voluntary simplicity has been a relatively invisible form of consumer resistance, both in the real world and, perhaps as a consequence, in consumer research. However, the ideology of voluntary simplicity is becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary Western societies under its historical moniker of “simple living”. Celente (1997) predicted that voluntary simplicity would occupy a greater share of mainstream consumer consciousness in the 21st century and evidence to validate this claim abounds in popular lifestyle magazines and television shows.

Furthermore, voluntary simplicity is theoretically important because, unlike other consumer resistance behaviors that target an element of the production, marketing, or consumption process (e.g. brand boycotts), it is a rejection of consumerism en masse. As Ritson and Dobscha (1999) point out, to consume less, is “the ultimate act of rebellion” (p.159). To date, voluntary simplicity has been conceptualized primarily as a lifestyle (Leonard-Barton 1981; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Bekin, Carrigan, and Szmigin 2005; McDonald et al. 2006; Miller and Gregan-Paxton 2006), but also as a behavioral index (Leonard-Barton 1981; Shama 1981; Hunke 2005), and social movement (Grigsby 2004).

This research (1) integrates prior research on the voluntary simplicity lifestyle, highlighting problems of typology; (2) develops a conceptual model of simple living as market mythology that untangles the simple living ideology from the voluntary simplicity lifestyle; and (3) delineates a narratological variance framework of simple living myths.

In the marketplace, the term “simple living” and several variants are frequently used to describe aspects of the voluntary simplicity lifestyle. This paper retains the use of the etic term voluntary simplicity to describe the lifestyle and employs its emic counterpart simple living to describe the popular market-mediated ideology. Voluntary simplicity definitions (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002, Shaw & Newholm 2002, Zavestoski 2002, Grigsby 2004, McDonald et al. 2006) are aggregated into a lifestyle of minimal, ecological, and ethical consumption while simple living is modeled as a market mythology.

Colloquially, the term myth is used to describe that which is generally believed to be true but is actually false. However, in the academic study of myths no veracity or fallacy is implicitly assumed by use of the term. Rather, a myth is defined as a belief or narrative that a group of people accept as true. “The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradictions or paradoxes in natural and social experience” (Levy 1981: p.51). A market mythology is a collection of “discourses that seeks to channel consumers’ identities and lifestyles in a particular ideological direction” (Thompson 2004: p.170).

Using Holt’s (2004) structure of myth markets as a guide, this paper establishes five components of the simple living phenomenon. (i) Upscaling is the upgrading of one’s entire lifestyle or any aspects of one’s consumption to match the more luxurious lifestyles of higher income consumers; it is the hegemonic ideology of consumer culture. (ii) Downshifting describes any voluntary or involuntary reduction in earning, spending, work hours, or pace of life, which typically engages the individual downshifter in a re-evaluation of his or her own identity, especially as it pertains to consumption (Schor 1998). (iii) Cultural contradictions arise when downshifting in an upscaling world; individuals experience fundamental identity conflicts whether they seek temporary or permanent respite from the earn-and-spend cycle. (iv) The market mythology of simple living resolves the cultural contradictions by providing the individual with a toolkit of authentic (subculturally-legitimated) myths to counter the hegemonic ideology. (v) The populist world of voluntary simplicity serves as the source material of the simple living mythology.

A variance framework of the simple living market mythology is delineated by drawing from historic essays, recent empirical literature, and content analyses of three different marketplace data sources: online forums, popular lifestyle magazines, and depth interviews with informants who self-identify with simple living. Less is more (Browning 1855) can be described as the soul of the simple living mythology. The frequently heralded recipe for a good life is less consumption (in economic and ecological terms), less careerism, less needless spending, less stress, and, in summary, “less distractions” (Gregg 1937/1977, Elgin 2000, Craig-Lees and Hill 2002, Shaw & Newholm 2002, Zavestoski 2002, Etzioni 2004, McDonald et al. 2006, and innumerable media articles). In the contemporary marketplace, this message is positioned as a narratological opposition to the more is more promotions of consumer culture. In a similar vein, small is beautiful (Schumacher 1973) captures the preference for human scale in the organization of communities and institutions.

Other mythic themes include: the pathology of consumer goods and consumption activities, the ecological and ethical consumer, work-life balance and the demythologizing of money, the myth of individual agency and the myth of community.

The paper concludes with a discussion of how myths in general and the simple living mythology in particular are employed in advertising, entertainment, and corporate communications.

References
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An Exploration of Men’s Consumer-Brand Relationships

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Fournier (1998) provides a typology of fifteen consumer-brand relationships based on her case studies of three women. This typology is significant through its expression of the “legitimacy of the brand as an active relationship partner” (Fournier, 1998, p. 343). However, it is unclear whether Fournier’s results are relevant to a segment of growing interest to marketers – heterosexual male shoppers. In particular, men who are active consumers of fashion and grooming products are currently estimated to be nearly a quarter of the entire American male population (Byrnes, 2006). Due to this segment’s increasing importance in the marketplace, and the gap in understanding how men, in particular, may form consumer-brand relationships, it is useful to explore this segment further. This study examines the applicability of Fournier’s consumer-brand relationship typology to an important segment in today’s marketplace – male shoppers.

Methodology
Given the scarceness of research on gendered consumption, especially with regard to men, (however, see Belk and Costa 1998; Bristor and Fischer 1993; Holt and Thompson 2004; Otnes and McGrath 2001; Penaloza 2001) a discovery-oriented research approach (Wells 1993) was appropriate for this research. Fifteen informants, men ages 25-34, were selected for participation in this study. Two methods were used to explore the male informants’ brand relationships: in-depth interviews and shopping with consumers. The interviews followed the recommendations set forth by McCracken (1988) and delved into the informant’s shopping behavior, consumption practices, and brand relationships.

The second method, shopping with consumers, enabled us to directly observe how consumers shop for particular brands. The researchers followed the guidelines set forth by Lowrey, Otnes and McGrath (2005). In total, over 240 pages of single-spaced text were generated. In analyzing the text, the researchers carefully examined the data for the presence of the consumer-brand relationships identified by Fournier.

Findings
Based on our data, three of Fournier’s consumer-brand relationships are prevalent among the fifteen male informants: secret affairs, committed partnerships, and flings. The most prevalent relationship observed is the “secret affair” defined as being “highly emotive, privately held relationship, considered risky if exposed to others” (Fournier, 1998, p. 362). This is likely due to the fact that while increasingly in popularity, according to a 2006 study by Datamonitor, consumption of fashion and grooming products elicit feelings of embarrassment among men and may be stigmatized as feminine behavior. For example, Darren conceals his regular use of Lancome’s anti-wrinkle cream. He jokes with the researcher that he will “kill her” if she tells anyone in his social circle about this consumption behavior.

A second brand-relationship, the “committed partnership,” defined as “long-term, voluntary imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances” (Fournier, 1998, p. 362) was also observed in the text. Again, because consumption of fashion and grooming products may not always be widely socially acceptable, some informants recognized that they may be open to ridicule by others. However, they still continued using specific brands for relatively long durations...