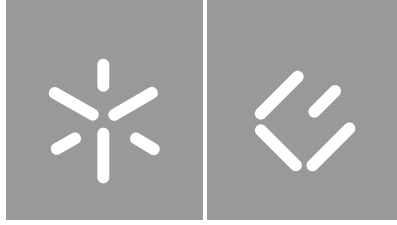


**Universidade do Minho**  
Escola de Economia e Gestão

Raquel Rebouças Almeida Nicolau

**When Less Becomes More: Motivations,  
Meanings and Outcomes of Voluntary  
Simplicity Adoption**





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**When Less Becomes More: Motivations,  
Meanings and Outcomes of Voluntary  
Simplicity Adoption**

Ph.D. Thesis  
Doctoral Programme in Marketing and Strategy

A work made under the supervision of  
**Ana Maria dos Santos Costa Soares**  
Associate Professor - University of Minho

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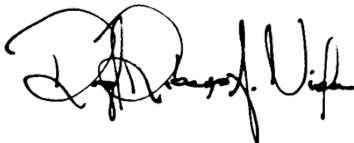
School of Economics and Management

Ph. D. in Marketing and Strategy

April 2021

Name: Raquel Rebouças Almeida Nicolau

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Raquel Rebouças Almeida Nicolau', written in a cursive style.

## **ACADEMIC PAPERS AND CONFERENCES**

### **Publications in Peer-reviewed International Journals:**

Rebouças, R., & Soares, A. M. (2020). Voluntary simplicity: A literature review and research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. doi:10.1111/ijcs.12621

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Rebouças, R.; & Soares, A. M (2020). Vida simples: dimensões conceituais e perfis relacionados. In: Workshop de Publicação Científica – Revista Brasileira de Gestão de Negócios, São Paulo.

Rebouças, R.; & Soares, A. M (2019). Voluntary Simplicity: Main Dimensions and Related Labels. In: XXIX Jornadas Hispano-Lusas de Gestión Científica, Sevilha. p. 209.

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## ABSTRACT

Problems related to high materialism and unsustainable consumption are widespread globally nowadays. The consequences of this type of consumer behaviour pose challenges to environmental questions and social issues, such as the increase of social inequality, growth of global warming and scarcity of natural resources.

Some consumer groups voluntarily reduce consumption and reflect critically about their daily choices in order to ensure to a better quality of life for themselves and others. Voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle focused on seeking a simple life by reducing consumption and other social and environmental practices. This group has different degrees of engagement with most of them being in transformation, adopting some lifestyle practices and not others.

The current thesis is about consumers who are taking steps of voluntary life simplification. It tries to understand values, motivations, meanings and marketing outcomes, to better understand the process of change and the effects of this consumption lifestyle adoption. Three different studies involving in-depth interviews, focus group, and netnographic analysis of over 22 thousand online comments were carried out exploring voluntary simplicity adoption.

The studies uncovered critical incidents that motivate lifestyle adoption and several aspects around VS first engagement levels organized into thematic networks. The results include recurrent discussions of VS definitions. We also found three main drivers, as critical factors to accomplishing a simple life. A map of practices was organised listing related products, services, and general preferences of this group regarding simplification. Finally, we discuss the VS adoption's buying decision process.

Research about this conscious and low materialistic lifestyle of consumption can provide in-depth knowledge about how and why consumers become interested and engage in voluntary simplicity, as well as useful guidelines for initiatives that encourage more responsible and ethical actions.

**Keywords:** *Voluntary Simplicity; Conscious Consumer; Consumption Reduction; Adoption process; Drivers; Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers*



## RESUMO

Problemas associados aos altos índices de materialismo e ao consumo irresponsável possuem amplitude global na atualidade. As consequências desse tipo de comportamento de consumo geram desafios ambientais e sociais, como o aumento da desigualdade social, aquecimento global e escassez de recursos naturais.

Alguns grupos de consumidores voluntariamente reduzem o consumo e refletem criticamente sobre escolhas cotidianas visando melhor qualidade de vida para si e para outros. Simplicidade Voluntária é um estilo de vida focado na busca de uma vida simples através da redução do consumo e de outras práticas sociais e ambientais. Esse grupo apresenta diferentes níveis de envolvimento, dentre os quais a maioria está em processo de transição, adotando algumas práticas do estilo de vida e outras não.

A presente tese é sobre consumidores que estão voluntariamente dando passos em direção a uma vida simples. Este estudo busca entender valores, motivações, significados e consequências do marketing através do consumo, para entender melhor o processo de mudança e os efeitos da adoção desse estilo de vida. Três diferentes estudos foram desenvolvidos visando explorar a adoção do estilo de vida simples envolvendo entrevistas, grupo focal e uma análise netnográfica de cerca de 22 mil comentários online.

Os estudos reuniram incidentes críticos que motivaram a adoção do estilo de vida e diversos aspectos em torno dos primeiros níveis de engajamento em uma vida simples. Os resultados incluem discussões sobre definições de simplicidade voluntária. Também identificamos três direcionadores centrais, como fatores críticos para uma vida simples. Um mapa de práticas foi organizado listando produtos, serviços e preferências relacionadas a este grupo de consumidores. Finalmente, discutimos o processo de decisão de compra sobre adoção do estilo de vida simples.

A pesquisa sobre esse estilo de vida consciente e pouco materialista pode resultar em um conhecimento aprofundado sobre como e por que os consumidores se interessam e se engajam na simplicidade voluntária, assim como apresentar aspectos úteis para guiar iniciativas que encorajem ações responsáveis e éticas envolvendo o consumo.

**Palavras-chave:** *Simplicidade Voluntária; Consumidor Consciente; Redução de Consumo; Processo de Adoção; Motivações; Simplificadores Voluntários Iniciantes.*

Ao meu amor, Vitor

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**NVS** Non Voluntary Simplifiers

**BVS** Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers

**VS** Voluntary Simplicity

**VSL** Voluntary Simplicity Lifestyle

**CIT** Critical Incident Technique

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION**

The ecological crisis, massive poverty, resource challenges, and the stimuli for high consumption lifestyles are current problems related to consumption habits (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Atik, Firat, Ozgun, & Uzunoğlu, 2020). Psychological, cultural and behavioural changes in consumption are feasible and necessary for social well-being (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Deliana & Rum, 2019; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011). Some experiments on decreasing materialism are associated with an increased feeling of personal security and the encouragement of intrinsic values (Ingo Balderjahn, Lee, Seegebarth, & Peyer, 2020; Hüttel, Balderjahn, & Hoffmann, 2020; Kasser, 2016). The relation between low materialism, consciousness of consumption and well-being is also very important to current social challenges, such as consumption-related mental disorders, social inequality and environmental problems.

Voluntary Simplicity (VS) is 'living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich' (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977, p. 2). VS and related trends, such as minimalism, are attracting increasing attention both from the popular press, media and academia. There is a growing interest and a developing body of literature on consumers that are voluntarily decreasing habits of consumption and want to lead a more balanced life (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011; Peyer, Balderjahn, Seegebarth, & Klemm, 2017; Walther & Sandlin, 2013). This group of consumers, termed voluntary simplifiers, share similar interests for consumption reduction and inner values and constitute a psychographic lifestyle-based segment. This research aims to understand the adoption of Voluntary Simplicity Lifestyle (VSL) from a marketing perspective.

