# NECESSITY CONSUMPTION PRACTICES AS RESPONSIBILITY CREATORS

Pirjo Laaksonen, Hanna Leipämaa-Leskinen & Henna Jyrinki
University of Vaasa
Department of Marketing
FIN-65101 Vaasa
Finland

**Abstract**

The present paper aims to construct suggestions for companies marketing responsible products and services from a new perspective. To that end, the paper starts from the assumption that the most important key to achieving responsible consumption is to aiming to decreasing consumption. The lowest limit of decreasing consumption can be defined as necessity consumption; the experienced necessary sets the limits for consumers' willingness to minimize their consumption. Therefore, responsibility is analysed within the frames of experienced necessity. Present paper investigates what young adults experience as necessary by the means of short narratives based actual consumption practices reported during one week. In the data analysis, a prior conceptual model of necessity consumption (Wikström et al. 1989) was utilized, and further deepened regarding especially necessity consumption with high stimulation by using a framework of consumption practices (Holt 1995).

The findings reveal that necessity consumption had variable contents as "basic consumption", and "experience", "integration", "classification" and "play". Thus, necessity consumption appears to be more multisided than satisfying basic needs. It is an on-going negotiation, social of its nature and holds multifaceted meanings. These findings can be translated into suggestions for companies planning their responsible offers. Firstly, responsible consumption choices should provide stimulation, enjoyment and experiential aspects for consumers. Secondly, responsible consumption offers should appear socially desirable and hence available in places where people spend time with each other, such as cafés. Thirdly, responsible consumption should not be based on giving up current consumption practices. Instead, responsible offers should be created in a way which enables them to be easily assimilated into the present ways of consumers' lives, so that acting in a responsible manner would not require completely changing old patterns of behaviour.

**Keywords:** Responsibility, necessity consumption, young adults, consumption practices, narratives

## 1. Introduction

Recently, the discussions on consumption have often been labelled by critical tones. This thinking is due to the idea that by emphasizing consumption it is created opportunities for needless waste by idealizing ever-unfulfilled desires and endless seek for new consumption objects (Ger and Belk 1996; Pereira Heath and Heath 2008). In these discussions, perhaps the most important key to achieving responsible consumption is to aim for decreasing the consumption (cf. Schrader and Thøgersen 2011). The lowest limit of decreasing consumption can be defined as necessity consumption; the responsible way of consuming is sometimes even perceived to be equal to consuming only to the most necessary (Morgan and Trentmann 2006). Even though this idea seems to be largely accepted and supported, the experienced necessity consumption has been left into the marginal when studying responsibility.

In this article, we examine responsibility by focusing on the question of decreasing consumption. We argue that experienced necessity sets the limits for consumers' willingness to decrease his/her consumption. Therefore, we analyse responsibility in terms of experienced necessity. In other words, what consumers consider necessary is something that they are not willing to give up in their consumption, thus these necessary wants should be included also in responsible choices. Through this, the present paper aims to construct suggestions for companies marketing products and services as "green" or responsible choices. First, we discuss the previous literature on the fields of responsible consumption and necessity consumption. Second, we analyse today's young adults' views on what kinds of consumption is necessary by means of short narratives based on actual consumption practices reported within a week. We conclude the paper by constructing managerial implications on the basis of our findings.

We base our understanding of consumption on the rather wide view presented by Arnould et al. (2002, pp. 5-6) whereby virtually anything that consumers do constitutes consumption, as "*consumption is individuals and groups acquiring, using and disposing of products, services, or experiences.*" Accordingly, we consider not only the material products but also the consumption practices that are related to products, services and experiences. Thus, we want to capture the consumption practices related to consumption objects as they can reveal the experienced necessity of particular products. By consumption practices it is meant consumers' everyday doings and sayings, which are linked through understandings, procedures and engagements (c.f. Schatzki et al. 2001; Warde 2005). In other words, consumption practices are basic units used to describe

consumers' practices, the variety ways people make use of consumption objects (Holt 1995). This also adds to and contrasts previous research on necessity consumption (e.g. Kemp 1998), in which it has been focused on beliefs rather than actual consumption.

