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Consumption to the Most Necessary:
Studying Consumption Within Voluntarily and Obligatorily
Scarce Living Conditions

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Abstract

In this paper the idea of responsible consumption is approached from a new perspective, scarcity. The paper discusses of the consumption of consumers who have made a conscious choice to live in scarce conditions (i.e. voluntary simplifiers) and of those living in obligatorily scarce conditions. The aim of the paper is to suggest future research by proposing ideas to conduct a comparison study on what contents and implications would consumption to the most necessary get in both of these scarce conditions. In both of these conditions, it appears that consumption is an on-going negotiation of the allocation of the scarce resources. The paper ends up suggesting that in order to grasp the comparison of necessary consumption between these two scarce living conditions, it would be fruitful to study the key verbs used in talking about consumption practices. Further, this could be done by concentrating on five questions: how much and in what respect do the (necessary) consumption practices between these conditions differ, how much would the implementations of (necessary) consumption practices intersect between these conditions, what kind of contents and contradictories does the responsibility get when studied through necessary consumption, what kind possibilities there are to construct consumer identities within these scarce conditions and finally what kind of critical debate it could be brought up on how people are valued through consumption in contemporary societies? It is aimed to participate on theory development on responsible consumption through providing a new perspective to this thoroughly studied research area. Moreover, by suggesting questions to study this diversity it is provided ideas for corporate management for acting responsibly in a way that responds to consumers' tastes and capabilities within both of these scarce conditions.

Topic: Responsible consumerism and ethical consumers

Introduction

Nowadays, consumption is often discussed with a critical tone: it is complained about the increasing amounts of greenhouse gas emissions caused by excessive consumption, and it is wondered about the continuous search of superficial identities consumer engage themselves in through employing shallow meanings attached to consumption objects. On the other hand, consumption also creates inequality: everybody cannot afford to consume.

Especially, in the research about responsible consumption, it is sometimes criticized even the use of the very word of consumption. Accordingly, within this literature, the responsibility often gets *consuming only to the most necessary* as its content. The way of perceiving the responsible consumption as avoiding vain consumption, gets highlighted especially among those, who are called *voluntary simplifiers* (e.g. Huneke, 2005; Shaw & Newholm, 2002). This consumption criticism is due to the idea that by emphasizing consumption it is created opportunities for unnecessary waste by idealizing ever-unfulfilled desires and endless seek for new consumption objects (Pereira Heath & Heath, 2008). In response, it is suggested that instead of consumers, it should be talked about citizens (e.g. Dobson, 2003) in order not to emphasize buying and shopping.

In contrast, also opposite opinions have been presented, Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek (2007, p. 153) point out that by claiming consumption to be eroding the civic life is too simplistic to wholly grasp the variety of consumption and civic life with all their nuances. Instead of glorifying either the utility-maximizing or self-oriented individual, it needs to privilege contingent civic sensibilities and political practices of *consumers* (Trentman, 2004). Also, it has been stated that voluntary simplifiers unavoidably operate within the field of consumption; they for example give product recommendations that enable sustainable choices (Huneke, 2005). Indeed, voluntary simplifiers' needs appear often rather poorly met, which in turn highlights chances for sustainably-based business.

The many meanings of consumption have been debated also in the circumstances, where consumption only to the most necessary is not a choice, but an obligation, caused by scarce living conditions and/or low-incomes. Those are the consumers, who live in subsistence income. Within these living conditions, consumption seems to hold a two-fold nature as it is used both to create social relations (Kochuyt, 2004) and also being a burden and a reason for anxiety, not so much a joy (Ekström & Hjort, 2009a; Hamilton, 2009b). Accordingly, in these conditions, it is sometimes placed more weight on other means than consumption, for achieving "a good life". On the other hand, it has been quite critically noted that these low-income consumers are left behind and outsiders within this consumption-emphasized society (Hamilton, 2009a) and stated that those who live in scarce conditions also deserve attention as consumers from enterprises and marketing (Ekström & Hjort, 2009b). Indeed, it appears that also in scarce conditions, it is possible to innovate and accordingly provide new opportunities for business (Srinivas & Sutz, 2008).

