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## Voluntary simplicity: an exploration of market interactions

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**(Title) Voluntary simplicity: An exploration of market interactions**

**(Short title) Voluntary simplicity**

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## **Voluntary simplicity: An exploration of market interactions**

### **Abstract**

Voluntary simplicity is often considered to be a sustainable lifestyle phenomenon buttressed by environment-friendly consumption practices. Voluntary simplicity is shaped by the individual as well as society, and marketplace interactions often impact voluntarily simplified approaches to consumption. Pertinent, therefore, is a consideration of how voluntary simplifiers negotiate the tensions between marketplace interactions and decisions (not) to consume, as the exploration of interactions between consumption and non-consumption choices has relevant implications for the advancement of sustainable consumption. Specifically, we seek to answer the following question: how have voluntary simplifiers in a rural context negotiated the relationship between voluntary simplicity and market-based (non-)consumption? This paper reports on a study of 28 rural voluntary simplifiers to explore the intersections between voluntary simplicity and rural markets. Findings highlight the convoluted nature and the multiple manifestations of voluntary simplicity, while the rural context allows an exploration of such tensions in relation to individual voluntary simplicity, local economy, supermarkets, fair trade and consumer culture.

**Keywords:** voluntary simplicity, ethics, sustainable consumption, anti-consumption

## **Voluntary simplicity: An exploration of market interactions**

### **Introduction**

The negative environmental impact of consumption-orientated cultures has resulted in mounting consumer concern, and voluntary simplicity may be viewed as a manifestation of conscientious consumers' action for change. Voluntary simplicity has gained increased prominence in the consumer behaviour literature (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996; Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Huneke, 2005; McDonald *et al.*, 2006), and for the purpose of this paper we define voluntary simplifiers as individuals who opt "out of free will – rather than by being coerced by poverty, government austerity programs, or being imprisoned – to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning" (Etzioni, 1998, p. 620).

The attention dedicated to voluntary simplicity is not surprising, given the estimate that 15% of Americans will have adopted voluntarily simplified lifestyles by 2010 (Jebrowski, 2000). Although voluntary simplicity is often considered within an anti-consumption framework, we argue that voluntary simplicity should not be viewed solely in these terms. Rather, there is a need to question the relationship between voluntary simplicity and market-based consumption. Baudrillard (1998) claimed that voluntary simplicity constitutes luxury consumption whether this be in the form of time or money. He rejects the notion that voluntary simplicity can represent an escape from the market. This view is supported by others who question an individual's ability or desire to opt out of consumption and, thus, the market (Kozinets, 2002; Arnould, 2007). This is

indeed reflected in part by the books on voluntary simplicity that have reached the best seller lists (Maniates 2002a) and by growing markets for more ethical and sustainable consumption choices (Williams, Taylor and Howard, 2005). Shama (1996), however, highlights a pronounced naivety on the part of voluntary simplifiers who put faith in the market system to resolve their consumption concerns. Similarly, Sorell and Hendry (1994) argue that the pertinent issue should be to encourage consumers to consume less, rather than refining consumption through product-by-product and company-by-company ethical profiles. Others view ethical and sustainable consumption alternatives as representing acts of market resistance that have been co-opted by corporations in the advancement of commercial interests (Holt, 2002; Carducci, 2006; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). In viewing voluntary simplicity through an anti-consumption lens, much of the research in this area has neglected to consider the evident tensions between voluntary simplicity and market engagement. Pertinent, therefore, is a consideration of how voluntary simplifiers negotiate the tensions between marketplace interactions and decisions (not) to consume, as the exploration of interactions between consumption and non-consumption choices has relevant implications for the advancement of sustainable consumption. Specifically, we seek to answer the following question: how have voluntary simplifiers in a rural context negotiated the relationship between voluntary simplicity and market-based (non)consumption?

In the sections that follow, we firstly consider the contemporary phenomenon of voluntary simplicity and market engagement. This illustrates how acts of voluntary simplicity have occurred both as reactions to, and within, the extant market structure. This is presented as a preliminary to setting out our empirical data. In the UK we note many voluntary simplifiers moving and continuing to move to rural areas of the country (Arlidge, 2004). This reflects key

values underlying voluntary simplicity, namely respect for the environment, and a desire to reconnect with nature (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977; Leonard Barton, 1981; Etzioni, 1998a). Therefore, rural locations are selected as the focus for this study.