## 2. Literature review

Responsible, conscious or sustainable consumption has become a subject of considerable interest among researchers in various fields ever since the 1960s and 1970s.Indeed, the issue that has long puzzled researchers is the attitude-behaviour link in sustainable consumer behaviour. This research has its roots in Ajzen and Fishbein's (1975, 1980) model of reasoned action, which has been modified when exploring more thoroughly the link between attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Bhate 2005; Follows and Jobber 2000; Marchand and Walker 2008; Schlegelmilch et al. 1996; Webb et al. 2008). What seems to draw together the previous research findings is that *attitudes, personality or sociodemographics cannot fully explain responsible consumer behaviour* (e.g., Carrigan and Attalla 2001). For this reason, it appears that research on responsibility needs to *focus on consumption actions instead of attitudes or other profiling variables* (Schrader and Thøgersen 2011).

The roots of the literature on necessity consumption can be traced back all the way to the early days of consumption research. The classic example is Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs. Since then, necessity consumption has been examined in various fields, each of them providing a different perspective on the issue. Firstly, sociological researchers have been interested in defining standards of good living and pointing out the collective norms and values of necessity consumption (Atkinson et al. 2002; Borgeraas and Dahl 2006; Lister 2004; Townsend 1979). One of the conclusions has been that the function of the consumption of necessities has evolved from ensuring survival to enjoying full social membership of communities and societies (cf. Atkinson et al. 2002, pp. 78; Ger 1997, pp. 118; Townsend 1979; Wikström et al. 1989). The second research line has explored the distinction between luxuries and necessity in terms of price elasticises. But the focus has been on studying consumers' beliefs and attitudes on necessity consumption, and not the actual doings (e.g. Kemp 1998).

Thirdly, necessity consumption is more or less implicitly addressed in consumer studies discussing consumer needs. These studies draw mainly from cognitive psychology and consider consumers' needs in terms of individuals' conscious or unconscious, biological states that define what they perceive to be necessary (e.g. Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003, pp. 328-329). But as Soper (2006)

highlights needs are never purely biologically determined, as they are connected to the individual's subjective experience, which is always context-specific. By the same token, Wikström et al. (1989) note that it is not just needs that define consumption, but also incomes, value and norm systems as well as situational factors. Accordingly, Wikström et al. (1989) develop a conceptual model in which all consumption is seen in relation to the degree of necessity it involves and the degree of stimulation it provides. This largely coincides with our approach; however, we strive for a more nuanced and empirically examined illustration of necessity consumption. Therefore, the present study investigates *necessity consumption as a subjectively constructed phenomenon shaped by social and cultural contexts*.

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1. Data collection and sample*

The empirical data were generated through written narratives on necessity consumption in January 2011. The narratives were written based on consumption diaries in which the informants were asked to collect and mark their consumption practices and objects during a specified period (seven days). In their consumption diaries, the informants were advised to specify their consumption as broadly as possible (see the definition of consumption in the introduction). In addition, the informants were asked to rate their consumption practices and objects in the diaries, using a seven-point scale ranging from a necessity (1) to luxury (7) (see, e.g., Kemp [1998] for utilizing a similar measurement instrument within a necessity consumption framework), and to discuss these rankings in their narratives. The total length of the narrative data became 155 pages written in Times New Roman 12 pt with 1.15 line spacing.

The sample consisted of students, young adults from a university-level course on Consumer Behaviour. We wanted to focus on young adults' viewpoints because they are the future – how they choose to act will determine the future state of our planet. Further, our target group is in transitional life situations (e.g., moving into their own homes), which provides us with a fruitful setting to determine in highly tangible terms what they actually consider to be necessary. Further, young adults live in economically limited conditions, which may force them to acknowledge the differences between necessity and luxury consumption.

The total number of students participating in the course was 56, of whom nine were males and 47 were females. Except for the emphasis on females, the students come from rather similar sociodemographic and economic backgrounds. However, in the course of the analysis it became apparent that there were great differences in their practices in terms of necessity and sustainable consumption.

Our research is situated broadly speaking within the interpretive approach of consumer research (e.g., Deetz 1996, pp. 202; Hudson and Ozanne 1988), in which the narrative paradigm has also been located (Shankar, Elliot and Goulding 2001, pp. 437). Most of the narrative ideologies share the same baseline: Through them we learn about who we are and about our history and culture, and by telling stories we make ourselves and our lives understandable to others; for this they are a rich source of insight (Czarniawska 2004, pp. 3; Shankar, Elliot and Goulding 2001, pp. 431; Thompson 1997, pp. 439-440). In the narratives, consumption practices and their meanings, relativity and importance are regarded as subjective experiences (cf. Cortazzi 2001), which in our research means that the "cut off" for defining something as necessary consumption comes from the research informants themselves; whatever they state as being necessary was accepted as such.