Simplicity as a virtue and the philosophy of simple life are not new concepts, surviving through different contexts and perspectives throughout history (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; McDonald, Oates, Young, & Hwang, 2006). The association between low consumption attitudes and the voluntary aspect of simplifying life has gained growing scientific attention with the popularity of sustainable consumption and the issues associated with high materialism. For marketing research, the growth of this and related lifestyles have a considerable impact on the companies' strategies and decisions (Huneke, 2005).

Simplifying is not necessarily less expensive or living cheaply (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Huneke, 2005), it may demand some effort and constant self-evaluation. This study focuses on the voluntary



nature of adopting simplifying behaviour, thus excluding those who are coerced or obligated to reduce consumption and change buying habits but still have a high materialistic profile. However, it is important to emphasize also that this voluntary aspect does not exclude people with income constraints who have motivations and beliefs about simplification (Kala, Galcanova, & Pelikan, 2017).

How and why do some consumers develop their consciousness to make responsible decisions of consumption? What values, motivations and meanings trigger consumers to engage into voluntarily simplifying consumption? How do consumers direct their consumption behaviour to a less materialistic focus? These and other related issues are important to researchers from marketing, psychology, business ethics, and other fields to better understand consumer behaviour and values.

Researching VS is important to understand consumer behaviour in contemporary consumer cultures (Alexander & Ussher, 2012), in particular the voluntary nature of this lifestyle, as well to help foster responsible consumer behaviour.

Pepper, Jackson, and Uzzell (2009) affirm there is little research about the values of socially conscious consumer behaviour. Marketing studies involving the analysis of consumer values can increase the understanding of the VS with a specific view, helping to expand the knowledge about conscious consumption of this target audience (Brown & Kasser, 2005). We identified few studies about the process of transition to a VS and about its values, meanings and motivations (Osikominu & Bocken, 2020; Rich, Wright, & Bennett, 2019).

Despite the growing body of literature on holistic and intense simplifiers, there is a dearth of studies focusing on the behaviour of simplifiers in the first levels of engagement (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; McDonald et al., 2006; Oates et al., 2008). Boujbel and d'Astous (2012) and Peyer et al. (2017) call for more research on the motivational antecedents of the control of consumer desires. This research intends to understand motivations, meanings and values that trigger the adoption of VSL, contributing to filling this gap. Hence, this study focuses on consumers who are beginning to voluntarily simplify their lives, departing from an indifference profile to a conscious and minimal consumption profile, seeking to understand the marketing outcomes that lead consumers to simplify their lifestyles.

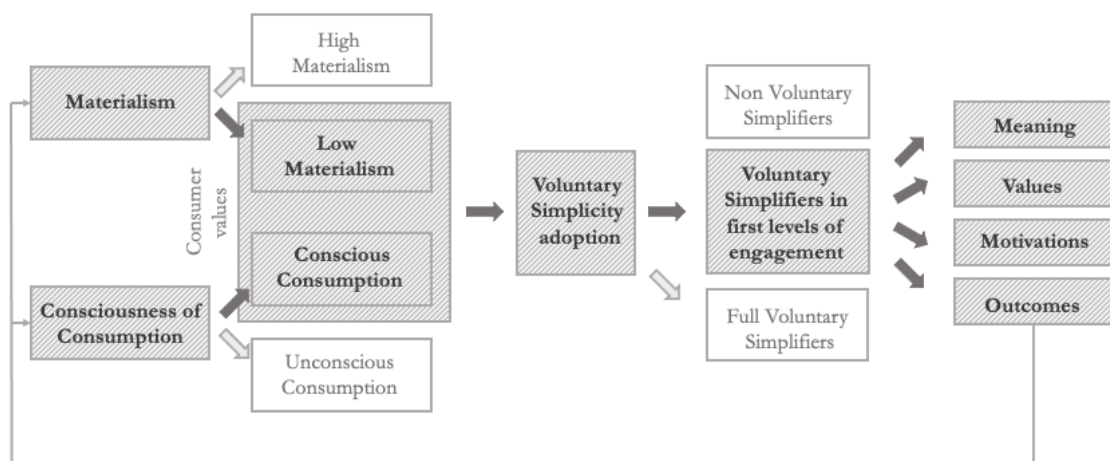
This study's uniqueness is to seek to understand consumers who are taking steps to reduce consumption due to a primary motivation of simplification. This group's voluntary nature, which is related to consciousness, is essential to understand other areas of consumer behaviour studies.

Behaviour results from an orchestrated and complex combination of conscious and unconscious aspects, resulting from biological, psychological and social influences. Thus, an in-depth study of the meanings behind consumption is important to develop knowledge about this field and its challenges.

Understanding the plurality of influences on the consumer consciousness of voluntary simplifiers may be essential to promote responsible consumption growth. The integration of different motivations and the complexity profile of the voluntary simplicity lifestyle may offer contributions to help on urgent issues of consumer behaviour, as high materialism and irresponsible consumption.

Marketers need to understand responsible consumers so as to align company strategies with their consumer needs (Hosta & Zabkar, 2016). Understanding VS in different degrees is essential for the advancement of sustainable consumption (Brown & Kasser, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006; Shaw & Moraes, 2009). This research focuses the VS consumption behaviour in first engagement levels through practices, consumption preferences and buying decision process. Figure 1 depicts the relevant constructs for this study, how they are related and fit within the broader literature. Considering the scarcity of studies about VS adoption and the complexity and subjectivity of the studied constructs, we adopt a qualitative approach for this research. Thus, the arrows on the figure represent propositions about relationships, not hypotheses. The grey boxes represent the research focus. There is an arrow between the last and the first boxes, to depict that the results of this study may be useful to contribute to the materialism and consciousness of consumption topics.

**Figure 1** Map of literature



## 1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

This study is about VS adoption, aiming to understand people involved in materialism reduction and adopting conscious consumption through simple life motivations. Hence, the study is based on the two main research question below:

*What values, motivations and meanings lead consumers to adopt voluntary simplicity?*

*What are the consumption-related outcomes of voluntary simplicity in the first engagement levels?*

This thesis intends to answer these questions by understanding what motivates the first steps in consumption reduction and life simplification. The main objectives of this research are:

#1 Analyse the process of moving between the groups of non-voluntary simplifiers to voluntary simplifiers.

#2 Understand how consumers become motivated to seek and adopt a simpler life and reduce their consumption.

#3 Identify the values which lead consumers to become voluntary simplifiers.

#4 Explore the meanings behind consumption around VS adoption.

#5 Investigate the consumption-related outcomes of VS adoption.

## 1.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The analysis of the perspective and the worldview of the investigation is relevant to understand and delimitate the research design followed in this study. The research paradigm underlying this work is the constructivist/interpretivism, drawing on the belief in the richness of subjectivism and individualistic values in knowledge construction based on details, meanings and motivations behind the analysed situations (Wahyuni, 2012). This specific research stance directs the study to an inductive approach, with issues being studied in a particular context (Malhotra, Birks, & Wills, 2012).

Three elements of the research worldview guide scientific investigation, known as the research paradigm: 1) ontology, about the reality dimension; 2) epistemology, associating the reality with the researcher; and 3) methodology, related to the elements and techniques to study reality (Sobh & Perry, 2006).