## **Voluntary simplicity**

Albee (1977) notes a society where individuals have been raised to believe it is acceptable to consume without consequence. Voluntary simplifiers, however, take an alternative perspective. Many different terminologies have been presented to describe what is now popularly termed “voluntary simplicity”. In reviewing the work of Elgin (1981), Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996) note nineteen different terms used to describe this concept, including a “compassionate approach to life”, “dedicated poverty” and “simple living”. It is important to note the varied ways in which individuals within the voluntary simplicity movement manage their own simplified lifestyles, and this is reflected in the existence of so many definitions of the term.

Etzioni (1998) distinguishes between three variations of voluntary simplicity, ranging in degree of strength from “downshifting”, through to “strong simplification” and “the simple living movement”. Shaw and Newholm (2002), on the other hand, use the term “ethical simplifiers” to denote the behaviours of voluntary simplicity adopters that respond mostly to ethical concerns, and McDonald *et al.* (2006) propose that more attention should be devoted to a large segment of consumers, the “Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers”. Such consumers fall at the beginning of the non-voluntary simplifier/ simplifier spectrum, and according to the authors this group may help us to understand the processes of adoption and non-adoption of greener

consumption styles. These varied definitions mirror the diversity within voluntary simplicity, which encompasses the adoption of lifestyles based on low consumption, ecological responsibility and self-sufficiency to varying degrees (Shama, 1985).

Motivations for such an approach to consumption also vary. They may centre on the careful and wise use of resources for the achievement of long-term consumption goals as reflected in frugality (Todd and Lawson, 2002), and may have little to do with societal and environmental issues such as those advocated by the low consumption and anti-consumption movement. However, motivations can also be related to a concern for the environment, religion and physical wellbeing (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). A US-wide online survey by Huneke (2005) also reveals the importance attributed by voluntary simplifiers to principles such as responsibility, family life, friendship and generosity. Noting the diversity within voluntary simplicity, Elgin (1981) suggests that its expressions appear to reflect an underlying coherence within its rich multiplicity of manifestations.

Such motivations gain expression through consumption and non-consumption practices. Voluntary simplifiers may choose to reduce and/or modify their consumption, or not to consume. Decisions not to consume can arise through a questioning of the need for certain products and/or services, and may reflect a questioning of the ethics of consumption more broadly (Barnet, Cafaro and Newholm, 2005). Overall, consumption practices may be reduced by, for example, engaging in communal laundry, a change in transport practices to cycling or car sharing, and vegetarianism motivated by concerns about resource usage (Arens, 1995). Consumption can also be reduced by reusing and repairing items to lengthen product life-spans (Durning, 1992;

Papanek, 1995; Cooper, 2005), purchasing second-hand goods and resisting commodification by growing food on allotments or on 'part-time farms' (Pendle, 2000), or by making clothing or household furnishing. Modified consumption behaviours still involve actual consumption, however, and these approaches may use modern technology to reduce material and energy use, for example, laundry balls to replace detergents, catalytic converters on cars, solar powered items and more energy efficient household goods. Boycotting (Friedman, 1996), that is, the deliberate patronage of positive consumer choices such as fair trade products, local stores and local produce, as well as recycling and refilling, is also employed.

Indeed, consumption has, in many instances, provided voluntary simplifiers with a means to create identity and seek new meanings through restricted and ethically modified consumption choices, as it is through the use of consumer goods that individuals create identity, build relationships and structure psychological events (Lunt and Livingston, 1992). Consumption is a human act and essential for the fulfilment of basic needs (Kozinets, 2002), but it is also through the cultural significance of goods that individuals express themselves and their identities (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979/1996).

Nevertheless, difficulties may be encountered in the signification process of voluntarily simplified consumption, as ethical issues are encompassing in nature and, therefore, complex in their own right. Tensions may arise not only around attempts to exit the market but also for choices within the market. For example, conflict can occur when voluntary simplifiers are faced with having to choose between fairly traded or locally produced goods; between a concern to trade fairly with 'Majority World' countries to promote their economies, or the environmental



problems of excessive transportation that would be reduced through local production. This supports the notion that individual consumption projects are not single acts, but rather contribute to a holistic lifestyle approach reflective of attempts to consider the macro impact and interdependencies of local and global markets, consumers and the natural environment.

Further insight into the relationship between voluntary simplicity and markets can be gleaned within the context of industrialisation. Industrialisation brought new complexities into the world, and Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996) suggest that, under industrial conditions, individuals' ability to live simply becomes potentially annulled. Authority and control, it is argued, were removed from the home and re-directed to the factory (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996), and many of the current studies on voluntary simplicity demonstrate voluntary simplifiers' desire to regain some of the lost control (e.g. Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Cherrier, 2005; Cherrier and Gandolfi, 2008). The historically symbiotic relationship between markets and communities should also be acknowledged here, as previous studies hold dualistic views of families and communities as standing in opposition to markets (cf. Tönnies, 1887/1955; Hoffer, 1931; Nisbet, 1970; Kozinets, 2002). As argued by Foucault (1991), as the 'economy' known to or born within communities transformed itself due to several historical factors, so did 'the family' and the 'community' of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, particularly post-industrial revolution. And as the economy became more detached from familial and communal ties, it also became more easily disconnected from social norms and mores. This is consistent with Rudmin and Kilbourne's (1996) point about authority and control discussed above.

Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996) also suggest that voluntary simplicity exists in contradiction to industrial conditions, and that its individualistic and aesthetic ethos has become subsumed by the very system of conspicuous production and consummation it should, according to the authors, overcome. Placing the practice of voluntary simplicity as one of living within markets (Etzioni, 1998; Shaw and Newholm, 2002) again serves to highlight the tensions between the anti-consumption ethos often attached to voluntary simplicity (e.g., Zavestoski, 2002a; Cherrier, 2008) and the consumerist market system within which it finds itself.

If simplicity in the past served to establish and reinvigorate the market system, it is possible that the simplicity of the 1970s also facilitated the same purpose, with movements such as the back-to-the-land as mainly a professional enterprise (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996). Today, too, there is evidence to suggest that, at least in the US, voluntary simplifiers are well educated and have above-average incomes, and that products have already been launched to capitalise upon voluntary simplicity adopters (Huneke, 2005). Again, this questions an individual's ability to opt out of the market as discussed above, and further reinforces the view that voluntary simplicity is a practice of living within markets.

Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996) also highlight that voluntary simplicity necessarily implies the conceptualisation of involuntary simplicity (economic poverty), involuntary complexity (being locked into the 'rat-race' of a work-to-consume ethic) and voluntary complexity (a conscious and positive approach to being part of the system), and all these stances relate to the varied ways in which individuals may engage with markets and market systems. The authors also question the morality of voluntary simplicity by suggesting that consumption and even excess

consumption may be viewed as positive in that they are key to the development and flourishing of prosperous markets and economies. Of course, such views have been criticised by most prominent authors within the field of sustainable development and consumption (e.g. Jackson, 2005) although, in the UK, DEFRA (2007) has recently highlighted the need to break the linkage between waste, sustainability and economic growth.

Finally, additional insights into the relationship between voluntary simplicity and markets can be gained through recent theorisations on risks and reflexive modernisation. According to Beck (1992), due to the globalisation of technological advances and, hence, modes of production, society has moved on from a phase of localised hazards to one in which risks have also become globalised and systemic. He argues that although science's "methodological scepticism" (Beck, 1992, p. 14) has been institutionalised and made ubiquitous, it lacks self-reflexivity about its consequences and, thus, the risks of that which it produces. This, in turn, is seen to facilitate a backlash against scientific methods, and a distrust of large institutions including corporations, which is often evidenced in voluntary simplifiers' discourses. Such circumstances, it is argued, characterise "reflexive doubt" (Thompson, 2005, p. 235-236), that is, "a critical reflection on the risks posed by complex technological systems and (...) the institutional, political, and economic forces that shape the determination of acceptable risk levels by socially sanctioned experts and authorities". Following Connolly and Prothero (2008), this is relevant in the context of sustainable consumption and, by extension, voluntary simplicity in that there exists a dialectic relationship between globalisation and self-projects. Globalising influences and their individuated social relations, it is argued, impact on projects of self-identity as much as the process of shaping the self through commodities influences global strategies. This

is seen to be circumscribed by the context of systemic risks described above, and the uncertainties caused by competing expert and lay knowledge in relation to such risks. Thus, although green (non)consumption is important in shaping and maintaining empowered voluntary simplicity identities, there is much uncertainty about the choices to be made (Connolly and Prothero 2008). Pertinent, therefore, is an improved understanding of the relationships between voluntary simplicity and complex market interactions. In this paper we seek to further explore how market contexts and processes impact upon, and are impacted by voluntary simplifiers' everyday (non)consumption experiences, and how they address possible tensions between market interactions and sustainability.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this paper is to more clearly understand the interaction between voluntary simplicity, practices of (non-)consumption and the market. In order to achieve this, semi-structured, depth-interviews were carried out, as they allow for deep probing and, therefore, understanding of voluntary simplifiers' interactions with markets. This research is positioned in a rural market context as, in keeping with many affluent countries, the UK media has and continues to report on those who opt out of their urban lifestyle to move to rural locations, particularly around the picturesque and remote Scottish Highlands and Islands (Arlidge, 2004). The nature of the research necessitated the use of an accentuated population. Thus, a purposive sample of voluntary simplifiers was obtained by placing advertisement calls for voluntary simplifiers in local newspapers, post offices and charity shops in rural areas (as defined by the Scottish Executive, 1999) around the Scottish Highland Region. These advertisements briefly