In current paper, it is concentrated on one hand, on the consumption of those consumers who have made a conscious choice to live in scarce conditions (i.e. voluntary simplifiers) and on the other hand, on those consumers who are living in obligatorily scarce conditions. By so doing, the idea of responsible consumption is approached from a new perspective, scarcity, in both voluntary and obligatory forms. The aim of the paper is to suggest future research by proposing ideas to conduct a comparison study on what contents and implications would *consumption to the most necessary* get in both of these scarce conditions. As discussed above, both of these conditions unavoidably operate within the field of consumption. In this sense, these consumption conditions both give chances for business innovations and consumers living in these conditions also need the attention from companies and marketing. In the end of current paper, it is reflected, through this comparison, what it could be crystallized about the responsible consumption? This paper is conceptual of its nature.

The Main Conceptualizations of Scarce Consumption

Both forms of scarce conditions offer an up-to-date phenomenon to study. Today, there appears to be a growing amount of consumers who are called voluntary simplifiers. The worldwide simple living network was founded in 1985 and became web-based in 1996, since then it has “provided resources, tools, examples and contacts for conscious, simple, healthy and restorative living” (Wampler, 2009). Zavestoski (2002) defines voluntary simplicity as “*a system of beliefs and a practice which is centered on the idea that personal satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness are results from a commitment to the nonmaterial aspects of life*”. Accordingly, Etzioni (1998) emphasizes that voluntary simplicity is “*the choice out of free will*” and thus not a result of poverty. However, Huneke (2005) points out that voluntary simplifiers are not always well-off, instead voluntary simplicity is based on personal experience of what is meaningful and turning that experience into the life-choices. Indeed, characteristic for all of these definitions is that voluntary simplifiers seek more meaningful existence which according to them is not achieved through material well-being (Cherrier, 2002).

Etzioni (1998) created three categories of voluntary simplifiers. The *downshiffters*, the most moderate form of simplifiers, are people, who voluntarily give up some luxuries, but still keep the consumption orientated lifestyle. It seems that downshifting is more a style, like contemporary retro fashion, and not a life-philosophical decision to give up the material lifestyle. The *strong simplifiers* give up more significant parts of their life for the sake of the lower-stress life. They typically replace high status and high paying jobs with a less-paid, but more personally meaningful work or prefer part-time employments. According to Etzioni (1998) the strongest simplifiers belong to the *simple living movement*. These are people who have arranged their whole life “according to the ethos of voluntary simplicity” (Etzioni, 1998, p. 623). All these forms of voluntary simplicity provide an arena in which to study those have chosen to live in scarce conditions.

On the other hand, under current economical decline, there are a growing number of consumers for whom the simple life is not a choice, but an obligation. It can be identified that prior research has approached people living in not-wealthy conditions through three concepts: poverty, low-incomes and scarcity. As the following discussion will show, these three concepts are interlinked and multidimensional in a way that somewhat makes their distinction artificial. However, it is also articulated why the choice of scarcity is the most applicable for the purposes of present paper.

First, *poverty* is a thoroughly studied research area, especially among sociologists and other social science researchers, but not that much among consumer researchers. This research line seems to concentrate on debating about the contents of the concept of poverty. Most of the present-day study appears to agree that poverty is something that is hard to define, even though it would be seemingly easily measured by low-incomes. Examples of these definitional discussions are ample (for a very thorough review of various poverty measures, see for example Couch, 2009). Just as an example of this conceptual jungle, Borgeraas & Dahl (2010) addressed three concepts of poverty: income poverty, minimum budget and (Norwegian) governmental guidelines for calculating social assistance benefits. Income poverty is often connected, not just amount of money, but also in connection to measures like "minimal acceptable *way of life*" or "acceptable *living standard*" (Ibid., p. 75). Minimum budget refers to classical tradition to specifying the basket of goods and services to satisfy basic needs (that are neither subsistence nor luxury level) in a given society (Ibid., p. 76). The calculation of social assistance benefits is based on the premise of what is needed for "proper, but sober way of life" (Ibid., pp. 77-78). Even though these measures appear pretty close to each other's by definition, the actual amount of money related to them varies greatly as demonstrated by Borgeraas & Dahl (2010).

On the other hand, what seems to draw together the measures of poverty is the idea that *poverty is not measured only as incomes*. Indeed, poverty has been connected to the research

activities also on the side of studying something else, like being a part of human well-being (e.g. Suranyi-Unger, 1981). As an example of even more groundbreaking thinking Lakshman (1993, 1996) has proposed that the material deprivation that is experienced by poverty sector is a form of socially constructed scarcity, which means that the scarcity is manufactured outside that sector. In this sense, even though the hunger is very much experienced materially, "poverty" is created discursively, in a style where ideas, matter, discourse and power are intertwined. Further, studies about poverty are often characterized not just discussing about different ways to measure or define it, but also with a tone of making a difference. The ultimate goal of the poverty studies often seems to be to be able to provide tools and stand out to help people living in poor conditions.