The mode of reasoning adopted in the present study is closest to the abductive approach (cf. Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000, pp. 17: Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009, pp. 89). The data analysis began in a manner similar to the one outlined by Thompson (1997, pp. 441) in his description of hermeneutical pragmatics for interpreting stories: The data was first read in its entirety by two of the researchers in order to get a sense of the whole. Second, the data were split in half and coded by two of the authors employing two theoretical models (that are presented below). All three researchers discussed the bases for the codings in order to arrive at a synthesis. The third round of hermeneutic data handling consisted of interpretation: An understanding was created by combining the researchers' theoretical frame of reference with the text being interpreted (Thompson 1997, pp. 441). The codes were gathered into the chunks (i.e., type of consumption) suggested by the theoretical models, and the various consumption practices and objects within each chunk were scrutinized.

### *3.2. Data coding*

Two conceptual models were employed in data coding. First, the conceptual model of necessity consumption by Wikström et al. (1989, pp. 296-297) was employed. Wikström et al. classify four

types of consumption on the basis of their degree of necessity and the degree of stimulation they provide (Fig. 1). The four types are basic consumption (high necessity, low stimulation), refined consumption (high necessity, high stimulation), routine consumption (low necessity, low stimulation) and supplementary consumption (low necessity, high stimulation). *Routine consumption* includes practices that are uncommon and undesirable because they are defined as unnecessary and unstimulating, such as passive TV viewing. On the contrary, *supplementary consumption* provides stimulation and personal satisfaction, and examples of it are leisure pursuits and trying out new and exciting products. *Basic consumption*, e.g., buying foodstuffs for cooking, washing up or using a phone, comprises practices that are compulsory, provide little joy and involve ordinary products. *Refined consumption* includes those types of consumption to which consumers devote particular interest and which provide stimulation. These can be regarded as necessities that reflect the present consumer culture in which social relations have multiple roles. Hence, refined consumption is seen to include not only special products, but also new kinds of necessities that are strongly social by nature.

