
Toward Sustainable Consumption and Life Satisfaction: Understanding Apparel Consumption of Voluntary Simplifiers

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Keywords: Voluntary simplicity, sustainability, life satisfaction, consumption

Introduction: The modern consumption-oriented culture not only negatively impacts an individual's well-being but also damages the environment. Overconsumption often results in personal debts, overwork, losing time to spend with significant others, psychological emptiness, and general unhappiness with life (Alexander & Ussher, 2012). In addition, this trend significantly harms the environment, causing the depletion of energy and resources (Alexander & Ussher, 2012). Especially, fast fashion has contributed to consumers' high rates of acquisition and disposal of apparel products, leading to the problem of unsustainable apparel consumption. Voluntary simplicity provides a solution to the problem by adjusting an individual's consumption level by promoting a socially responsible consumption lifestyle. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative pilot study is to explore apparel consumption behavior of voluntary simplifiers.

Literature Review: Voluntary simplicity refers to freely choosing a lifestyle that minimizes one's consumption of goods and services to maximize nonmaterialistic satisfaction (Leonard–Barton, 1981). Many studies of voluntary simplicity have explored the motivations to engaging in voluntary simplicity, behaviors and practices, and its contribution to life satisfaction. The motivations for adopting voluntary simplicity can be categorized into two dimensions: me-oriented and other-oriented reasons. People adopt this lifestyle to reobtain their control over daily life (Leonard–Barton, 1981). On the other hand, people pursue voluntary simplicity for other-oriented reasons such as concern for the environment. In addition, the study of Wu, Boyd Thomas, Moore, and Carroll (2013) shows that this simple lifestyle can be adopted from both me-oriented and other-oriented reasons even in the context of apparel consumption. Furthermore, the adoption of voluntary simplicity is closely related to consumer well-being and life satisfaction by satisfying various psychological needs (Rich, Hanna, & Wright, 2016). However, no study has deeply investigated apparel consumption experiences of voluntary simplifiers in general.

Methods: This study employed in-depth interviews to explore, describe and understand the phenomenological experiences of voluntary simplifiers in the context of apparel consumption. A research participation invitation email was sent out to a retail merchandising class at the University of Minnesota. Two female college students were recruited. The sample size was deemed appropriate in that we designed this small-scale pilot study to generate “modest claims” in a specific group (i.e., college students' voluntary simplicity in an apparel consumption context) that could achieve saturation quickly (Chamaz, 2006). One participant was 20 years old, junior. The other was 22 years old, senior. The interviews were conducted in a private study

room at a library. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The length of each interview was approximately one hour.

Results: A total of seven themes were identified under the three main categories. Under the Motivation category, four themes emerged: *Lifestyle*, *Personal Improvement*, *Social Influence*, and *Finance*. The *Lifestyle* theme represents the fundamental changes in their lifestyle as college students. As they have their own place to fill in, they started thinking about what is necessary in their space and closet. The *Personal Improvement* theme is related to one's personal needs to improve oneself, by focusing on other aspects of life instead of buying more clothes or cleaning out their closet. The *Social Influence* theme is associated with how they were influenced by significant others around them such as family and friends. The *Finance* theme emerged from saving money. One of them believed being frugal is important to be financially prepared for the future. For the Practice category, two themes were identified: *Functionality* and *Quality*. The *Functionality* theme emerged from buying and keeping pieces that are most versatile and comfortable such as simple black dress they can mix and match in different settings. The *Quality* theme represents that they were willing to spend more money on apparel items of a high quality that can enhance their personality and make them feel confident. Finally, under the Consequence category, one theme emerged: *Happiness*. The *Happiness* theme represents that pursuing voluntary lifestyle makes them feel happier. It does not make them attached to apparel items, so they do not become disappointed when they cannot use them anymore.

Implications: The findings of this pilot study provide a foundation for further research and theory development on apparel consumption of voluntary simplifiers. Especially, they tend to choose apparel items based on functionality and quality that can express their personality and make them feel confident. Also, it is a conscious way of living that can lead to happiness. Therefore, further research may consider the psychological mediators between the adoption of this lifestyle and life satisfaction. Further, the results of this study can help policymakers' or educators' development of effective strategy to promote this lifestyle alternative.

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