Second, the *low-income consumers* form another research line. Even though this research stream seems to be more focused on understanding the actual consumption choices and practices than the poverty studies, it often has the same tone than the poverty studies; the underlining justification for the low-income research is making a difference in low-income families' life. Accordingly, a great deal of the academic interest has taken the direction of studying how and why these consumers consume. Indeed, it has been investigated for example the factors that influence healthy eating in low-income households (Mackereth & Milner, 2007; Webber, Sobal & Dollahite, 2010) and the importance and impact of commercialized brands among low-income school children and adolescents (Jezkova Isaksen & Roper, 2008; Roper & La Niece, 2009). On the other hand, those studies that more explicitly aim for improving the lives of low-income consumers are sometimes more report-like explanations. This are for example on can low-income households afford healthy food (Golan, Steward, Kuchler, Dong, & Kirlin, 2008), how it would be possible to make people with low-incomes to reduce smoking and can they afford having mobile phones (Barrantes & Galperin, 2008).

Third, studies that use *scarcity* as the main concept appear to be rarer. However, for example Ekström & Hjort (2006, 2009a, 2009b) have concentrated on those who are living in

scarce conditions in affluent society (in Sweden), highlighting quite critically the affluence-scarcity –paradox. Scarcity-research also mixes with other two above mentioned research lines. These are researches conducted for instance by Kochuyt (2004) and Hamilton (2009a, 2009b), in which it has been studied low-income or poor consumers in welfare states, in Belgium and in Ireland, respectively. However, for the purposes of the present paper, the scarcity seems to provide a common denominator. Indeed, it is not the incomes or poverty experienced *per se* that connects the consumers who minimize their consumption either voluntarily or obligatorily. As presented by Etzioni (1998) the choice of voluntary simplicity is not caused by poverty or as Huneke (2005) points out the choice of simplifying life voluntarily is not directly related to incomes. In contrast, both consumption conditions are characterized by scarcity, which supports selecting scarcity as the main concept for the paper in hand.

Previous Findings on Consumption Practices within Scarce Conditions

Prior research has found out some general rules about the consumption practices among voluntary simplifiers as well as debated about the consumption practices within obligatorily scarce living conditions. The findings of prior research are to be discussed next.

What it comes to the consumption practices of the voluntary simplifiers, they have first and foremost been seen to aim for reducing consumption and/or maintaining consumption, but in a form of making more sustainable choices (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Huneke (2005) has analyzed 21 ways according to which the voluntary simplifiers object to make their life-choices. Those life choices concern quite obviously the buying behavior; voluntary simplifiers aim for buying locally grown produce and from local merchants, buying environmentally friendly products, buying from socially responsible producers and buying organic foods. The consumption should also be thought-out as the goals are to avoid impulse purchases, to eliminate clutter and to limit the

exposure to ads. Moreover, the voluntary simplifiers are supposed to be the active makers in their consumption practices as recycling, composting and making rather than buying gifts are considered as virtues. Accordingly, the lazy way of life is criticized as the voluntary simplifier wants to limit/eliminate TV and to limit car use. The life-choices include also professional life, like working at a satisfying job and/or limiting wage-earning work. Further, the ways contain a social aspect as being friends with neighbors, being active in the community and living in the co-housing are seen as the goals for the voluntary simplifier. Finally, the ideological base of the voluntary simplicity may be perceived for example in the aims like being politically active, eating a vegetarian diet and maintaining a spiritual life.

However, also the voluntary simplifiers face contradictions in making their consumption choices (Huneke, 2005). Often organic and local products are more expensive or even too expensive for someone who may be working only part-time. On their way of simplifying their lives, the voluntary simplifiers often move to the countryside, but from where the public transportation is limited, thus forcing to own a car. In similar spirit, as one of the wishes of the voluntary simplicity is to be in control of one's time spending, the simple life is sometimes very time consuming, for example as one is supposed to make gifts self. Indeed, it appears that voluntary simplifiers often simplify their lives the ways that are easiest to deliver considering their individual live situations (Huneke, 2005). This leads to differences among the voluntary simplifiers, which in turn makes these ethical simplifiers as unpredictable (c.f. Shaw & Newholm, 2002) as any other consumers within contemporary consumer society (e.g. Gabriel & Lange, 1995).