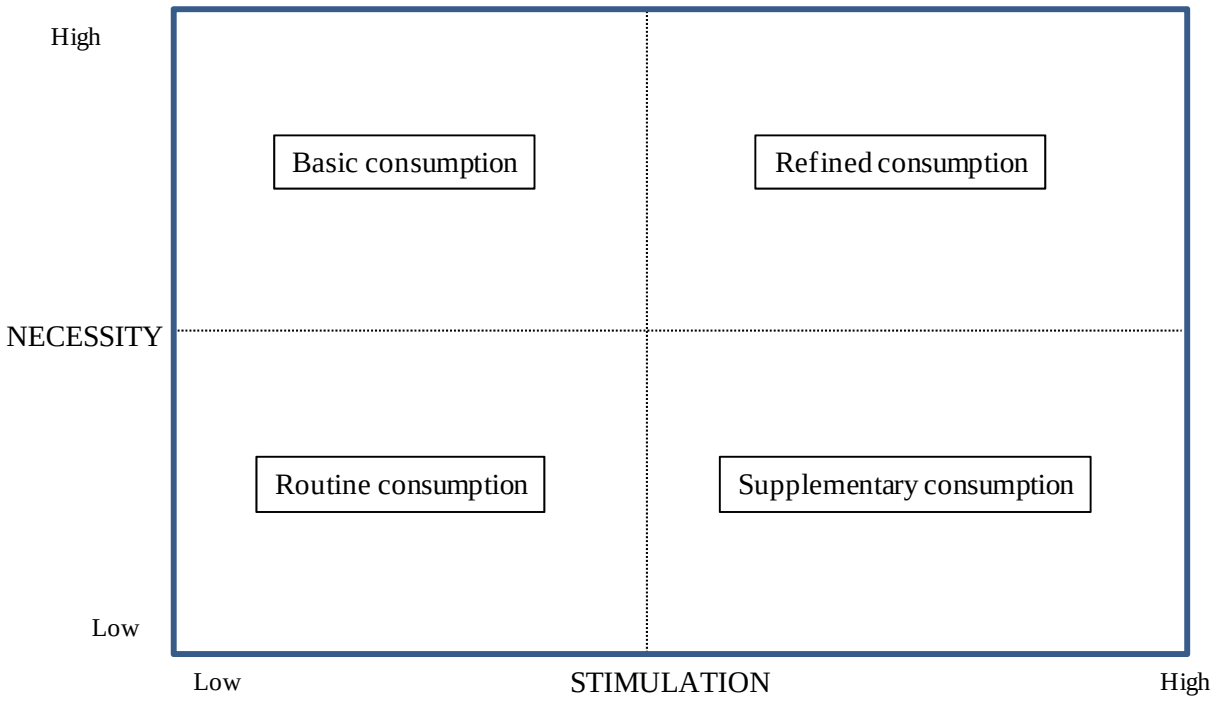


**Fig. 1** The conceptual model of different types of consumption by Wikström et al. (1989)

We focused on the upper corner of Figure 1 and analysed the consumption practices that were seen to involve a high degree of necessity and different levels of stimulation, thus exploring which consumption practices were seen as *basic* consumption (having a high degree of necessity and low

degree of stimulation) and which as *refined* consumption (having a high degree of necessity and high degree of stimulation). We coded both the practices and objects of consumption and the arguments given as to why they are necessary or luxury.

As prior research has suggested, necessity consumption involves much more than merely satisfying basic needs (Wikström et al. 1989), the second analytical framework was applied in order to deepen the interpretation of the different nuances within *refined* consumption. For this, we employed the analytical framework of consumption types presented by Holt (1995) (Fig. 2). Holt (1995) makes two basic conceptual distinctions in his typology: the structure of consumption and the purpose of consumption. The structure of consumption may be directed towards engaging consumption objects or interacting with other people. When it comes to the purpose of consumption, the actions may be ends in themselves (autotelic) or means to some other ends (instrumental).

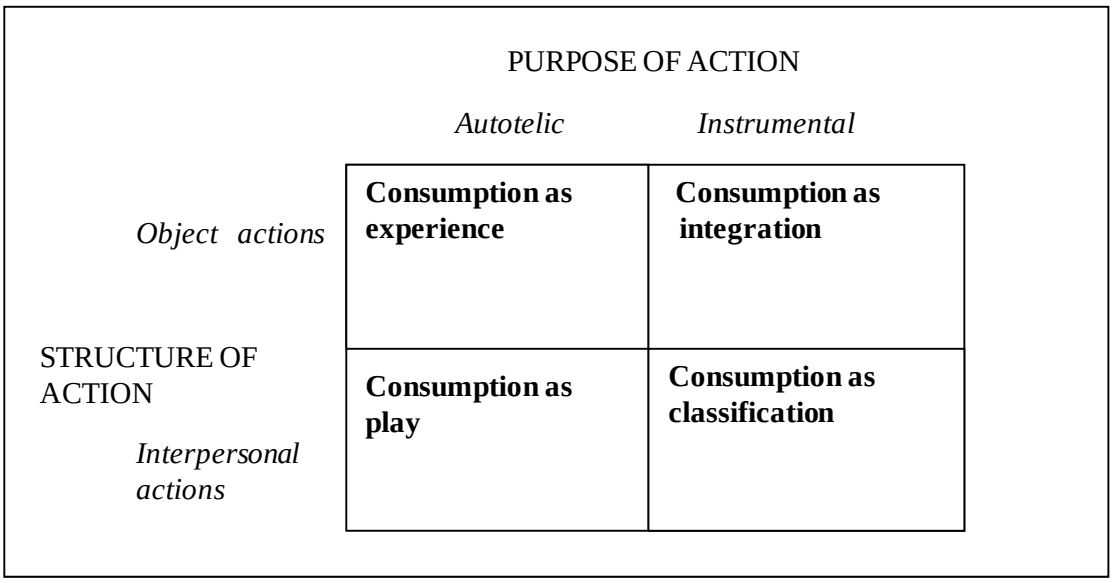


**Fig. 2** Typology of consumption practices (Holt 1995)

The first part of this typology is called *consumption as experience*, which emphasizes hedonic, aesthetic, autotelic and subjective values of consumption. The second part is labelled as *consumption as integration*, in which consumers acquire and manipulate object meanings. Holt (1995, pp. 6) regards that integrating activities have a twofold nature; on the one hand, consumption objects are used as self-extensions (cf. Belk 1988), and on the other hand consumers reorient their self-concepts to align themselves with their institutionally defined identity (cf. Solomon 1983). The third type is called *consumption as classification.* By this Holt (1995, pp. 10) means the ways in

