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The role of sustainability in profiling voluntary simplifiers

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ABSTRACT

Studies focusing on voluntary simplifiers are gaining in popularity, but doubt remains about the relevance to business of this segment and to what extent this lifestyle is attributable to sustainability-rooted choices. Instead of the commonly used self-reported scales, a novel measurement approach is applied using objective data to identify voluntary simplifiers. Based on equivalent household incomes and level of product possession this research provides, using a large-scale, representative sample, empirical evidence that voluntary simplifiers comprise almost one-sixth of the German population. Results indicate that voluntary simplifiers buy more green products, exhibit a greater environmental and economic sustainability consciousness and share more universalistic values compared to four other uncovered segments, namely well-off consumers, over-consumption consumers, less well-off consumers and poor consumers. From a business perspective, moderate voluntary simplifiers do not exit the market. Instead, they constitute an attractive target group for ecological products and alternative consumption options such as sharing.

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1. Introduction

Embedded in a consumerist mainstream society obsessed with highly consumption-oriented lifestyles, there are individuals who deliberately refrain from consumption (Lee and Ahn, 2016). Despite their low consumption, it would be advisable for companies to know these consumers in more detail, because by striving for consumption alternatives they are nevertheless still “making use of market systems” (Shaw and Moraes, 2009, p. 221). Besides individuals who restrict their consumption due to financial scarcity, there are those who consciously consume less than they can afford. The reasons for this are manifold, such as rejecting capitalism and materialism, living sustainably, and striving to lead independent and self-determined lives. There is extensive research regarding the different lifestyles or groups of people who consciously refrain from consumption. This includes anti-consumption in general (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2012), frugal consumption (Lastovicka, Bettencourt, Hughner, and Kuntze, 1999) and voluntary simplicity (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977). In particular, voluntary simplifiers are a specific segment of anti-consumers who generally reduce their overall levels of consumption (Iyer and Muncy, 2009).

Numerous definitions exist regarding who voluntary simplifiers are (Johnston and Burton, 2003). There is a widespread consensus that they reduce material consumption (e.g., Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002;

Etzioni, 1998) although they are financially well-off (Huneke, 2005; Zavestoski, 2002). This might be especially true for moderate simplifiers, who reduce consumption levels, but not working hours and thereby income (Ballantine and Creery, 2010). Compared to people with similar high-income levels, moderate simplifiers spend significantly less money on consumption. Usually, research measures voluntary simplicity by self-reported scales (e.g., Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Hamilton and Mail, 2003; Huneke, 2005). Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996) criticize such subjective measures due to the high risk of a social desirability bias. Therefore, the first research goal of this paper addresses this measurement issue by using a novel approach to identify voluntary simplifiers and take advantage of objective data: individuals' income and level of consumption, measured by a household's possession of selected consumer durables.

The following question is then addressed: Are voluntary simplifiers sustainability-rooted, and to what extent? Sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 8). In order to foster it the UN addresses the necessity of sustainable consumption in its new sustainable development goals (No. 12). More specifically, sustainable consumption covers two main issues: consuming differently – that is, buying environmentally friendly, organic or Fairtrade products – and consuming less (Balderjahn et al., 2013; Jackson and Michaelis, 2003). However, one open question is whether simplifiers are sustainability-rooted, as is often assumed (Shaw and Moraes, 2009). Research indicates that simplifiers are ecologically and socially motivated, and likely behave or consume in ecologically responsible ways (e.g., Craig-Lees and Hill,

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2002; Iwata, 2006; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Nevertheless, the role of sustainability in living a simpler life remains unclear. To address this knowledge gap, it is necessary to provide empirical evidence by taking a multidimensional perspective on sustainable consumption. Therefore, the second research goal of this study is to establish a multidimensional sustainability profile for the voluntary simplifier, which includes sustainable buying intentions, human values and consciousness for sustainable consumption (CSC) (Balderjahn et al., 2013).

To summarize, the key objective of this work is twofold: First, to uncover a segment of people who voluntarily consume less relative to their income within a large-scale data set in an affluent European nation. Second, to verify whether, and to what extent, this segment of voluntary simplifiers is sustainability-rooted.

Applying the objective measures of household income and the quantity of owned durables to identify voluntary simplifiers, this research uncovers five clearly distinguishable segments in the German population. One (14.4%) of the three segments with above-average household income owns only as much as the two below-average household income segments. According to the first research goal, the results prove the existence of a segment of voluntary simplifiers in the German population. With regard to environmental consciousness, buying intention towards organic products, universalistic values, and impulsive buying findings reveal that this segment of voluntary simplifiers is sustainability-rooted.

In the following, the conceptual framework is proposed and hypotheses developed by presenting relevant theoretical aspects of voluntary simplification and sustainable consumption. In order to achieve the research goals and test the proposed hypotheses, hierarchical cluster analysis is used along with analysis of variance, and the main results of a large-scale consumer data set are represented. Finally, this work presents a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and directions for future research.