This study intends to explore the philosophical dimension of constructivism and interpretivism, based on the need to focus on the details, meanings and motivations behind the analysed situations (Wahyuni, 2012). In what concerns the nature and the development of knowledge, the ontology of this research is subjectivist, based on the assumption that individuals contribute to social phenomena (Wahyuni, 2012). This study's epistemology is based on motivational actions, with the researcher being a participant in findings.

Aligning the research design for the study is important because it is the connection between the methodology and research methods that achieve the research objectives (Wahyuni, 2012). Qualitative research is commonly applied to understand complex relationships, with patterns being formed through comparison, conceptualization and condensation, adding value to the research phenomena (Gummesson, 2005). Quantitative studies, on the other hand, can provide rigour to marketing quantifying data, searching for causality between dependent and independent variables (Malhotra et al., 2012). Analysing the characteristics of quantitative and qualitative studies suggests that a qualitative approach is more appropriate to this research because it can provide more detailed, in-depth descriptions of social constructs, emphasising the uniqueness and contexts of the studied topics (Malhotra et al., 2012; Wahyuni, 2012). To understand VS adoption, a qualitative approach was also recommended by McDonald et al. (2006), to increase the comprehension of simplifiers consumption profile. For these authors, the best way to study this group is in terms of motivations, because it is common to observe similar profiles of purchases but with a lot of different motivations.

The methodology chosen for this study is qualitative, related to the nature of the explored social phenomena (Morgan & Smircich, 1980), it focuses on the complex relationships to increase the comprehension of consumption profiles (Gummesson, 2005).

In this thesis, three different data collection methods were employed: in-depth interviews, focus group, and netnography. For the first empirical study, we adopted two qualitative data collection methods in order to gain an in-depth insight into voluntary simplifiers in the first levels of engagement: semi-structured interviews using the critical incident technique, and a focus group.

We applied in-depth interviews (see interview guide in appendix 1) with the inductive method of the critical incident technique, which studies human behaviour by observable activities, from the individual perspective of respondents (Flanagan, 1954; Gremler, 2004). Regarding the focus group, this method is useful for understanding how interviewees perceive a situation, as it is a dynamic meeting where participants are encouraged to discuss specific topics they have in common in their lives (Parker & Tritter, 2006). The focus group (see guide in appendix 2) method was chosen to complement the individual interviews because the inter-relational dynamics of participants enriched the findings through discussions about voluntary simplicity.

For the second study, we conducted netnographic research to focus on individual interactions with internet connections, studying the online social narrative regarding VS adoption. Netnography explores the desires, meanings and feelings of consumers who interact in online communities (R. V. Kozinets, 2002). After gaining familiarity with the language of participants, we joined an internet forum and asked questions to complement the data and elicit direct interactions with the online community (see appendix 3). The discussions' immersion and engagement were relevant to develop the problems and become familiar with the forum culture. We followed the six steps of the netnographic method: research planning, entrée, data collection, data analysis, ethical standards and research representation (R. V. Kozinets, 2002).

The applied methods complemented each other, supporting results and presenting new insights. As method of data analysis, we resorted to content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is applied from the systematization of themes and patterns through the coding process, interpreted from the context of data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Analysis, reduction and structuring of data were made by the process of content analysis, through the identification of relationships and thematic categories (Malhotra et al., 2012).

The content analysis process started with the transcriptions by the researcher to reach a general vision of all data from interviews and focus group. Regarding the online content, we cut and pasted posts associated with adopting VSL into Atlas.ti word processor. Subsequently, we proceeded with the coding method to extract patterns and the essence of the participants' discourses. The coding processes were built through different categories of codes, with the development of the first and second coding cycles, to provide a deeper reflection on the data, critically linking components of files to find connections (Saldana, 2009). The software Atlas.ti helped to improve and systematize

data analysis. It helps arrange and manage large bodies of textual, graphical or video data to develop networks.

We developed the first code process based on the research objectives and patterns found during analysis. The first cycle coding process systematized quotations into categories, associating citations with similar characteristics and making connections between codes. In the second coding cycle, we revised and refined the initial coding scheme, generating networks between categories and subcategories of codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The subcategories of each network contain labels cited in previous VS research. Table 1 presents a general overview of the thesis research design with the studies' details.

**Table 1** Thesis research design with studies' details

<b>Empirical research</b>			
<b>Study main goals</b>	#1 Analyse the process of moving between the groups of non-voluntary simplifiers to voluntary simplifiers. #2 Understand how consumers become motivated to seek and adopt a simpler life and reduce their consumption. #3 Identify the values which lead consumers to become voluntary simplifiers. #4 Explore the meanings behind consumption around VS adoption. #5 Investigate the consumption-related outcomes of VS adoption.		
<b>Research questions</b>	What values, motivations, meanings, and outcomes lead consumers to become beginner voluntary simplifiers?	# How is Voluntary Simplicity's adoption process? # Which practices are common in the process of VS adoption? # How is the buying decision process of voluntary simplifiers in the first steps of this lifestyle engagement?	
<b>Empirical studies</b>	<b>Study 1</b> The consumption behaviour of Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers: An exploratory study	<b>Study 2</b> The adoption of Voluntary Simplicity: understanding the concept, drivers, practices and the consumer buying decision process of simple life's first steps	
<b>Research methods</b>	In-depth interviews with the critical incident technique (19 beginner voluntary simplifiers between 21 and 68 years of age) Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour	Focus-group (8 participants between 24 and 35 years of age, the meeting lasted 70 minutes)	Netnography (635 posts containing 21.198 comments)
<b>Data analysis</b>	Content analysis resulted in seven networks (719 quotations)		Content analysis resulted in three networks (8 codes and 627 quotations)

<b>Findings</b>	# critical incidents	# discussion about VS concept through simplifiers' own perspective
	# motivations	
	# barriers	# main drivers to lifestyle adoption
	# values	# map of voluntary simplifiers' practices on the first levels of engagement
	# meanings and associations	
	# marketing outcomes	# buying decision process model of VS adoption
	# buying decision process	

## 1.4 EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

This study's general contribution lies in exploring the meanings, motivations, values, and consumption-related outcomes of voluntary simplicity adoption. Focusing on the first levels of VSL engagement presents specific results that are important to foster responsible consumption. Understanding the voluntary aspect of reducing consumption contributes to the literature of conscious consumption.

The growing number of conscious consumers with singular buying decision processes may encourage business and society to more ethical consumption systems. For marketing research, this and related lifestyles' growth significantly impact the companies' strategies and decisions (Hosta & Zabkar, 2016; Huneke, 2005).

Analysing the process of moving between non-voluntary simplifiers to voluntary simplifiers may help the research area of consumer behaviour. Understanding this process is essential nowadays in the face of the negative consequences of overconsumption and irresponsible practices to society and the environment. Moreover, it adds to our understanding of a larger phenomenon of “disenchantment with market society”, consumer resistance, anti-consumption and consumer well-being theory (Atik et al., 2020; Ingo Balderjahn et al., 2020)

Identifying the values and motivations of reducing consumption can explain different influences and relations around consumers' preferences and practices. The meaning behind consumption in the adoption of VS is also valuable to understand the richness of associations involving materialism and simple life. Researching VS is important to understand consumer behaviour in contemporary consumer cultures (Alexander & Ussher, 2012) and find implications for increased sustainable consumption (Brown & Kasser, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006; Peyer et al., 2017). Exploring the process of engagement in a responsible lifestyle may contribute to social and marketing spheres.