outlined the purpose of the study and asked for those who held concerns for low consumption, ecological responsibility and self-sufficiency, reflective of Shama's (1985) definition of voluntary simplicity, to contact the researchers. Respondents were contacted by telephone and were asked specifically how their consumption lifestyles reflected Shama's (1985) areas of low consumption, ecological responsibility and self-sufficiency. The 'voluntary' aspect of their simplified consumption was determined through these areas and respondents were asked if the geographic location of their homes was important to their voluntary simplicity. Twenty-eight participants were selected for the interviews. The sample represented an active group of voluntary simplifiers based on Shama's (1985) three dimensions of voluntary simplicity. Participants had moved to a rural location as part of their pursuit for voluntary simplicity, and were selected to geographically represent the sample area chosen for the study. Participants were not asked for demographic details as the research was concerned with (non-)consumption experiences rather than seeking to make inferences based on demographic measures. Interviews took place in participant's homes, and were around 1½-2 hours in length. All interviews began in an open-ended format (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) with a general question about any issues of concern in consumption. Once the dialogue began, participants were encouraged to describe their actual experiences and actions, and the interviews were conversational in nature. Table 1 provides a summary profile of each participant.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Each discussion was tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Analysis of the interview transcripts followed a process of hermeneutic interpretation as outlined by previous research

(Thompson, 1996), allowing the development of thematic categories and identification of holistic relationships among the meanings and categories participants used to describe their (non-) consumption experiences and relationships with markets. References to specific examples from the text are made in the next section. In what follows, participant's simplifying behaviours are reviewed in terms of three areas deemed key to an understanding of how voluntary simplifiers negotiated the relationship between voluntary simplicity and market-based (non)consumption, namely *individual simplicity, community and rural markets, simply consuming complex food*, and *voluntary simplicity and consumer culture*.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Individual simplicity, community and rural markets**

The voluntary simplifiers in this study hold on to a strong 'sense of community' (Friedman, Abeele and De Vos, 1993), both through local links and communion with nature (Moss and Morgan, 1967), and despite their individualised consumption practices. Participants in this study seek to re-establish some of the symbiotic links between their communities and markets (Foucault, 1991; Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996) as they attempt to reclaim, although in a different manner, some of the lost communal norms and morals through purposeful market interactions. This is achieved, for example, through a critique of current agricultural methods (George) and support for local produce (Alex):

"I think the only reason they use these chemicals is because greed has somehow come into the system. Farmers used to produce enough to make a living and we all ate healthily. Now they are

growing everything so that they can increase their yields and I'm not quite sure where that is getting us apart from doing a lot of harm to the environment and animals" (George).

"We are great believers in buying locally. Your own environment and soul is somehow connected to the people that live in that area, and we read somewhere that seemingly it is better for you to buy and eat locally from your own environment. I mean, before people started to travel around, that is exactly what they had to do, so we tend to support the farmers market, local farmer shops, and buying stuff in season. I mean I know you can get things all year round now, but we certainly tend to eat what is in season" (Alex).

Patronage of local exchange and exchange spaces was viewed by many as essential, given their service to the community (Smith and Sparks, 2000). Although previous research has documented higher levels of out shopping in rural areas, except among the elderly and financially and car deprived (Broadbridge and Calderwood, 2002), participants in the current study supported local stores for community and ethical reasons which include environmental concerns. Participants did not view price as a barrier as has been reported elsewhere (Furey, Farley and Strugnell, 2002); instead, participants expected to pay more for ethical alternatives such as organic, locally produced and vegetarian products when available.

Despite participants' sense of community, consumption was, on the whole, an individualised endeavour. It would be unrealistic to expect today's consumers to be locked into traditional or idealised forms of community, as social links and relationships are constantly redefined in western societies and markets. Indeed, localised, communal relations co-exist with individualised lifestyles, and relate to pluralistic affiliations based on roles, situations and

interests (Szmigin, Carrigan and Bekin, 2007). Indeed, Wachtel (1996) reminds us that not all forms of individualisation are negative, and that some may indeed facilitate personal growth and spiritual development. This is reflected in the current study:

“...It comes from so many different places. In my own spirituality there is some of the ancient wisdom...there is also the psychological perspectives...that I have learned, which come into my own understanding and my own ways of being” (Sally).