which consumers classify themselves in relation to other consumers. They do so through the meanings that are carried by consuming objects and practices (Holt 1995, pp. 2). The fourth part of the figure is *consumption as play*, that is, the way in which consumption is used in order to interact with other consumers (Holt 1995, pp. 9). In the present research all four types were analysed separately but the contents assigned to them were allowed to mix. That is, the same practice could be coded under several types of consumption following the argumentation or the emphasis in argumentation given in the narratives.

## 4. Findings

Our empirical purpose was to analyse the views of today's young adults on what kinds of consumption are necessary. The main findings of the analysis are illustrated in Figure 3 and characterized in detail with the meaning themes founded from the narratives.

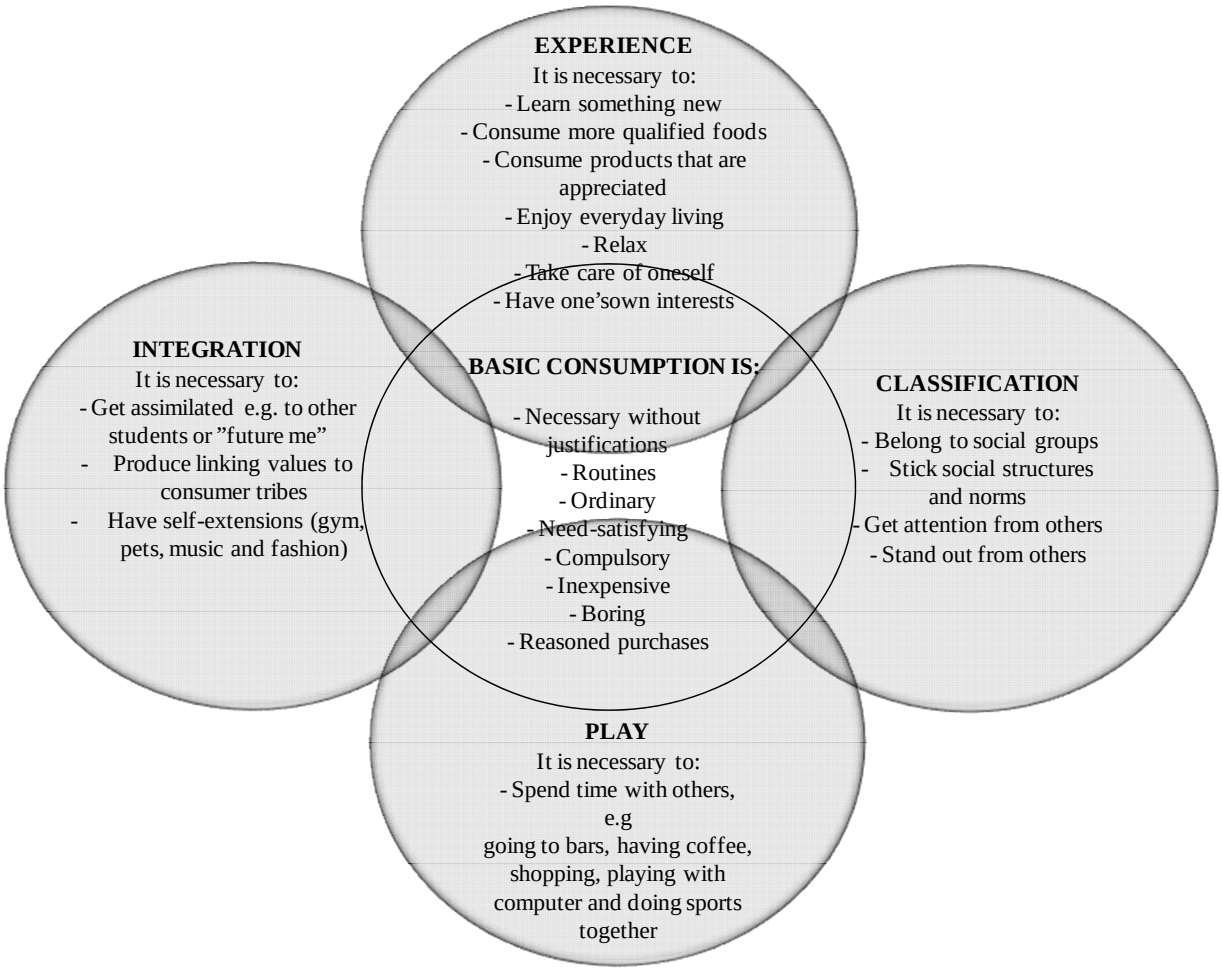


**Fig. 3.** Necessity consumption practices.

In Figure 3 all the meaning themes are depicted as overlapping, which shows that the contents assigned to different types of necessity consumption intersected.

*4.1. Necessity consumption as basic consumption*

We start by analysing necessity consumption as holding the meanings of basic consumption, having thus a high degree of necessity but a low degree of stimulation (Wikström et al. 1989). First, the data revealed that young adults regarded many of their consumption practices as being so *necessary that they do not need to be justified*; for example, one female axiomatically parallels necessity products and groceries: "During the week I mostly bought necessity products (groceries)."

Necessity consumption practices were also seen as *routines* that are performed commonly and repetitively. These kinds of routines included driving a car and different routines in the morning. On the other hand, necessity consumption was considered *ordinary consumption.* Ordinary consumption practices are common in normal living and comprise for example studying, working, watching TV, putting on makeup, phone discussions, using the Internet and listening to (background) music. One of the females wrote: "Necessity consumption is something that essentially belongs in my everyday living and there is a specific time for each of these practices during the day."

Necessity consumption was seen as something that *satisfies needs*. For example a washing machine was seen as a necessity but a tumble dryer was something extra. Similarly, basic clothes were seen as necessary but some (expensive) brands were luxurious. The differences between necessary and luxury consumption practices were often discussed in terms of accessibility: "Some unfortunate people may think that I live a life of luxury. I buy clothes even if my closet is already full. However, for me, this is just ordinary life" (female).