This thesis may add to some theoretical approaches to comprehend consumption behaviour. This study's findings provide a useful theoretical framework to contribute to the Social Cognitive Theory. According to this theory, an individual's behaviour is highly influenced by his ability to perform a behaviour and by his environmental settings (Bandura, 1997). Analysing VS adoption may contribute to the Social Cognitive theory by exploring the VSL's personal, behavioural, and environmental domains, focusing on the reciprocity between them (Demirel, 2020).

In addition, this thesis may contribute to the Schwartz Value Theory. According to this theory, which builds upon other theories highlighting the central roles of values in guiding action, egoistic, altruistic and biospheric values influence behaviour through beliefs and personal norms (Saleem, Eagle, Low, & Yaseen, 2018). Researching VS values on first engagement levels may contribute to further reinforce the explanatory power of this theory and highlight one category of values at the expense of others, contributing to discrimination of the different levels of engagement through this theory. Other than that, understanding the relationship between VS values may reinforce these categories to comprehend pro-environmental behaviour further. Finally, this study may contribute to the Self-determination theory by supporting how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations mobilize behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The VS field may be interpreted as aiming at reconciling different focal points: consumption and non-consumption practices, individual and collective approaches, the private and public spheres, and personal and social well-being (see figure 8). The richness of VS lies not only in the dimensions listed but, in their interplay.

When investigating the outcomes in life simplification through consumption, it is important to observe the practical consequences of some consumers' perceptions. This thesis fills gaps arising from the absence of studies about the process of VS adoption and the urgent need to understand this consumer group in the face of the current high profile of materialism and ecological issues (Aidar & Daniels, 2020; Osikominu & Bocken, 2020).

## **1.5 THESIS STRUCTURE**

This thesis has five chapters, as summarised in table 2. The first chapter is a general introduction that encompasses research background, justification, some expected contributions of the studies, the discussion about the paradigm, and the research design.



Chapter two is a literature review about VS. It intends to understand the research area with the first systematic review of the field. This chapter explores published peer-reviewed articles to analyse the concept of VS, map the areas of study of this topic, and designing a research agenda through found research gaps.

Intending to fill some gaps pointed out in chapter two, chapter three is an exploratory study to understand the consumption aspects of BVS. The results of this study are multiple thematic networks about the explored issues: values, motivations, meanings, barriers and outcomes. This research also delineated a buying decision process of BVS based on the found aspects.

Chapter four is a netnographic research about the adoption of VS. This research confirms the results of the previous studies and summarises its findings. This study found three main drivers of VS adoption, designed a map of practices around this lifestyle and characterised the buying decision process of this process of life simplification. We conclude that the three articles complemented each other with a sequence of interrelated findings (see figure 18 in conclusion section).

Lastly, we discuss the main conclusions associating previous studies in expected managerial and theoretical contributions, exploring limitations, and presenting future research suggestions.

**Table 2** Thesis structure

<b>Chapter 1</b>	
Introduction	Research background and justification
	Research problem and objectives
	Expected Contributions
	Research paradigm and methodological approach
	Thesis structure
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>Article 1</b> Voluntary Simplicity: A Literature Review and Research Agenda	Abstract
	Introduction
	Voluntary Simplicity
	Method
	Results

	Directions for further research
	Limitations
	Implications for practice and policy making
	Conclusion
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
	Abstract
	Introduction
<b>Article 2</b>	Voluntary Simplicity: Main Characteristics and Levels of Engagement
The consumption behaviour of Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers: An exploratory study	Research Methodology
	Findings and Discussion
	Conclusion, Discussion, and Managerial Implications
	Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
	Abstract
	Introduction
<b>Article 3</b>	Voluntary Simplicity: concept, drivers and adoption
The adoption of Voluntary Simplicity: understanding concept, drivers, practices and the consumer buying decision process of simple life first steps	Methodology
	Findings and Discussion
	Conclusions
<b>Chapter 5</b>	
	Main Conclusions
General Conclusion	Theoretical and Managerial contributions
	Limitations and Suggestions for future research
<b>References</b>	
<b>Appendices</b>	

## **2 VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH AGENDA<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

Voluntary simplicity (VS) is a lifestyle focused on seeking a simple life by reducing consumption and other practices. This systematic literature review aims to analyse and critically discuss the state of the art of VS. This review provides a categorisation scheme of VS and analyses: the number of studies and year of publication; journals, number of citations and research areas; study location; VS definitions; types of studies; and research methods. By providing a map of existing research, the paper contributes to the clarification of the VS construct and to the assessment, synthesis and identification of research gaps, and opportunities for further research. VS implications for theory, practice and policy are discussed within the context of consumption/anti-consumption.

### **KEYWORDS**

Voluntary Simplicity; Systematic Literature Review; Consumer Behaviour; Conscious Consumption; Responsible consumption

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Global warming, scarcity of natural resources, increase in social inequality and consumption-related mental disorders have become widespread globally. These problems have been associated with overconsumption and materialism (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Atik et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a need for psychological, cultural and behavioural changes in consumption to improve environmental, social and individual well-being (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Deliana & Rum, 2019; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011). As an example, some experiments on decreasing materialism have been associated with an increased feeling of personal security and the encouragement of intrinsic values (Atik et al., 2020; Kasser, 2016; Oral & Thurner, 2019). Consequently, psychological, cultural and behavioural changes in consumer behaviour in connection with materialism and sustainability are needed, and feasible.

The association between the voluntary aspects of simplifying life and low consumption attitudes has been gaining growing scientific attention in view of the increased popularity of sustainable consumption and the growing awareness of the negative consequences associated with high materialism (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011; Peyer et al., 2017; Walther & Sandlin, 2013). It is relevant both for marketing research and practice to understand the main characteristics of voluntary simplicity (VS) as it may contribute to further our knowledge of ways to promote and foster conscious consumer behaviours. In fact, conducting research on VS is important to reach a better understanding of consumer behaviour in contemporary consumer cultures (Alexander & Ussher, 2012) as well to draw implications for the promotion of sustainable consumption (Brown & Kasser, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006; Peyer et al., 2017). For marketing practitioners, the growth of this type of behaviour and related lifestyles has a considerable impact on the strategies and decisions of companies (Huneke, 2005).

Previous research has offered differing views on the meaning of VS and plural associations with this topic, the purpose of this review is to map and contribute to a clear picture of the VS topic, through the following research questions: 'How has VS been conceptualised in previous studies?' and 'How has this research topic been analysed over the years in different areas?'. A systematic review of the literature on this topic can contribute to answering these questions based on a comprehensive mapping of extant research.

This paper explores VS through a systematic literature review of 106 articles in international peer-reviewed journals (published between 1977 and 2020). Although there is a previous paper that

analyses definitions of voluntary simplicity (Johnston & Burton, 2003), to the best of our knowledge, this is the first systematic review of VS. This analysis contributes to understanding VS as a growing research topic with potential contributions to theory, business practices and policy-making issues. This article is divided into four parts: first, we present the concept of VS; then, the systematic review method is presented; the third section presents the findings, providing a systematization and discussion of results; finally, research opportunities about the research topic are presented, associating results in order to map studies on VS.