In similar spirit, prior research has recognized that the responsible consumption is often in contradiction (e.g. Gilg, Barr, & Ford, 2005) or even inherently controversial (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). It appears that in making their consumption choices especially ethical consumers are constantly *negotiating* about the most responsible choice. This tells about the difficulty of choice-making; indeed, the responsible consumers are said being confused (Roberts, 1996). Reflecting the

contemporary condition, that is sometimes been described as postmodern, also voluntary simplifiers seem to face the inwardly ambivalent consumption practices (c.f. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Gabriel & Lange, 1995) the paramount presence of the fluid and momentary identities (c.f. Goulding, 2003; Hall, 1992; Valentine & Gordon, 2000), and the fragmented and polarized consumption choices (c.f. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Hall, 1992).

Second, what it comes to the consumption practices within the obligatorily scarce conditions, previous research findings appear to be fundamentally dispersed. Findings, for instance about healthy eating have been rather varied. On one hand, healthy eating has been considered being (often too) expensive in relation to the incomes (Wiig Dammann & Smith, 2009), but on the other hand, healthy eating seems to be influenced by many things, for example the store environment and other customers, not just by price (Webber et al., 2010). Further, there are differences related to healthy eating among the low-income consumers, it should not be taken for granted that all low-income consumers do not eat healthy (Mackereth & Milner, 2007). This appears to tell a similar story than what just claimed to be characteristics for contemporary or postmodern consumer, for example unpredictable and fragmented behavior (e.g. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Gabriel & Lange, 1995)

However, previous research on consumption within the obligatory scarce conditions seems to agree on something: in the families children's consumption seems to be put first (e.g. Ekström & Hjort, 2009a; Hamilton, 2009b). It is found out that because children are so much loved, their consumption needs are prioritized (Hamilton & Catterall, 2007). Indeed, consumption appears to be employed to construct social relations within the families (Kochuyt, 2004), and accordingly in low-income families it is more often verbalized each family member's individual consumption, whereas in middle-class families it is more talked about the collective consumption of the whole family (Ekström & Hjort, 2009a).

Moreover, some of the "guidelines" that are generally attached to consumption appear to come alive in the circumstances of the obligatory scarcity. Indeed, not even the poorest of the poor consume only to survive, instead consumption is used also to fulfill higher order needs in search for social capital, cultural goals, and consumption is employed as a compensation of the poor living conditions (Subramayan & Gomez-Arias, 2008). Accordingly, the reference groups seem to matter, when low-income consumers are aiming for "the better" through having the consumption as a communicative tool (Ekström & Hjort, 2009a). Especially, when products are visible, like clothes, poor families try to keep the same standard as other families (Guillen-Royo, 2009). It is even found out that a failure to follow the trends and the "required" brands in the consumption of among young consumers may have an effect on the creation of a damaged self-concept (Isaksen & Roper, 2008). This is based on the findings that in the early teenage people learn how to read and interpret brands and their symbolic messages (Roper & La Niece, 2009). However, materialistic values appear to have a connection to the level of incurring of a debt (Poncio & Aranha, 2008).

Propositions for Future Research

A look into the previous research seems to open up more questions than provide answers. It appears that in both forms of the scarce consumption conditions, there are similarities in the consumption practices in-between these two conditions, but also contradictories within each one of the consumer clusters. Indeed, if there are all those similarities in-between and contradictions within both of the consumer clusters, what is the use of a comparison study? As an answer current paper proposes that by mirroring the consumption of the voluntary simplifiers, for whom minimizing consumption is a choice caused by wish to consume responsibly, to those for whom the scarce consumption is not a choice, but an obligation, it could be crystallized new ideas for the thinking of responsible consumption. To be more precise, what kind of contents and meanings does

the *necessary consumption* get within both of these conditions? So, *how* are the consumption practices between these conditions different or similar in terms of what is considered necessary? Through constructing a new view on necessary consumption, it would be possible to create fresh knowledge about responsible choices, for example are the choices of the voluntary simplifiers really the scarcest and the most responsible ones? And in what amount are those, who are living in obligatorily scarce conditions, actually forced or willing to consume responsibly? In sum, it is suggested, that by studying those who do minimize consumption, was it then voluntarily or obligatorily, it could be brought something new to this very thoroughly studied research area of responsible consumption.

