

# Voluntary Simplicity: A New Consumption Mode Motivated by Responsible Behavior

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## Abstract

In this study, our aim is to understand the motivations which explain the behavior of the followers of voluntary simplicity; a new postmodern movement. A quantitative study was conducted with 310 voluntary simplifiers. The results showed that simplifiers, known for their ethical stands, are distinguished by non-materialistic behavior, self-sufficiency and they defend the idea of recycling practices. It is therefore obvious that this segment of voluntary simplifiers could arouse the interest of Marketers, who should think of establishing a Marketing Mix adapted to the needs and expectations of this type of consumers.

**Keywords:** Voluntary simplicity, ethics, recycling, non-materialistic, self-sufficiency.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, the world has been witnessing constant economic, political, technological, social and other changes. These latter have given rise to harmful ecological effects as well as to a growing concern with life quality and the consumption patterns of human beings. Indeed, during these modernity years, the most developed countries are structuring their wealth in line with a massive and an intensive use of renewable and non-renewable resources. As a result, a remarkable degradation of the environment is observed as a consequence of its increased pollution and the increasingly pronounced climate imbalances.

These negative repercussions, dangerously affecting the environment, have helped the emergence of a "smart and wise, bon vivant and independent" consumer (Van De Walle and Brice, 2011), adopting a subjective consumption pattern that goes far beyond the concrete attributes of the product or service to meet a more immaterial need. The emergence of such a profile is now the result of the transition from a modern to a postmodern society, opening the door to several alternatives of an ecological and ethical nature. These alternatives aimed at guaranteeing a better life for future generations. Of these alternatives, a movement has emerged that is increasingly attracting the attention of researchers and consumers: voluntary simplicity.

In order to better understand this new movement, it is relevant to identify and understand the motivations of its followers. Pursuing such an understanding brings us back to the following question: what are the main motivations that explain the behavior of voluntary simplifiers? In order to answer this question, a review of the literature is useful to develop a theoretical background that clarifies the concept of voluntary simplicity. Empirically, a survey was carried out on a sample of voluntary simplifiers.

## **1. Emergence of the simplifier consumer**

In this postmodern era, it seems certain that society's behavior has changed in recent decades. Through these changes a new consumer is emerging. Unlike the modern consumer, the postmodern consumer is less interested in material wealth. Rather, they are looking for experiences that allow them to acquire morally rich values. Modern consumers are more willing to be dependent on material goods (Firat and Dholakia, 2006).

On the contrary, the postmodern consumer is much more motivated by experience and by the moral values of the activities he or she engages in. According to Berner and Van Tonder (2003), a postmodern consumer is one who is open to new values and principles in the family, community, etc. (Firat and Dholakia, 2006). They oppose the irremediable damage of overconsumption and overwork that encourages some of them to consume differently, i.e. in a responsible manner, while taking into account the harmful effects of their own consumption on the environment and society. Voluntary simplifier consumers belong to this post-modernism.

The very first definition of the concept of "voluntary simplicity" was presented in 1936 by Richard Gregg, a follower of Ghandi, in his article « The value of Voluntary simplicity », in which he evokes all the constructive principles of this phenomenon: *"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 purpose”.*

According to this author, voluntary simplicity can be understood as a combination of internal and external arrangements. The inner provisions reflect sincerity and honesty, as well as all types of spiritual values. The outer provisions are made explicit by the ability to avoid the use of products that are unnecessary and that jeopardize the independence of the consumer. Research aimed at a greater understanding of this concept has been evolving, and authors have suggested that it is a diverse social movement of people resistant to high consumption lifestyles while seeking to minimize their consumption and achieve a better life quality (Grigsby, 2004; Alexander, 2009).

This movement has aroused the interest of companies, as it represents a new specific segment of anti-consumers that needs to be studied carefully in order to be able to satisfy it (Iyer and Muncy, 2009). Put differently, we speak of the emergence of the parasitic phenomenon of anti-consumerism (Hoffmann and Lee, 2016). This exciting prospect will enable consumers who adopt this lifestyle to live better while consuming less and differently, while ensuring a minimum of negative repercussions on their health, their entourage and their environment (Alexander and Garret, 2009).