Besides satisfying needs, necessity consumption can be interpreted as *compulsory*. In these cases consumption practices were often done in a hurry, being "necessary evils" and providing no joy. Taking out the garbage, washing up and taking the dog out are examples. Necessity consumption practices also appeared to be *inexpensive and affordable,* for example having lunch at the university restaurant. Similarly, *reasoned purchases* (e.g., buying food items from a shopping list) and

*boredom* (e.g., buying of groceries was even described as being “disgusting” by one female) were distinctive to necessity consumption.

*4.2. Necessity consumption as experience*

When we move on to analysing refined consumption (Wikström et al. 1989), we look at those necessity practices that have a high degree of necessity and high degree of stimulation. First we focus on necessity consumption as an experience (see Fig. 2 and Holt 1995).

First, it emerged that young adults often experienced that it is necessary to *learn something new*. The practices they take to this end include reading newspapers or watching the news: “I cannot survive without a television; I rely on it daily as a source of information.” They also saw that it was sometimes necessary to consume *higher-quality and more expensive foods.* The reasons for this were related to health and taste issues. In addition to food, the informants felt that it was necessary to have or buy *products that were important to them and appreciated*: “I do not want to replace some brands with cheaper ones, for example Coca-Cola and Clinique” (female).

The data also showed that it was necessary to *enjoy everyday living.* Self-gifts or going to a bar for drinks were seen as necessary; as one informant said, “I want to enjoy my everyday living, because it comprises such a great part of my life” (female). Also, aesthetic beauty was one source of enjoyment. When enjoyment was connected to luxury consumption, it was usually more expensive, such as going to a movie. *Relaxing* was an important justification for consumption, watching TV and listening to music were common ways of relaxing and were considered to be either necessary or a luxury, depending on the informant and situation.

Besides enjoying and relaxing it was necessary to *take care of oneself.* Different types of sports activities and travelling were ways of taking care of one’s wellbeing, both physically and mentally. Similarly, it was also considered necessary to be able to *have one’s own interests*, such as music, literature, photography, cooking or yoga – as one informant stated, an interest is something “that is necessary for me, as I am involved in it and I am interested in it” (female).