Through local rural links these voluntary simplifiers created and adopted their own, individualised forms of community relations which were suitable to their personalised forms of voluntary simplicity. Personal motivations for living in a rural area were balanced with a consideration for the local community and individual participants’ macro concerns. This is illustrated in examples of reduced consumption, including growing their own produce and repairing items to make them last longer, as well as continued but modified consumption, such as purchasing fair trade and organic alternatives. These approaches to consumption were often in response to overarching societal risks as reflected through motivating concerns.

### **Simply consuming complex food**

Another aspect buttressing our participants’ desire to reconnect with nature was their concerns with the global risks emanating from environmental degradation, and this resonates with the literature on risks and reflexive modernisation reviewed above (Beck, 1992). Climate change and unsustainable production and consumption practices can be regarded as such risks, and are perceived by participants as determined by institutions and economic forces. In terms of



food consumption, voluntary simplifiers' support of local shops and distrust of big supermarkets are reflective of "reflexive doubts" (Thompson, 2005). The majority of participants shared the desire to consume seasonally. However, some highlighted the difficulty in knowing what the correct choices are (Connolly and Prothero, 2008); knowing what is in season is difficult due to the dominance of supermarkets, which source produce all year round. Many cited purchasing from local stores as a means of overcoming this:

"You know, it's going back into the community...its lining somebody's pocket here and not going to some multinational" (Ewan).

Another participant was willing to forego her desire to only purchase organic if it meant supporting local farmers rather than supermarkets. Concerns about commercialisation and profit motives were demonstrated through the avoidance of multinational companies (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Sen, Gurhan-Canli and Morwitz, 2001; Klein, Smith and John, 2004), and through participants' boycott of high profile cases including Nestlé and GM products. Some also chose to minimise these doubts and complexity by regaining control over the production of some of their own foods:

"In our last place we grew our own, and we are going to convert this back garden to producing our own stuff. It might be psychological, you know, but 'my tomatoes taste better'! Nothing can beat going into the garden and picking a few fresh potatoes and eating them within the hour, we are becoming more and more conscious of that" (Alex).

Many participants engaged in seasonal and organic consumption through growing or rearing their own, and sought to reduce rather than just modify their commercial consumption practices (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). While such partial exit from the restraints of the market (Maniates, 2002b) was desirable, this had to be managed alongside consumption choices within the market. Participants varied among those who were almost self-sufficient and others who grew a smaller proportion of their total produce. The benefits of personal satisfaction and taste highlighted in the above quote, combined with a discomfort with much conventional food production, resulted in home production being viewed as a pertinent aspect of a voluntarily simplified lifestyle. This may well represent a re-enabling of the consumer (Szmigin, Carrigan and Bekin, 2007) and indeed some level of consumer empowerment (Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson, 2006) in the face of such complex risks.

Concerns about the risks associated with modern farming methods regarding animal welfare and health scares, including Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Foot and Mouth disease, resulted in a high number of participants reducing their meat consumption and sourcing meat locally from farmers, neighbours or friends, where the link between consumer and producer is direct. Other participants practiced a fully vegetarian diet, with a small number bordering on veganism. Diet restraint was not linked to resource issues (Arens, Thorogood and Reddy, 1995), perhaps due to the close connection with source, where many meat reducers ate fish for health reasons which they accessed themselves from the wild. For several participants, organic farming was strongly associated with a more responsible answer to food production.

Nevertheless, risks are not restricted to the environment. Societal concerns are also to the fore. Many participants deliberately boycotted (Friedman, 1996) fair trade products, due to concerns about inequity and justice. Despite being in conflict with the principles of local production this was not considered an issue in this context, perhaps due to the inability to produce tea, coffee and sugar, the main purchase categories in this area, locally. These findings are in keeping with research elsewhere, which highlighted consumer concern and purchasing in this area (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw, Shiu and Clarke, 2000; Shaw and Shiu, 2003). Indeed, the global market for fair trade coffee grew by 53% in 2006 (Pearson, 2007). Interestingly, although much of this success has been attributed to the availability of these products in mainstream supermarkets, participants in the main sourced fair trade products from charities and, like organic produce, were willing to pay more for these products. One participant highlighted concerns surrounding supermarkets as a purchase location:

“I think the organic and the fair trade standards, they don’t aim to be anything other than an acceptable minimum...you know generally speaking you think you’re being goody goody...and in some ways relative to the world as it is it may be...they are claiming to be an acceptable minimum in relation to what’s sustainable and just. So if there’s some sort of fall out in terms of supermarkets profiting from this type of thing I tend to accept that as part of the price, but I think it gives supermarkets encouragement to get into it anyway...Yes, because I think fair trade standards are based on justice, really, so from my point of view, as I said how simplicity has to do with being organised, if then in your life you are subscribing to one set of values and then you’re practicing another set of values, there’s something there that is not simple, and it’s contradictory really. So, that’s what I mean by simplicity, it’s got to do with coherence rather than lack of complexity, so I find it difficult to be involved in transactions which are hurting somebody” (Paul).