## **2. Voluntary Simplicity and Ethical Behavior**

It is important to look at the followers of voluntary simplicity and determine the lifestyle links that bring them together. The literature has revealed that the behavior of the simplifier is dictated by several types of motivations such as ethical consumption, self-sufficiency and non-materialistic and recycling behavior. In 1981, Leonard Barton identified three groups of voluntary simplifiers: conservatives, activists and conformists. Among these groups are the activist voluntary simplifier group, which brings together individuals from families with strong resource conservation ethics and a responsible behavior towards society and the environment.

These adherents are seen as a model for educating and raising awareness about resource scarcity. In 2002, Shaw and Newholm also affirmed the existence of this group of ethical voluntary simplifiers whose underlying motivations are either environment protection or social justice and equity. In the same vein, Mc Donald et al (2006), explain that the purchase of fair-trade ecological products by followers of voluntary simplicity is the logical mindset behind a concern for the environmental and social impacts of consumption choices.

Moreover, Alexander (2011) stressed that the interdependence of people and resources and the increased awareness of environmental issues are key issues for voluntary simplicity. Thus, it is incumbent on the adherents of voluntary simplicity to preserve these finite resources and that a new attitude of citizenship needs to be adapted. Similarly, Carvalho et al (2009) indicated that voluntary simplicity adherents show a double consciousness. On the one hand, an ecological conscience to work against the exasperation of the scarcity of natural resources: voluntary simplicity supporters ask for a more responsible and fair use of available resources to meet important environmental challenges, such as global warming, pollution, etc. On the other hand, there is a social awareness that quality of life and the planet's resources are not fairly distributed over all regions of the world and even within each country.

### **2.1 Voluntary simplicity and self-sufficiency**

The literature on voluntary simplicity has attributed the value of "self-sufficiency" to the lifestyle of voluntary simplicity (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Leonard Barton, 1981; Shama, 1981). This value conveyed by proponents of voluntary simplicity denotes the need for more control over life and less dependence on organizations. Indeed, Rogers and Leonard Barton (1979) defined voluntary simplicity as "the degree to which an individual selects a lifestyle designed to maximize direct control over daily activities and minimize consumption and dependence". In fact, Ballantine and Creery (2010) argued that voluntary simplicity proponents have tried to be as self-sufficient as possible. Thus, Privat (2011) indicated that of the behaviors conveyed by the voluntary simplicity lifestyle is self-sufficiency, i.e., doing everything oneself, sewing, gardening, cooking, repairing.

Leonard Barton (1981) added that voluntary simplifiers, that the author calls activists, show a behavior of self-sufficiency; they do a lot of gardening, DIY, etc., yet they are not self-sufficient. Similarly, Elgin and Mitchell (1977) pointed out that voluntary simplicity combines the intention to be more self-determined and less dependent on large, complex institutions. Furthermore, they proclaimed that self-determination manifests itself in consumption, as a desire to assume greater control over personal destiny and not to live a life dependent on others (administration, banking, etc.). In the light of these theoretical findings, the following hypothesis is formulated:

*H 1: ethical voluntary simplifiers behave in a self-sufficient manner.*

## **2.2 Voluntary simplifiers and non-materialistic behavior**

According to Etzioni (2004), there are three types of voluntary simplicity adherents that differ according to the intensity of simplification of their lives. These are the "Downshifters", the "Strong simplifiers" and the "Holistic simplifiers". Among these groups is the "sacrificing simplifiers" group, which includes individuals who have given up high-paying, highly skilled jobs to live on less income. This group of sacrificing simplifiers also includes a large number of wage earners who voluntarily choose to retire before they are forced to do so. They choose to have less income in order to have a less stressful, simpler life. This allows them to spend more time on family, leisure and intellectual activities. These members therefore show a non-materialistic attitude.