It is interesting to note that all of the abovementioned necessity practices in which consuming is an experience also have luxury aspects, and often the informants provided similar moral justifications as when they saw interests as being necessary.

*4.3. Necessity consumption as integration*

Next, the data revealed different integrative consumption practices that were regarded as necessary. The focus in each of the integrative practices is on the object of consumption, which however is employed in a manner that connects the consumer to various (aspired) social groups. In order to be assimilated with other students, it appeared to be necessary *to use computers and the Internet*. However, *studying* itself was often considered necessary, but in terms of pursuing such assimilation in order to forge their "future selves". Also, keeping track of time and *civilizing oneself* seemed to be necessary; here too the connection to others was established more implicitly: "I believe that it is beneficial to have good general knowledge and conversational skills in social situations" (male).

Young adults also wanted to be assimilated into other groups by means of their consumption practices. For example, one of the necessary integrative practices was *dressing properly in the workplace*: "For a woman, it is easier to fit into a work community full of men wearing business suits when you look groomed, classy and don't stand out" (female). This reflects that many of the students were trying to assimilate into different types of consumer groups. Accordingly, it was found that *communicating different "linking values"* was seen to be necessary in order to achieve the sought-for assimilation into various consumer tribes (cf. Cova and Cova 2002); among these "linking values" were decorating one's home, keeping track of trends in fashion and going to a gym. Sometimes, it seemed to be necessary to have *self-extensions* (cf. Belk 1988): "My dog can be considered as my self-extension, because I am emotionally attached to it and I am ready to sacrifice time and money to its well-being. When people ask me to tell them about myself I often mention that I own a dog – this shows how important it is to me" (female).

*4.4. Necessity consumption as classification*

The fourth group of necessity consumption practices is called consumption as classification (see Fig. 2). In classification practices the emphasis is on interpersonal relations, whereas in the case of integration practices the objects of consumption were addressed (Holt 1995, pp. 6-11).

First, *it was necessary to belong to various social groups*: their university peers, people in working life, sport and other hobby enthusiasts, sustainably acting consumers, birth family, fashionable people, and reasonable consumers. To complete these classifications, a number of consumption practices were considered to be necessary. For example statement like "My consumption shouldn't

appear to be different from other students' consumption" (male), implies that the informant wants to fit in with his student peers. On the other hand, many of the students considered it necessary to pay rather expensive membership fees to a local sport gym, because they "...feel the desire to belong to a group of people who consider sport to be as important as I do" (female). The findings showed that young adults still wished to be connected to their birth families having implications for favouring domestic foods or certain brands that their mothers had used. Further, many students saw it as necessary to belong to the group of sustainable consumers. In these practices, for example, recycling and shopping at flea markets were regarded as virtues. Often, this appeared to be an aspired group, one to which students wanted to belong, even though that often turned out to be impossible in practice.

Second, it seemed to be *necessary to conform to social structures and norms.* Young adults had a need to act in the way that others expect them to. Sometimes, drinking alcohol and going to nightclubs appeared to be social norms: "When my friends persuaded me to join them on a night out, I had the feeling that it is necessary for me to participate" (male). Similarly, drinking coffee at the university with peers was socially important.

Third, it emerged that it was *necessary to get attention from others.* Here attention was gained through visible consumption objects like shoes, clothing, makeup and hair. Fourth, it was *necessary to stand out from the others.* The contents of these consumption practices obviously varied from individual to individual; for instance, one student said that she wanted to buy healthy food, because she "wants to be different from the masses". Interestingly, there were also a couple of mentions of the importance of standing out from those who are much too interested in ecological thinking, "green freaks".

*4.5. Necessity consumption as play*

The fourth type of consumption practices comprises consumption as play (see Fig. 2 and Holt 1995). Within this group of practices, it became apparent that it is simply *necessary to spend time with others.* Being together was indeed an end in itself: "The main consumption object was not the clothes that I bought, for example, but the time I spent shopping and the company I was with" (female). Spending time together was connected to a variety of places and situations: Going to bars, having coffee, shopping, playing with a computer and doing sports together. On the other hand, it

appeared to be necessary to use computers, the Internet and mobile phones to keep in touch with other people; for example, many of the informants said that Facebook was necessary.