## **2.2 VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY**

Voluntary simplicity is defined as a lifestyle of freely reduced consumption involving a conscious effort to live a simple life (McDonald et al., 2006; Rich, Hanna, & Wright, 2017), with ethical principles, environmental consciousness behaviour and often, the reduction of working hours (Alexander & Ussher, 2012). For McDonald et al. (2006), these characteristics are interrelated; however, for Rich et al. (2017), each of these aspects can be adopted independently to simplify life. Reducing consumption is important to achieve the simple lifestyle, but more than a mere decrease, a purpose of simplicity is needed (Alexander & Ussher, 2012). The 'voluntary' nature of the adoption of a simple lifestyle excludes the practices from those who have no freedom of choice, who live in forced poverty or are coerced by any institution or government to adopt such behaviours (Boujbel & d'Astous, 2012; Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Etzioni, 2004; Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; Leonard Barton, 1981; McDonald et al., 2006; Shama & Wisenblit, 1984). Some studies hold that VS is not exclusive of affluent people, this lifestyle can also be chosen by those whose basic needs are less well satisfied (Huneke, 2005; Kala et al., 2017).

The central aspects of simplifying life go back to ancient Greek and Chinese philosophers and have been adopted by different groups throughout history (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; McDonald et al., 2006). Elgin and Mitchell (1977) listed five VS core values: 1) material simplicity, 2) human scale, 3) self-determination, 4) ecological awareness, and 5) personal growth. Nowadays, concerns with overconsumption habits and environmental matters have given rise to the popularity of the term 'simple life' on blogs, books and academic research as one possible solution for these problems (Botta, 2015; Connolly & Shaw, 2006; Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012; Iwata, 2001; Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018). Moreover, there has been criticisms

as to the fact that some academic works in this field are superficial, speculative and that more scientific neutrality about the lifestyle is needed (McDonald et al., 2006).

Some authors consider that leading a simple life is as a lifestyle that comprises a group of practices and motivations beyond sustainable consumption (Haenfler et al., 2012; McDonald et al., 2006; Shaw & Moraes, 2009). Consumption guided by moral reasoning in the private sphere is considered a political act and voluntary simplifiers are seen as political actors (Alexander, 2011; Zamwel, Sasson-Levy, & Ben-Porat, 2014). This consumer group has been understood as a diverse new social movement (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Sandlin & Waither, 2009). However, Huneke (2005) does not agree with the view of VS as a consumer movement and sees it as linked to consumer behaviour.

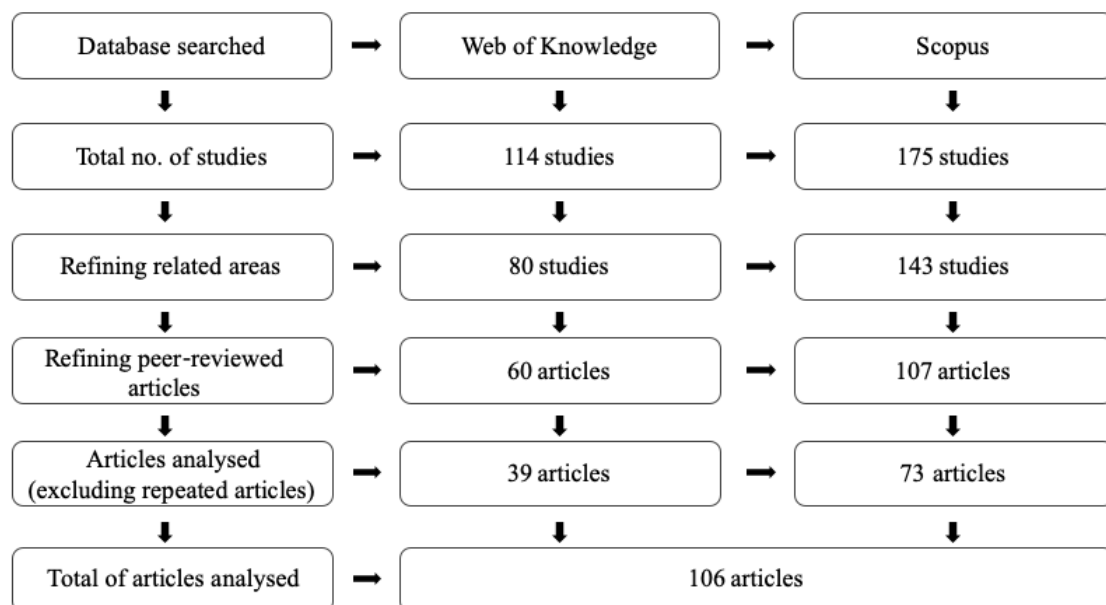
Despite the debate on what characterises voluntary simplifiers, many authors emphasise the relevance of this group for marketing and consumer behaviour studies (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006; Rich et al., 2017; Shaw & Moraes, 2009).

## **2.3 METHOD**

The present article explores the various ways in which VS has been studied in the literature, so as to determine the main topics studied and derive a roadmap for future research. Systematic review papers can be of several types, namely: structured review focusing on widely used methods, theories and constructs (Canabal & White, 2008; Kahiya, 2018; Paul & Singh, 2017; Rosado-Serrano, Paul, & Dikova, 2018), framework based (Paul & Benito, 2018), hybrid- narrative with a framework for setting future research agenda (Dabić et al., 2020; Kumar, Paul, & Unnithan, 2020), theory based review (Gilal, Zhang, Paul, & Gilal, 2019; Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019), meta analysis (Knoll & Matthes, 2017; Rana & Paul, 2020), bibliometric review (Randhawa, Wilden, & Hohberger, 2016), review aiming for model/framework development (Paul, 2019; Paul & Mas, 2019). We structured our review as a hybrid-narrative with a framework for setting future research agenda literature review (Kumar et al., 2020; Parthasarathy & Gupta, 2017). This systematic review begins with the delimitation of the topic, defining and refining the review, followed by the development of data-extraction criteria based on features of the studies, which result in the reporting process, analysing themes with associations to theory, policy and practice, concluding with the identification of research gaps and directions for future research (Paul & Criado, 2020; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003).

To conduct our study, we searched for papers published in indexed journals following the approach of prior reviews (Parthasarathy & Gupta, 2017; Paul & Benito, 2018; Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019). We have used two of the largest abstract and citation platforms of indexed papers: Web of Science (Web of Knowledge/Clarivate analytics) and Scopus. These are extensive multidisciplinary platforms which allow for different advanced search approaches. To identify the consideration set for this review, two search terms were used: *volunt\** and *simpl\**. In the Web of Science, the following content-related field tags were searched: topic, title, publication name and research area. In Scopus, the search was done in the following fields: article title, abstract and keywords. We did not specify a coverage period, in order to identify all relevant papers regardless of the publication date. First of all, the search was carried out without limitations on 02/2020 in the Web of Science, resulting in 114 studies. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then used to refine the research. As a first step, only related research areas were selected, excluding documents in unrelated fields such as chemistry or physics, resulting in 80 papers. In the second step, only articles in peer-reviewed journals were selected, obtaining a total of 60 studies. Finally, the abstracts were read to exclude articles which did not specifically address the topic. A total of 39 articles were identified for the systematic review. The same procedure was applied for the search in the Scopus database. At this stage, the first search carried without limitations resulted in 175 documents. The same process was followed resulting in 73 articles. Duplicated articles on both databases were eliminated, resulting in 106 studies that were read and content analysed (Fig. 1).