Ballantine and Creery (2010) also indicated that there is a type of voluntary simplifiers that they call "strong simplifiers". These are those who give up high-paying jobs in order to live on modest incomes, reducing their consumption accordingly. This reduction in working time and subsequent reduction in income allows the proponents of voluntary simplicity to reduce their spending (Carvalho et al 2009). Following these theoretical proposals, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*H2: Ethical voluntary simplifiers show a non-materialistic behavior.*

## **2.3 Simplifiers and recycling behavior**

Referring to the study of Elgin and Mitchell (1977) in the United States, we distinguish 4 distinct degrees of voluntary simplicity: Full voluntary simplicity, Partial Voluntary simplicity, Sympathizer toward voluntary simplicity, Indifferent, Unaware or opposed to voluntary simplicity. Among these groups, The first one is called "The Radical Voluntary Simplifiers" and is made up of people who live the life of simplicity to the full. They are family-oriented and recycling-oriented and tend to consume organic products and buy organic products made from recycled materials (Iyer and Muncy, 2009).

In the 18-item scale of Leonard Barton (1981), it was shown that recycling is one of the most important activities that voluntary simplifiers engage in. Privat (2011) and Boisvert (2005) also confirmed these practices involuntary simplifiers, showing that recycling, composting, reuse of second-hand products, etc., are common practices for this group. Our third hypothesis is formulated as follows:

*H3- Ethical voluntary simplifiers show a recycling behavior.*

### **3. Research methodology**

On this issue in developing countries, and more specifically in Tunisia, is very scarce. To our knowledge, specific groups of voluntary simplicity seekers have existed there for about fifteen years. To identify our sample, the criterion of positive attitude towards the environment was chosen, since it has been shown that individuals who show some ecological awareness are likely to adopt the lifestyle of voluntary simplifiers. The convenience sampling method was chosen. A questionnaire was sent to 310 people, to different members of the group "Defense of the ecological environment in Tunisia", to the group "Acting for the environment in Tunisia" and to subscribers of the Facebook page "Voluntary simplifiers in Tunisia".

The questionnaire was hosted on Google Forms and self-administered on the web. This method is called Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI).

#### **3.1 Measurement Scales**

In order to test our hypotheses, we used measurement scales from the literature and which we adapted to the needs of this study (see Appendix 1). The measurement scale used to measure ethical consumption behavior is the one proposed by Toti and Moulins (2015) with three dimensions (political, social and environmental). We used the two dimensions of Cordeau and Dubé's (2008) voluntary simplicity scale cited by Dellech et al (2018), which has already been used in the same context to measure self-sufficiency (3 items) and non-materialism (3 items). The practice of recycling is measured using the "Recycling" scale of the General Ecological Behavior Scale by Kaiser and Wilson (2004), which includes 3 items.

The structure of the different scales used was first checked by a Principal Component Analysis (PCA), with Varimax rotation, using SPSS version 24 software. Following this exploratory phase, the item "You buy products sold as part of social actions" on the scale for measuring ethical consumption behavior was removed, as its factor loadings were low, 0.42 (<0.5). Then, in order to confirm the factor structure of the scales from the exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analyses were performed using AMOSv23 software.

**Table 1: The reliability and validity analysis of each measurable variable**

Index	Loading	Rh $\hat{o}$ de Jöreskog ( $\rho$ )	CR	AVE
Pol1	0.83	0.884	0.793	0.56
Pol2	0.74			
Pol3	0.65			
Pol4	0.76			
Social1	0.82			
Social2	0.84			
Social3	0.75			
Env1	0.88			
Env2	0.82			
Env3	0.78			
self-suf1	0.65	0.874	0.737	0.67
self-suf2	0.71			
self-suf3	0.82			
Not-mat1	0.59	0.876	0.748	0.73
Not-mat2	0.86			
Not-mat3	0.76			
Recyc1	0.83	0.756	0.728	0.62
Recyc2	0.65			
Recyc3	0.69			

### 3.2 Hypothesis Testing

In order to test the empirical validity of our research hypotheses, we used an ANOVA analysis. To test the first hypothesis, we examined the significance of the relationship between being an ethical voluntary simplifier and having self-sufficiency behavior. The results show that there is a significant relationship (Sig < 0.000) between the 2 variables (Table 2). Therefore, our first hypothesis assuming a significant relationship between being an ethical voluntary simplifier and having a self-sufficiency behavior is retained.