2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

2.1. Anti-consumption and voluntary simplicity

This research centers on anti-consumption lifestyles that generally lead to fewer acquisitions. Commonly, anti-consumption represents and focuses on reasons against consumption, and possessing or using specific goods (Lee, Roux, Cherrier, and Cova, 2011). Among others, voluntary simplification is one manifestation of the umbrella phenomenon of anti-consumption (e.g., Hoffmann and Lee, 2016). Kozinets, Handelman, and Lee (2010) emphasize that people consciously and deliberately choose anti-consumption, for instance, through their rejection of the consumerist mainstream, and instead achieve voluntary simplicity (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2012; Lee and Ahn, 2016). Most definitions emphasize that voluntary simplifiers value reduced consumption (e.g., Elgin and Mitchell, 1977). According to Alexander and Ussher (2012), the practice of simple living encompasses consuming less, minimizing expenditures, and valuing the possession of fewer goods. Whereas personal possession is an expression or symbol of a highly consumption-oriented lifestyle, indicating the attainment of material affluence and social status, this relationship does not exist for simplifiers (e.g., Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). Moreover, simplifiers consciously search for a life purpose in terms of a “nonmaterialistic source of satisfaction and meaning” (Etzioni, 1998, p. 620). In general, they limit their expenditures out of free will and not because of financial constraints (Etzioni, 1998). Furthermore, voluntary simplifiers are characterized by a set of core values related to the self, relationships, society, and sustainability (Johnston and Burton, 2003). As voluntary simplifiers are ecologically aware (Huneke, 2005), they differ from the closely related concept of the frugal consumer (Lastovicka et al., 1999), who refrains from consumption for reasons other than ecological ones.

The degree to which voluntary simplifiers adopt a simple lifestyle ranges on a continuum that encompasses different levels

of consumption intensity (for a review of concepts, see McDonald, Oates, Young, and Hwang, 2006). Although moderate simplifiers voluntarily reduce consumption by giving up consumer goods they could readily afford (Etzioni, 1998) (downshifting in consumption), they still retain a consumption-oriented lifestyle. Thus, moderate simplifiers do not exit the market but rather change their consumption level and behavior, and therefore represent “a considerable target market for ethical or green products and services” (McDonald et al., 2006). By contrast, strong simplifiers substantially restructure their lives by, for example, reducing income levels or working hours (downshifting in work) (Nelson, Rademacher, and Paek, 2007). Drawing on sustainability-rooted anti-consumption, the authors of this paper define and focus on moderate voluntary simplifiers who deliberately reduce their consumption levels, indicated through lower levels of owned consumer products relative to their financial opportunities (downshifting in consumption).

2.2. Sustainability and voluntary simplicity

With respect to sustainability, there are different concepts of voluntary simplifiers. One of these concepts is that of ethical simplifiers, whose underlying motivations are environmental protection or social justice (e.g., Shaw and Newholm, 2002). These individuals consider the social and environmental impact of production processes and goods and consequently limit their use of resources, recycle their waste, and avoid impulse purchasing in their daily (consumption) behavior (e.g., Huneke, 2005). Alexander and Ussher (2012) empirically prove that simplifiers use their financial resources to opt for socially and environmentally conscious ways of living and consuming. Additional findings of their study indicate that almost three quarters of simplifiers spend their money almost always/often on organic, local, Fairtrade, and green products, as well as on renewable energy and long-lasting products. Espousing a more activist approach, simplifiers might also resist mass consumerism and engage in political consumption practices (Cherrier, 2009), such as boycotting and buycotting (Nelson et al., 2007; Shaw and Moraes, 2009; Zamwel, Sasson-Levy, and Ben-Porat, 2014). They value self-made products and homegrown food and engage in acts of collaborative consumption such as bartering, informal exchange, and sharing (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Ballantine and Creery, 2010; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). As Shaw and Moraes (2009) note, voluntary simplifiers engage in a wide range of consumption strategies that involve anti-consumption (reduced, modified, or no consumption) as well as sustainable consumption practices (e.g., buying Fairtrade or organic products). Among other reasons, their conscious consumption behaviors are attributable to environmental, social, and economic concerns and thus fit a multidimensional view of sustainability.

H₁. Voluntary simplifiers prefer a) to buy ecological products, and b) to buy Fairtrade products.

H₂. Voluntary simplifiers support a) boycott activities, and b) buycott activities.

H₃. Voluntary simplifiers refuse impulsive buying.

H₄. Voluntary simplifiers have internalized a strong consciousness for sustainable consumption.

2.3. Human values and voluntary simplicity

Human values are “desirable transsituational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 21). Previous research indicated that human values affect consumers' behavioral patterns in the field of sustainability (e.g., Thøgersen and Ölander, 2002). Schwartz (1992) distinguishes 10 value types, and three of these – universalism,

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