**Figure 2** Literature search strategy



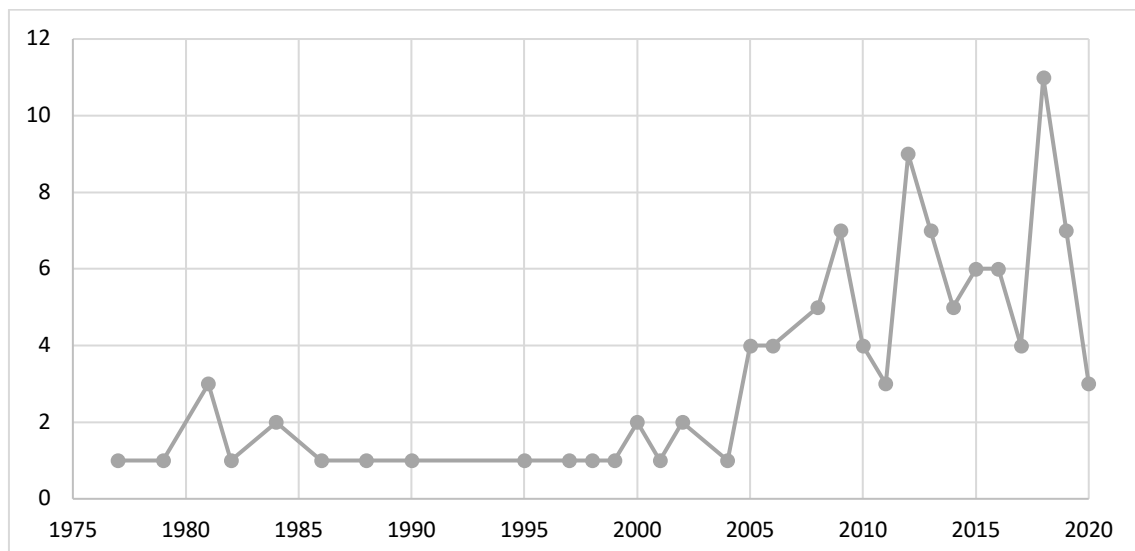
## 2.4 RESULTS

The review was structured into distinctive features to provide a map of current literature, such as: the number of studies and year of publication; journals, number of citations and research areas; study location; VS definitions; types of studies; and research methods.

### 2.4.1 Year of Publication

The search retrieved papers published between 1977 and 2020 and even though there are studies from the '70s (see Fig. 2), and VS is an ancient concept (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; McDonald et al., 2006), only 17 articles were published before 2000 (16% of publications), which may signal that this is still a recent area of research. There has been a noticeable increase in the number of publications between 2008 and 2020, with 77 articles (72%), suggesting that this area is a growing topic of research (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011; Peyer et al., 2017; Walther & Sandlin, 2013). This growth in the number of studies is aligned with the concern regarding sustainability and high materialism, as well as the popularity of related topics as minimalism, slow living and downshifting in blogs, books and other media (Botta, 2015; Connolly & Shaw, 2006; Haenfler et al., 2012; Iwata, 2001; Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018).

**Figure 3** Number of publications per year

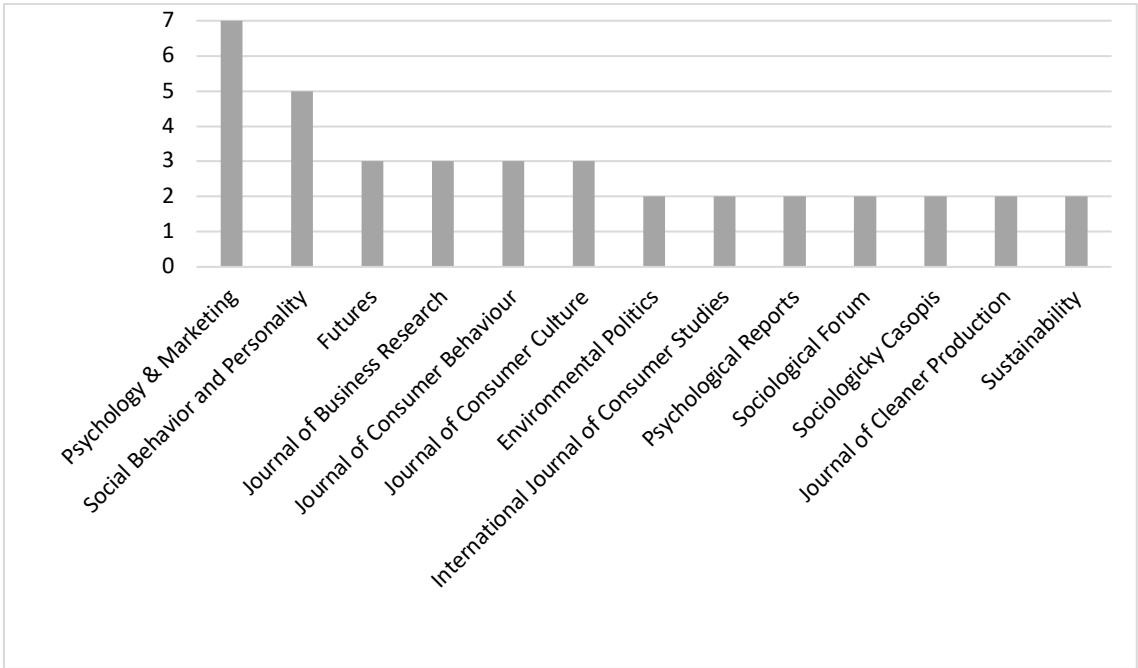


### 2.4.2 Journals, Research Areas and Number of Citations



The analysis of publication outlets reveals that 80 journals published VS articles, 13 of which have more than one paper about VS. This shows the diversity of journals in which VS has been published, suggesting that the interest for this topic is shared across different disciplines, mainly consumer behaviour and social psychology, with some articles published in sociology journals. This outcome indicates that VS is being researched almost exclusively in terms of individual decision making, rather than as a social or spiritual movement, or a political trope, pointing to the dearth of research focusing on collective, social and political views of VS and the need for studies with different units of analysis, such as communities and cities (Bekin, Carrigan, & Szmigin, 2005; Botta, 2015; Chhetri, Stimson, & Western, 2009; Özgen, 2012). The graph shows the journals which published two or more articles on the topic (Fig. 3).

**Figure 4** Journals with more than one publication about VS



The research area of each article was further analysed to position this topic within different research fields. Examining the areas of research of the studies contributes to throw light on specific approaches and arguments, which in fig. 4 are systematised according to the number of publications. The areas of some articles are spelled out in the description of the research database; some of them needed to be extracted through interpretative analysis. Some articles pertain to two different areas.