In addition, the company of others was necessary, because it was rewarding and relaxing: “How can something so necessary be such a luxury by nature?” wrote one female. The justification for considering the time spent with friends as necessary was that friends are a mental resource: “Someone might say that it’s not necessary to spend a night in a restaurant in good company, but I experience these kinds of social occasions as refreshing and energizing.” Also, pets were seen as companions that give their owners the strength to carry on.

## 5. Conclusions

We conclude the paper by discussing the findings in terms of responsible consumption. We have examined responsibility by focusing on decreasing consumption, assuming that *experienced* necessity sets the limits for consumers’ willingness to minimize their consumption. Our data indicates that experiencing something as necessary is an on-going negotiation, its meanings and contents are shifting from time to time, and from person to person, and consumption often has aspects of both necessity and luxury (cf. Wikström et al. 1989; Kemp 1998). Indeed, already the meanings given to "basic consumption" appeared to be contrasting and overlapping as it was characterized as important (one cannot survive without it) but also as boring (ordinary and compulsory routines). However, present findings show that the experienced necessary consumption had highly varied contents being something more than "basic consumption" (cf. Wikström et al. 1989). Accordingly, we discovered very multifarious contents for "refined consumption" (high necessity, high stimulation).

The findings revealed that those issues young consumers do not want to give up were often related to their consumption experiences. Even rather “modest” experiences and pleasure giving issues such as renting a movie or hanging out with friends were regarded as highly necessary. Therefore, our first managerial implication claims that products and services positioned as responsible choices should be able to provide possibility to fulfil desires and enjoy everyday experiences. This means attaching experiential meanings to responsible choices and ensuring that they are easily and temptingly available instead of containing associations of boredom and expensiveness as the present data indicated. This is something that should be taken into account when designing “green” or responsible consumer products and services.

Further, the feelings of social belonging and acceptance were necessary to young adults. The second implication thus emphasises the social nature of responsible choices. The responsible offers should be designed to include either social pressure or social rewards, for example making responsible choices as social norms (using recycled paper in the offices) or as virtues (cycling to work). The current data indicated that young adults had a latent wish to act in a more responsible manner if only they had more time or more money, or intend to do so in the future. To boost these wishes into actions, the responsible choices should be easily available in places where people spend time with each other. For young consumers these venues included cafés, bars and gyms. On the other hand, in couple of the narratives it was indicated the reluctance to be labelled as "green freaks". Therefore, it is important that responsible behaviour does not stigmatize consumers, but rather is socially desirable, especially because the young are particularly influenced by other people and their opinions in their identification processes (Atkinson et al. 1996, p. 653). When planning the marketing communications this translates to connecting first and foremost with the early adaptors and opinion leaders as they play critical roles for product diffusion (Arnould et al. 2002, pp. 736-739).

Moreover, the data revealed that rather than buying new things young adults experienced different kinds of usage situations of things as necessary. These comprised for example washing up, cooking and using a computer. This is an important issue because the responsible way of life is often seen as challenging, effort demanding and sometimes denied as being too expensive. These are the common reasons for not acting in a responsible manner (e.g. Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997). Therefore, our third implication is that responsible consumption should be communicated through the possibilities to change the everyday practices into a more frugal and less resource-intensive direction. That is, consumers should be offered ways to easily assimilate responsibility into their everyday doings. Similarly, prior literature (Atkinson et al. 1996, p. 78; Laaksonen 1993) suggests that it is easier to assimilate, i.e. to add something new to old consuming patters, than to accommodate, i.e. to completely change the old patterns of behaviour.

If responsibility is marketed through product choices (e.g. buying fair trade or organic products), it is often assumed to be rather expensive. But if responsibility is assimilated into parts of everyday consumption practices (e.g. switching lights off, taking shorter showers, washing laundry only when the machine is full), it may become associated to the frugal way of living, and not rejected so easily. Our conclusion comes close to the concept of "choice of architecture" which alleviates

nudging people's choices into the direction that is best for themselves, their families, and their society without restricting freedom of choice (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). If doing laundry and using a computer were experienced as necessities, washing machines and computers should have an energy-saving mode as a default setting so that consumers do not need to change the settings in order to save energy. Thus, attention would be turned away from blaming individuals for not making often expensive "green" choices. Instead, it should be focused more on creating responsibility-containing products and services, which would be a rather friendly way to "force" consumers towards more environmentally friendly behaviours.

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