Community and Connectivity: Examining the Motives Underlying the Adoption of a Lifestyle of Voluntary Simplicity

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Interest has been growing in alternative consumption lifestyles, as researchers attempt to understand those who choose to lessen their participation in America’s “commodity culture.” Of particular interest is a group of “anti-consumers” known as voluntary simplifiers. This paper, using in-depth interviews, sheds light on the motives and unifying values underlying the choice of this lifestyle. Although exhibiting tremendous variance in their implementation of simplicity, respondents’ motives revealed a common theme of community, both local and global. In addition, a more general factor, the desire for connectivity with people and the planet, emerged as a unifying criterion for decisions regarding whether and to what extent to participate in the consumer marketplace.

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decision making regarding the house purchase. Decision should be made based on direct comparison of evaluated alternatives consistent with a person’s goals and needs. Taking into consideration the specifics of the selected product, it is hoped that this study contributes to a better understanding of the strategic buying process and provides some useful guidelines for consumers.

References

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Duane Elgin’s book Voluntary Simplicity resonated with those seeking an alternative to America’s “commodity culture,” a culture in which people are “primed to want and desire commodities even though they cannot afford to have them” (Elgin, 1981, O’Sullivan, 2003). While “voluntary simplicity” is not a new concept, recently there has been a growing ripple of individuals adding steam to this longstanding “anti-consumerism” movement (Etzioni, 1988). In the popular culture, many books, such as Circle of Simplicity and Choosing Simplicity, and organizations, such as Adbusters and Seeds of Simplicity, have emerged to give validity to this lifestyle and provide a forum for exploring ideas and gaining support (Andrews, 1997; Pierce, 1999).

Prior to this past decade, there was little academic interest in the voluntary simplicity movement. However, as the movement gains momentum in the popular culture, researchers are beginning to focus on understanding the attitudes, values and motivations of voluntary simplifiers, as well as those engaged in other anti-consumerism lifestyles (Cherrier and Murray, 2002; Zavestoski, 2002). This limited body of research suggests that voluntary simplicity can be viewed as a lifestyle choice since it pervades all aspects of behavior and is not necessarily correlated with what may otherwise appear to be highly related personality traits, such as frugality (Lastovicka 1999, Todd 2002). In fact, many who currently practice voluntary simplicity experienced a transformative learning process that that led them to simplify their lives. In Choosing Simplicity, a book that explores the different ways in which individuals have chosen to implement the principles of voluntary simplicity, several adherents stated that they were not content just going along with the “norm” and sought something more meaningful in their lives (Pierce, 1999). Interestingly, though implementing the voluntary simplicity lifestyle in quite divergent ways, those interviewed for the book shared the conviction that the “good life” is not based upon material possession or image.

Because research on this topic is still in its infancy, we currently lack answers to even the most basic questions about the voluntary simplicity lifestyle, such as what a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity entails, what factors prompt an individual to simplify their life and how voluntary simplifiers participate in the traditional marketplace. One of the earliest accounts of voluntary simplicity states that:

“Voluntary simplicity involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose” (Gregg 1936).

In another work, Elgin and Mitchell categorize simplicity according to five basic values: material simplicity, self-determination, ecological awareness, human scale, and personal growth. However, based on a review of the definitions appearing in the popular press and selective articles in the marketing field, Johnston and Burton (2002) reports that Elgin and Mitchell’s taxonomy of values fails to provide a complete account of the values and motivations underlying an individual’s decision to adopt this lifestyle. Johnston and Burton’s review represents a step forward, in that it attempts to provide a more clearly articulated conceptualization for future academic research on the topic.

Other attempts to bring coherence to the definition and motivations underlying this lifestyle have focused on clarifying what voluntary simplicity is not. This work shows that, contrary to the common misconception, voluntary simplicity does not advocate giving up all material possessions, but instead promotes the notion of mindful consumption.
In this working paper we attempt to bring greater clarity to our understanding of voluntary simplicity by examining the values, attitudes and marketplace behaviors of those adopting the lifestyle. Unstructured, in-depth interviews were administered with self-proclaimed voluntary simplifiers. Initial results provide insight into many dimensions of voluntary simplicity. In particular, the data reveal an interesting pattern among participants with regards to motivations for choosing this lifestyle. The stated motivations varied from individual to individual and included environmental concern, desire for financial independence and time freedom. However, the concept of community, both local and global, entwined many of their reflections. The local community aspect dealt with the face-to-face interactions with family, friends, and community members, whereas the global community referred to all living things on the planet, including plants, animals, and humans. Along with the discussion of community arose the desire to feel “connected” with nature, people and their inner self. This indicates that perhaps the most basic underlying motivation for choosing voluntary simplicity is the desire to feel connected to one’s inner, external and global community.

The need for connectivity is universal. The means by which voluntary simplifiers satisfy this need suggests that past consumer behavior research, which draws a direct link between identity and material items (Belk 1988), may need to be refined. The findings also suggest that marketers seeking to increase consumer well-being must decrease their focus on material possessions and emphasize experiences that facilitate connectivity.

References

Sacred and Profane Consumption Revisited: The Case of Fair Trade Consumers
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Conceptualisation
Two main responses to globalisation prevail. Protagonists committed to programmes of industrial and economic modernisation emphasise the role of world trade in attaining universal peace, prosperity and well-being. Antagonistic to the consumer culture driven by marketing and neo-liberalist activity, a 'rainbow coalition' points to a long list of the ills of globalisation ranging from habitat destruction through 'air miles' issues to child labour.

‘Third Way’ approaches to globalisation attempt a measured response based on the reality of the current propensity to consume. Accepting the dominance of consumption, strategic solutions to the ‘dark side’ of globalisation are understood in terms of responsible and ethical practices by producers and consumers alike. The Fair Trade movement represents a case in point.

Whilst recording the positive effects of Fair Trade on producers in developing countries, this paper proposes to concentrate on its benefits to consumers. A definition of Fair Trade is given:

“Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers—especially in the South. Fair Trade organisations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.” (European Fair Trade Association 2002)