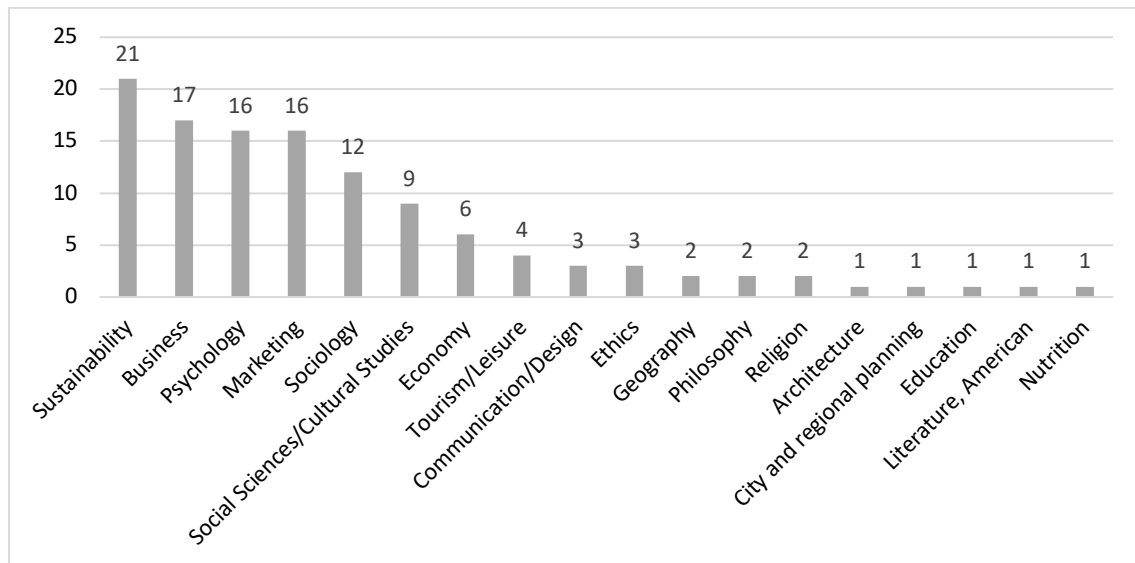
This review highlights the frequency of this topic in business, marketing and economics, which sum up 39 articles (37%) in these three fields. Furthermore, marketing studies related to tourism (4), design (3) and architecture (1), could also be found, indicating the relation between business areas and this lifestyle, and its consumption patterns. This finding is aligned with the argument that Voluntary Simplifiers are not alienated from the market and consumption logic, as they do not seek to eschew market interactions. Instead, they have a specific relationship with them, modifying their consumption practices in different domains, traveling/tourism, housing and decoration, etc, through more ethical and conscious choices (Shaw & Moraes, 2009).

The presence of only one article on educational research (Sandlin & Waither, 2009) may indicate a research gap, pointing out the need for further studies exploring how VS consumption patterns can be taught and learned, with the aim of reducing materialistic levels and increasing consumption awareness (Read, Alexander, & Garrett, 2018). Studies focusing on the fashion industry are also called for, considering that Voluntary Simplifiers claim that leading a simple life to some extent affects their choices involving clothes (Alexander & Ussher, 2012).

In order to understand the impact of these publications, we analysed the number of citations, and found out that the 10 most cited articles are: Brown and Kasser (2005); Shaw and Newholm (2002); Cherrier (2009); Leonard Barton (1981); McDonald et al. (2006); Olsen (1981); Craig-Lees and Hill (2002); Huneke (2005); Haenfler et al. (2012); Alexander and Ussher (2012). Most of these papers explore conceptual characteristics and daily practices of Voluntary Simplifiers, highlighting dimensions and common behaviours.

These papers were published in journals such as: *Social Indicators Research*; *Psychology and Marketing* (4); *Journal of Business Research*; *Journal of Consumer Research*; *Journal of Social Issues*; *Social Movement Studies*; and *Journal of Consumer Culture*. Business, Marketing and Psychology journals published the majority of these most cited articles, evidencing the growing interest of studies in these fields and the relevance of this topic for marketing research.

**Figure 5** Research areas of studies in VS

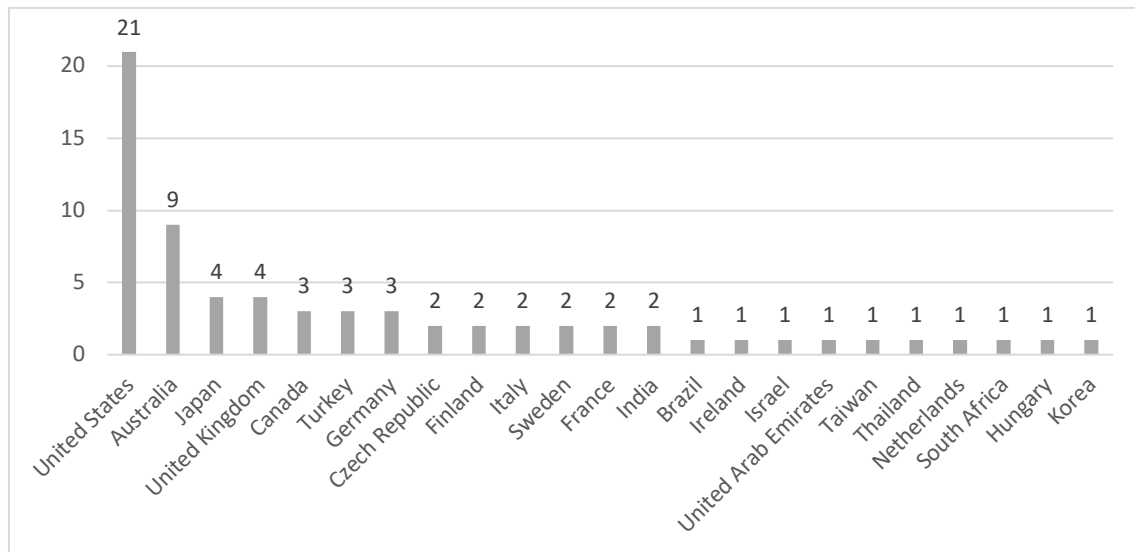


### 2.4.3 Study Location

The geographical location of the empirical studies has been examined to provide a better understanding of the context where extant research has been carried out. This analysis shows that the majority of VS studies have been conducted in developed countries, and especially in Anglo-Saxon countries (Fig. 5). Although this finding may partially be due to the fact that our search was conducted in English, this result suggests that there is a need to study this lifestyle in diverse geographical locations, including developing and emerging countries (Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018), as VS is not exclusive of affluent people and developed countries (Huneke, 2005; Kala et al., 2017).

Voluntary Simplifiers can be understood as a global segment, with a strong global cultural identity (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977), for which ingroup similarities are stronger than cultural differences (Strizhakova & Coulter, 2013). This argument provides a rationale for researching Voluntary Simplifiers in multicultural contexts, as the studies of Kropfeld, Nepomuceno, and Dantas (2018), Botta (2015), Alexander and Ussher (2012), and Van Steenbergen and Feller (1979).

**Figure 6** Study Location



#### 2.4.4 Voluntary Simplicity Definitions

In view of the growing research about VS, the construct has been used to capture a diversity of behaviours and motivations. With the purpose of understanding the different facets associated with VS used in previous research, the definitions adopted in each article were content analysed.

Results show that VS encompasses different facets related to values, practices and relationships both with others, and with the environment. Although these categories are interconnected and are not mutually exclusive, they were mentioned separately in the studies. So, for analytical purposes, the definitions of VS were divided into these categories to better understand the incidence and breadth of VS facets. Six recurrent aspects were found: reduced material consumption; search for intrinsic values, wellbeing and quality of life; environmental responsibility; social consciousness and focus on relationships; self-sufficiency; and working hours reduction. A summary of discussions in each topic is presented on table 3.