Participants utilised a combination approach to purchasing, accessing at least two or more of the following: supermarkets, local stores, farmers and markets, home production, and wholefood suppliers. Although a small number of participants avoided the use of supermarkets completely, many used them selectively in combination with the aforementioned due to convenience, range, and price. Of course, this shows that risk reduction in the context of voluntary simplicity is not tension-free, and may also add to the paradoxical complexity (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996) of voluntary simplicity. For example, many participants noted the conflict faced between organic produce and food miles. In the UK controversy has surrounded this as reports of around 65% of organic produce being imported from overseas have been in the media (Lawrence, 2002; Morris and Buller, 2003). Given the interest in local production noted by participants in this study and elsewhere (Vidal and Wainwright, 1999) many believe organic should be inherently connected with local production, particularly given the increased proliferation of farmers markets (Purvis, 2002). An often complex questioning of consumption was also articulated by participants as discussed below.

### **Voluntary simplicity and consumer culture**

Although no participants in the current study had completely opted out of consumerism, participants did vary from those who exhibited many practices of self-sufficiency and reduced consumption to those who maintained aspects of consumption and sought to resolve consumption concerns through more benign choices in the marketplace, thus, enjoying many of the comforts of a consumer orientation. Such concerns are expressed both positively and

negatively within the current market system. Concerns about commercialisation and profit motives, for example, were demonstrated through the avoidance of multinational companies and a reduction in meat consumption. In reducing meat consumption participants were not seeking alternative product solutions offered by the market, as evident in the increased availability of meat substitutes such as Quorn and Textured Vegetable Protein (Mintel, 2000). Rather, they placed emphasis on the need to reform the nature of production. Thus, concerns about modern farming methods were addressed through the purchase of free range or organic produce, but more often through locally sourced meat. In both these examples a modification of the existing market system is sought, both through withdrawing support where injustice is perceived and rewarding more ethically perceived sources of supply. Shaw and Clarke (1999) found that concerned consumers wished to enact change by consuming and, thus, changing the status quo from within the existing market system. In adopting the market system to enact change, this suggests that consumption can offer a greater voice. Thus, the practices of reduced and modified consumption revealed through participants in the current study can be seen as attempts to reform current systems and practices by acting both directly in relation to, and in response to the market. Such an approach is not without tension and participants did share unease about current levels of consumption in society, expressing views such as, “people are gobbling up more and more of the world’s resources and...don’t have any restraint over their consumption” (Alan). The influence of marketing promotion was viewed as a critical part of this problem and evoked anger among some participants, while other participants described how they have been influenced by promotion:

“I’m not a great consumer, I absolutely loath shopping, I get no buzz out of it whatsoever. Although I do like going to the charity shops, that’s good fun...I think its really clever, don’t get me wrong, I think its amazing how you can convince somebody that they need something, and believe me I could be convinced with it... I cannot understand why we worry about trivial things when part of the world is starving and dying for lack of medical attention...but last week I got a real bee in my bonnet and I wanted a digital camera, so I managed to work really hard and saved some money up, it wasn’t a fortune...and I was very excited about it. We went shopping and Tesco had a special offer on where if you spend so much you could buy a digital camera, so that’s what I did. I had it for a few days and then gave it away, I really enjoyed it, I got some amazing pictures on the beach of shells, but I have a son who is an art student and his need is greater for it, so I gave it to him. I was like a child with my new toy, so yes, I was influenced” (Kim).

This illustration demonstrates how an individual who does not consider herself a mainstream ‘consumer’ and who sees many societal problems in consumption can get caught up in the allure and excitement of consumption. Indeed, this resonates with Kozinets’s (2002, p. 22) argument that “consumption is the many human acts that people perform as they interact with the material world around them”, and Douglas and Isherwood’s (1979/1996) point that consumer goods hold cultural significance and are central to how individuals express themselves. Although Kim describes getting caught up in the excitement of her purchase, this was short lived and the final outcome is one of detachment to the material item where the need of another individual comes first. Jackson (2003) considers this to be the very success of consumerism; the ability to foster needs and the inability to satisfy them over the long term. Other participants

found it difficult to understand such influences. Alan states how “it doesn’t turn me on, in fact it does quite the opposite”, he describes how he has “always felt very uncomfortable with defining yourself through your consumption”. This view is echoed by Ronnie when he notes “a large percentage of people buy things that they don’t really want, I’ve never quite figured that all out”. Thus, what we witnessed among participants were attempts to balance their desire for reduced consumption alongside continued but often modified consumption. For most participants’ anti-consumption was not an individual or cultural feasibility. Soper (2007) suggests ‘alternative hedonism’ as an alternative to focusing on less consumption through promotion of the pleasures of alternative practices. Such an approach was evident in the current research, and the two illustrations below explore the connection between reduced consumption, happiness and spirituality:

“Part of my spiritual journey is to learn that that is an illusion, the more you have the more you are going to want, it’s the same with achievement and everything else really, it’s a complete illusion. I used to think that if I had a new set of golf clubs then life would be wonderful, but it doesn’t work like that” (George).

“The fact that although we are materially better off, there is still more crime and unhappiness, it doesn’t seem to be an answer. And the decline in regular church goers, not that I’m a church goer, but I think that that probably was a good factor in peoples lives, in helping to stabilise people...I think people need to have something other than material things, there has to be something else other (Alan).

This link between spirituality and voluntary simplicity was echoed by other participants. Indeed, Sadie noted “simplicity would have to be naturally a part of a spiritual lifestyle”, and has been made previously in the context of voluntary simplicity (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002) and ethical consumption (Shaw and Thomson, 2002). The feelings of responsibility beyond the self towards the environment and people evident in the spiritual orientation described by some participants promoted the notion of consumers as citizens (Gabriel and Lang, 1995), and a felt need to respond to ethical concerns. Further, participants considered a rural location as important to their voluntarily simplified lifestyle, enjoying the benefits of “peace and quiet” (Faith) and a lifestyle considered “less superficial” where life has been altered so that “needing the things that most people seem to need” is not important (Sadie). This was in keeping with their motivations for simplifying and was inherently linked to the importance given to the environment, animals, humans, quality of life, and spirituality. Thus, as illustrated above, due to consumption concerns participants generally questioned the need for certain items and some displayed a general disinterest in many aspects of a consumerist lifestyle.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined how voluntary simplifiers in a rural context negotiate the tensions between their marketplace interactions and modified consumption. The research has highlighted the convoluted nature and the multiple manifestations of voluntary simplicity, while its rural context has allowed an exploration of such tensions in relation to individual voluntary simplicity, local economy, supermarkets and fair trade.



At a micro level, our research has echoed the existing literature on voluntary simplicity. We found a range of approaches to, and degrees of voluntary simplification across participants (Elgin, 1981; Etzioni, 1998; McDonald *et al.*, 2006), and careful and wise use of resources was aimed at achieving long-term sustainable consumption goals (Todd and Lawson, 2002). Although some of the literature suggests voluntary simplicity exists through groups, we found it is a personal choice with awareness of the general good and the good of the local community. Indeed, and contrary to some of the literature (Todd and Lawson, 2002), all presented concerns about societal and environmental impacts of consumerist-oriented cultures. Participants adopted holistic and intricate approaches to consumption decision-making and sought coherence, not without tensions (e.g. digital camera). Their interconnected practices included considerations about the place of purchase (local shops), and availability of ethical alternatives in rural shops was not optimal. However, despite the shortcomings participants aimed to support local commerce and got around issues by, for example, being extremely organised about their shopping to avoid unnecessary trips and to access desired alternatives. There was a balancing between individualised simplifying styles and consideration for the local community. A rural location was deemed important to participants' voluntarily simplified lifestyles and, coupled with environmental and societal concerns, they shared a desire to foster and strengthen communities and their local economies. Voluntary simplicity can bring about more personalised and caring exchanges due to the consumer choices involved, and by extension it may reinstate socially and environmentally-oriented norms and mores in local markets. Voluntary simplicity helps us view communities and markets as embedded in symbiotic relationships, and avoids the conceptual dualisms made by some of the consumer behaviour literature (Kozinets, 2002) and old sociological theories. Indeed, the practice of voluntary simplicity is one of living within

capitalism, and not in complete opposition to it (Etzioni, 1998; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Voluntary simplifiers really are making use of market systems to find desired ethical alternatives.