To go more concrete ideas, current paper proposes that in order to grasp the comparison between these two scarce living conditions, it would be fruitful *to study the key verbs used in talking about consumption practices*: do consumer speak about giving up, hoping and wishing, wanting, sharing, abiding, rejecting, eliminating, limiting, recycling or stretching? And to which consumption objects these verbs are used for? This idea is based on the reasoning that in both of these scarce conditions, it appears that consumption is an on-going *negotiation* of the allocation of the resources. The paramount question thus becomes, what constructs to be *necessary* consumption and what constructs as vain consumption in each of these conditions; how the scarcity is allocated?

First, it should be concentrated on *how much and in what respect do the consumption practices between these conditions differ?* To delineate this a bit more: is for example watching television something that the voluntary simplifiers first give up (as suggested by prior literature), but consumers within the obligatorily scarce conditions regard as the main recreation? How about mobile phones and computers? And how about food, what is luxury and what is necessary within both scarce conditions? Whereas voluntary simplifiers are expected to buy local and organic vegetables, those may appear as luxuries for low-income consumers. Thus, it would be engrossing

to discover do these consumption practices form any patterns like certain types of enterprises, brands or products are either considered necessities or rejected? What kind of structures can be found in the talk of both consumer clusters? Do consumers speak about consumption objects in relation to the fears or maybe according to the deficiencies? Is there more to lose or more to gain by the means of consumption?

Second, the voluntary simplifiers quite obviously aim for consuming responsibly, but would the consumption practices within the circumstances of obligatory scarcity actually include responsibility? Maybe the responsible acts come “naturally” as many of them are the cheapest ones; for example as both consumer clusters are assumed to aim for saving in their energy consumption, is switching the lights off when leaving the room something that is typical for both. Indeed, *how much would the implementations of consumption practices intersect with each others*. Maybe recycled and second hand products are the common consumption objects in both of these conditions? How about convenience food, is it rejected by both consumer clusters? Further, how do these consumer clusters consume on possible family vacations as domestic and local tourism is often considered as a “green choice”, and it is often also the most affordable one.

Third, this brings also forward questions about the *contents and contradictories of responsibility*. As discussed above, both forms of scarce consumption contain controversies. Indeed, it would be interesting to uncover for example how voluntary simplifier negotiates between environmental responsibility and commitment to personal well-being? On the other hand, the contradictions among low-income consumers are expected to be related to the price, but as literature suggested there is not just one kind of low-income consumer, so what are the other extremes in negotiating the necessary consumption? As an example would either kind of consumer buy a self-gift? In all, can consumption be rewarding or does it just cause bad conscious? What kind of goals of consumption can be found in talk; to stick as a member of an eco-community or as a member of the larger society or just to stay alive?

Fourth, it would be interesting to take this comparison study into the theoretical discussion about *consumer identity*, in which it could be explored the identity construction and communication in both of the scarce conditions. In here, it could be investigated does the voluntary simplifier construct his/her identity through scarce consumption choices? The scarcely one consumes the better simplifier one is? Further, is there expressive consumption within the voluntary simplicity and what kind of forms would the expressive consumption get? On the other hand, what kind of role does the consumption play in identity construction and communication among low-income consumers? Or could it be found something that is the opposite of expressive consumption; maybe hidden consumption which could have as its contents something that consumers do not want to show like low-cost and un-branded clothes?

Fifth, inspired by ideas of consumer identity, the discussion of the contents of (necessary) consumption would also offer a possibility *for a research with a more critical point of view*. This kind of a research would give chances to debate on a societal level. Taking the strong theoretical grounding of the consumer research as a starting point, it could be created new understanding to societal discussion about the inequality within contemporary consumption societies. Indeed, what kind of implicit valuations of *consumption* society can be brought forward; is it so that voluntary simplifiers are regarded as aiming for good and high whereas low-income consumers are the left-behinds or at least those that are to be helped within current society? Are voluntary simplifiers *subjects* of consumption whereas low-income consumers are *objects* of welfare? By opening up these ways of talking about necessary consumption within these scarce conditions it could be brought up new ways to debate about the valuations within contemporary societies; how are people valued through consumption?

Through this research it is thought to get an understanding what kind of contents does the necessary consumption get when it is investigated within these kinds of intensified conditions. Further, paper aims to participate on theory development on responsible consumption through

providing a new perspective to this thoroughly studied research area. Moreover, by proposing questions to study this *diversity*, it could be created fresh ideas for the corporate management for acting responsibly in a way that responds to consumers' tastes and capabilities within both of these scarce conditions.

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