**Table 2: ANOVA results for H1**

	Sum of squares	Ddl	Medium square	F	Sig
Intergroups	26,573	2	13,286	26,573	,000
Intragroups	282,427	307	,920	282,427	
Total	309,000	309		309,000	

The results in Table 3 show a significant relationship between being an ethical voluntary simplifier and having a non-materialistic attitude: H2 is retained.

**Table 3:** ANOVA results for H2

	<b>Sum of squares</b>	<b>Ddl</b>	<b>Medium square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Intergroups	67,103	2	22,368	28,295	,000
Intragroups	241,897	307	,791		
Total	309,000	309			

**Table 4:** ANOVA results for H3

	<b>Sum of squares</b>	<b>Ddl</b>	<b>Medium square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Intergroups	39,719	2	19,859	22,641	,000
Intragroups	269,281	307	,877		
Total	309,000	309			

Similarly, for hypothesis H3, the results also showed a significant relationship between an ethical voluntary simplifier and having a recycling behavior (Sig 0.000 = 0.05) (table 4), H3 is therefore validated.

### **Conclusion**

As research on voluntary simplicity is scarce, this supports the usefulness and the theoretical and managerial contribution of this study. Our results showed that simplifiers known for their ethical stands are distinguished by non-materialistic behavior, self-sufficiency and they defend the idea of recycling practices. It is therefore obvious that this segment of voluntary simplifiers could arouse the interest of marketers, who should think of establishing a Marketing Mix adapted to the needs and expectations of this type of consumers.

It is then relevant to further promote the production of organic products, with an eco-label and recyclable packaging and to develop fair trade. Indeed, this target group needs to be reassured by labelling and certification processes. Retailing-wise, we can develop fair trade, specialized channels, such as delicatessen, supermarkets for local, ecological, regional products, etc. A technological application can come to the service of simplifiers, particularly at the level of communication; informing them about how to track the product to be bought or consumed. The simplifier can thus know whether or not the product meets their ecological concerns. This can also contribute to a particular form of adapted and customized communication.

However, our study shows some limitations. A bias of social conformism has been noticed. In fact, through their answers, the respondents express a social and a moral ideal, and a desire to conform to social norms in order to be socially responsible.

Considered a study of a concept that is less or never studied in an emerging country, it would then be possible to undertake future studies with more detailed analyses of this concept by looking at qualitative data that provide deeper and more explicit information on voluntary simplicity.

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**Appendices**

**Scale for measuring ethical consumption behavior (Toti & Moulins, 2015)**

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Items</b>
<b>Political dimensions</b>	You prefer to buy the product with an ecological label (food, clothing, bulbs, cosmetics, etc.).
	you prefer to buy in stores that showcase ecological or organic products.
	You prefer to shop in stores that promote fair trade.
	You buy fair trade products out of solidarity with producers.
	You buy products sold as part of social actions.
<b>Social dimension</b>	You avoid brands / products that profit from the misery of their employees.
	You avoid products or brands that make children work even indirectly.
	You avoid products from companies that do not respect the rights of their employees.
<b>Environmental dimension</b>	You limit your consumption (food, energy, clothing, etc.) to what you really need.
	You contribute to the preservation of the environment through daily actions.
	To reduce your contribution to global warming, you consume differently.

**Scale for measuring Self-sufficiency Attitude (Cordeau et Dubé, 2008).**

<b>1</b>	Whenever possible, I prefer to do things on my own rather buying them.
<b>2</b>	It is preferable to grow our own vegetables.
<b>3</b>	If we want to live a satisfying life, it is preferable to be self-sufficient as often as possible.

**Scale for measuring non-materialistic Attitude (Cordeau et Dubé, 2008).**

<b>1</b>	I try to use the items I bought as long as possible.
<b>2</b>	We should often focus less on the aesthetic presentation of items
<b>3</b>	I cannot tolerate that items still usable are thrown in large quantities as if they were waste.

**Scale of measurement of recycling practice Kaiser and Wilson (2004)**

<b>1</b>	You collect and recycle the paper used.
<b>2</b>	You bring empty bottles at a recycling bin.
<b>3</b>	You don't throw away dead batteries in bins unsuitable.