Anti-Consumption: Now on Sale

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This research uses the theoretical lens of market mythology to illuminate how and why an anti-consumption lifestyle (voluntary simplicity) is being refashioned into a contemporary consumption phenomenon (simple living). Voluntary simplicity is defined as a lifestyle of minimal, ethical, and ecological consumption. Simple living is conceptualized as a market mythology consisting of six myths: the myth of less, the myth of consumer goods and consumption activities as pathology, the ecological and ethical consumption mythology, the myth of work-life balance and the demythologizing of money, the myth of individual agency, and the myth of community loss and gain.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13573/volumes/v35/NA-35

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research uses theories of market mythology (Levy 1981; Holt 2004; Holt and Thompson 2004; Thompson 2004) to illuminate how and why an anti-consumption lifestyle (voluntary simplicity) is being refashioned into a contemporary consumption phenomenon (simple living). Voluntary simplicity is defined as a lifestyle of minimal, ethical, and ecological consumption (Gregg 1936; Leonard-Barton 1981; Elgin 2000; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Zavestoski 2002; Etzioni 2004; Grigsby 2004; Bekin, Carrigan, and Szmigin 2005; Hunke 2005; McDonald et al. 2006; Miller and Gregan-Paxton 2006). An integrative literature review highlights the antecedents (access to wealth and education), manifestations (reduction of consumption relative to societal norms), and consequences (sense of control and self-sufficiency), and the long historical legacy of the lifestyle.

Simple living is conceptualized as a market mythology consisting of select strands of the voluntary simplicity ideology detached from the practice and diluted for the mass market. The simple living market mythology is delineated in three steps. First, a meta-analysis of historic essays and recent ethnographies is conducted to identify the major themes in voluntary simplicity discourse. Second, a popular lifestyle magazine, a recent blockbuster movie, and informant narratives are analyzed for major themes in the simple living discourse. Third, the voluntary simplicity and simple living themes are compared and contrasted.

While eight myths are identified in the voluntary simplicity discourse, only six of those are retained in the simple living discourse: the myth of less, the myth of consumer goods and consumption activities as pathology, the ecological and ethical mythology, the myth of work-life balance and the dehumanizing of money, the myth of individual agency, and the myth of community loss and gain. The two missing myths are also of considerable theoretical interest: the myth of modern cities and technology and the myth of exemplary citizenship. First, while many simple-living advocates have promoted rural living (e.g. Thoreau) and opposed modern technology (e.g. the Amish), the contemporary market mythology does not appear to take a firm stance on either subject. Rather, individuals are encouraged to find simplicity in their own context, wherever that may be geographically, and discourse about technology is rare and vague. Second, exemplary citizenship for the public eye is a theme that runs through some historical texts; for example, Gandhi famously declared, “My life is my message.” However, the emphasis on living simply as a personal statement or identity project is absent in contemporary iterations of the mythology. The universality of centered subjects and their consumer identity projects in postmodernity (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) might yield one explanation: since all consumers (simplifiers and non-simplifiers alike) are presumably engaged in continuous identity work, the significant differences between the subcultures may lie in the how, not the whether.

Market mythologies, like that of simple living, can be put to work in advertising and entertainment. The simple living magazine analyzed for this research focuses on ‘simple’ cooking, decorating, housekeeping, fashion, and personal grooming. A major retail chain advertisement for personal electronics claims to clear the clutter of consumer choices by making the choice for the consumer in each product category. The paradox that the ad uses simple living discourse (i.e. clearing the clutter) toward persuading consumers to buy more electronics is presented without any irony. Hirschman (2000) finds that movies that address mythic tensions have considerable greater commercial success. The movie analyzed for this research is devised around the tensions between materialism and simplicity. While simultaneously looking for a slower-paced, values-driven job in journalism, a highly-educated, middle-class, woman is accidentally thrust into a high-profile, high-stress, round-the-clock, consumption-focused career in fashion. The pathology of consumption, the search for work-life balance, and the eventual triumph of individual agency are core mythic themes of the film.

References