Thus, while much of the literature exploring voluntary simplicity from an anti-consumption perspective suggests individuals are seeking to eschew the market, this view places individuals outside of the market and wider society. In this paper we witness consumption practices as acting both directly in relation to, and in response to the general market. Thus, although anti-consumption practices are often eticly considered as opposing the domination of the market, voluntary simplifiers may find themselves dependent on a market to which they may object, or from which they desire independence (Featherstone, 1995). In most cases participants were able to address their concerns regarding consumer culture through a balancing of self-sufficiency, reduced and modified consumption practices. They bundled consumption practices such as positive choice (e.g. fairtrade, organic), non-consumption, reduction, re-usage and modification of consumption, and went even further by growing some of their own produce. They actively engaged in some boycotts (e.g. eschewing supermarkets), and were very critical of excess consumption and marketing promotions. Although some admitted to being influenced by marketing promotions (e.g. Kim), others felt blasé about consumerist appeals, and this was coupled with much concern and cynicism toward over-commercialisation and aggressive profit motives. Thus, practices of voluntary simplicity were both adopted within and often constrained by market conditions.

Another relevant contribution of this research concerns the choice of context, given that rural settings have not received much attention in previous studies. As discussed by participants,

rural settings allow them to reconnect to nature and to ‘what really matters’ at a personal and sometimes even spiritual level, and facilitate a differentiated, more manageable relationship with the complexities of our post-industrial existence (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996). Most importantly, these rural participants seem to discuss their voluntary simplification as a form of alternative enjoyment and meaning of the good life, which in turn resonates with Soper’s (2007) concept of ‘alternative hedonism’; a viable and equally pleasurable alternative to western consumerist culture, encompassing reduced consumption, happiness and spirituality.

Finally, this study shows that despite some ‘anti-promotion’ attitudes and resistance to some forms of consumption (Zavestoski, 2002b), voluntary simplicity is not seeking to eschew market interactions. Resistance to one type of consumption takes the form of another, and their practices are more about creating healthier, environmentally-friendlier and more balanced lifestyles for themselves, than seeking to escape the marketplace. They engage in varied consumption, non-consumption, modified consumption and anti-consumption practices as discussed above, which combined represent environmentally-friendlier styles of consumption.

The conclusions drawn from this research relate to a very specific group of voluntary simplifiers. Other contexts or types of market interactions may be pertinent to the experience of different voluntary simplifiers, which in turn could be explored in future studies.

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**19**, 121-126.

**Table 1. Participants' profiles**

Pseudonym	Important Issues	Location for Food Shopping
Alan	Anti-consumption, Environment, Farming Methods	Supermarket
Amber	Rural environment, health	Supermarket, local stores
Emma	Spirituality, environment	Farmers market, local stores, supermarket
Alex	Quality of life, health, environment, fair trade	Farmers market, local stores, supermarket
Dawn	Quality of life, rural environment, politics, fair trade	Supermarket, grow own
Audrey	Spirituality, vegetarianism, fair trade, environment	Local market, grow own
George	Spirituality	Local market, grow own
Arthur	Political, anti-consumerism, country of origin	Grow own, supermarket
Ella	Environment, country of origin, fair trade	Grow own, supermarket
Hazel	Farming methods, fair trade, country of origin, environment, air travel, political	Grow own, local stores, farmers market, wholefood store
Jen	Quality of life, rural environment, recycling	Local stores, supermarket
Linda	Environment, fair trade, country of origin, political, farming methods, quality of life, spirituality	Grow own, supermarket
John	Environment, country of origin, local production, fair trade, quality of life	Grow own, wholefood store, supermarket
Norma	Environment, self sufficiency	Supermarket, local stores, grow own in development
Sadie	Environment, local production, spirituality	Supermarket, grow own in development
Paul	Spirituality, local production, farming methods, fair trade	Grow own, wholefood store
Alexis	Quality of life, semi-self sufficiency, organic, country of origin	Grow own, Supermarket, local store
Faith	Quality of life, local production, Seasonality, packaging, animal welfare, spirituality, energy efficiency	Grow own, local store, supermarket
Sally	Paganism, vegetarianism, packaging, animal welfare, health, environment, fair trade, local produce	Wholefood store, supermarket
Keith	Rural environment, community, energy efficiency	Supermarket
Shelly	animal welfare, local produce, energy efficiency	Grow own, supermarket, local store
Ronnie	Peace, recycling, packaging	Supermarket
Leigh	Animal welfare, politics, fair trade	Grow own, supermarket
Kim	Spirituality, animal welfare, fair trade, organic, rural environment	Grow own, supermarket
Gail	Environment, animal welfare, politics, spirituality, alternative medicine	Grow own, local store, supermarket
Gordon	Local production, packaging	Grow own, local stores
Ewan	Environment, animal welfare, politics, spirituality, alternative medicine	Grow own, local store, supermarket
Andy	Environment, sustainability, energy efficiency, recycling, local production	Grow own, supermarket