**Table 3** Summary of discussions in each VS facet

VS Facets	Articles	Summary of discussions
Reduced material consumption	81	Conscious choice to reduce material consumption; minimizing consumption dependency; voluntary choice to live with less; resistance to high consumption lifestyles; low-consumption lifestyle; outwardly simple living
Internal values, wellbeing and personal growth	50	increased nonmaterial benefits; personal growth; seeking satisfaction through nonmaterial aspects of life; focusing on the "inward riches" of personal growth, family, community and spirituality; cultivating non-materialistic sources of satisfaction

		and meaning; removing clutter from life; inwardly rich living; reorganizing one's life priorities.
Environmental responsibility	34	ecological awareness; low resource use; sustainable lifestyle phenomena; ecological responsibility; advocating environmental protection
Social consciousness and focus on relationships	21	consideration of social impact of consumption choices
Self-sufficiency	10	maximizing control over daily activities; self-determination; self-sufficiency-oriented attitudes
Reduction of working hours	3	less work-orientation; spending more time with family and friends

The self-sufficiency aspect is closely associated with environmental responsibility; however, different authors have emphasised this as an independent aspect (Iwata, 2001; Kuanr, Pradhan, & Chaudhuri, 2020; Özgen, 2012; Saunders, 2000; Shama, 1988). The low consumption factor is associated with VS in 77% of studies (81 articles), followed by internal values, wellbeing and personal growth in 47% (50 articles), and environmental responsibility in 32% (34 articles). Social consciousness and focus on relationships were considered in 20% (21 articles) of the studies. Self-sufficiency and the reduction of working hours were less emphasised (only 10 articles).

The six dimensions identified in this review are in line with the core values listed by Elgin and Mitchell (1977) in their seminal paper about VS: material simplicity, human scale, self-determination, ecological awareness, and personal growth. The values of self-determination and personal growth (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977) can be linked to the search for internal values, wellbeing and personal growth whilst the reduction of working hours facet can be associated with the modern social movement of slow living (Botta, 2015).

These results show that the concept of VS is seen as multifaceted. The incidence of dimensions on studies suggests that extant research emphasize different facets when conceptualizing VS, this plurality may vary through the years and the cultural context of research. We also can perceive a common essence about VS observing the most cited aspects as reduction consumption and the internal values, which may be seen as a step to the other dimensions. As a result of this research, we conceptualize VS as a lifestyle that seeks for consumption reduction focusing on inner values, that may be associated with sustainable and social purposes.

### 2.4.5 Type of Studies

Papers were content analysed in order to interpret the nature of the studies. Four types of studies were found: studies relating VS with other constructs; profile studies; studies of practices; and narrative-based studies. The four types are described below, and specific papers in each category have been listed (some articles may be classified into two different groups of studies).

**2.4.5.1 Studies relating VS with other constructs (40 studies):** studies which study VS in association with different related constructs constitute 38% of the publications (table 2). In particular, this lifestyle is analysed with respect to sustainable consumption (Albert, 2019; Iwata, 2001; Kropfeld et al., 2018); its relation to economic growth and materialism degrowth, and patterns of organizational social responsibility (Alexander, 2012). Furthermore, this way of living is associated with wellbeing and life satisfaction (Bayat & Sezer, 2018; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Kasser, 2009; Shaw & Newholm, 2002), and ethical issues (Read et al., 2018). These studies not only argue for the relevance of VS to the main topics of consumption reduction, political issues, well-being, ethical, and sustainable issues, but they also further confirm the dimensions of VS definitions, and the core values listed by Elgin and Mitchell (1977).

These results point out to the fact that there are related constructs which are still less analysed in VS studies, such as the relationship between Voluntary Simplifiers and related consumer groups such as conscious consumers and frugal consumers (Albert, 2019). Pepper et al. (2009) state that the research about socially conscious and frugal consumers is an emerging field, particularly in the case of Voluntary Simplicity. The consciousness of consumption is considered one of the precursors of the voluntary simplicity lifestyle (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977), and represents a central aspect of voluntary simplicity (Huneke, 2005). Some authors have engaged in the debate concerning the implications of this lifestyle on public policies, through the premise that individual actions can be precursors to collective action (Alexander, 2012; Bekin et al., 2005; Etzioni, 2004; Haenfeler et al., 2012; Kasser, 2009).

**Table 4** Studies relating VS with other constructs

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Articles</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<i>VS and sustainable development or consumption</i>	14	<i>Kropfeld et al. (2018); Lee (2019); Albert (2019); Lorenzen (2012a); Marchand and Walker (2008); Kronenberg and Iida (2011); Leisinger (1998); Peyer et al. (2017); Lewandowska et al. (2018); Hellöre (2008); Little (1995); S. Williams (1984); Iwata (2001); Iwata (2006)</i>	<i>Sustainable consumption; Ecological Impact of Anticonsumption Lifestyles; Sharing economy; Frugal innovation; Green lifestyles; Anticonsumption practices</i>

<i>VS and economic growth/degrowth society</i>	9	<i>Alexander (2012); Alexander (2013); Romano (2012); Heikkinen (2015); Friedman and Friedman (2010); Van Steenbergen and Feller (1979); Heikkinen (2018); Alexander (2014); Fraňková and Johanisová (2013);</i>	<i>Social movement; grass roots movement to change regulation; Hypermaterialism; Overdevelopment; Sustainable degrowth</i>
<i>VS and well-being/good life/life satisfaction</i>	5	<i>Bayat and Sezer (2018); Brown and Kasser (2005); Kasser (2009); Boujbel and d'Astous (2012); Rich et al. (2017)</i>	<i>Moral values; subjective well-being; ecologically responsible behaviour; psychological needs</i>
<i>VS and ethical analysis</i>	4	<i>Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma (2014); Read et al. (2018); Shaw and Newholm (2002); Peifer, Chugani, and Roos (2020)</i>	<i>Utilitarianism; Kantian deontology; Virtue Ethics; The ethics of consumption</i>
<i>VS and materialism</i>	4	<i>Nefat (2016); Kuanr et al. (2020); Boujbel and d'Astous (2015); Nepomuceno and Laroche (2015)</i>	<i>Consumption desire; Consumerism; Materialistic values; Personal debt</i>
<i>VS and trends/slow living</i>	3	<i>Elgin and Mitchell (1977); Botta (2015); Özgen (2012)</i>	<i>Slow living; Slow city; Consumption trends</i>
<i>VS and religion</i>	2	<i>Chowdhury (2018); Whitney Sanford (2013)</i>	<i>Intrinsic religiosity; Hinduism</i>

**2.4.5.2 Profile Studies (31 studies):** these are articles which follow an exploratory approach to achieve a better understanding of conceptual characteristics of VS and Voluntary Simplifiers (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002; Haenfler et al., 2012; McDonald et al., 2006), through the analysis of identity, motivations, central characteristics (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Etzioni, 2004; Shama, 1981), and values (Shama & Wisenblit, 1984) (table 3). There are studies focusing on the different out of engagement, which is an important aspect to analyse in this lifestyle because through the initial stages to the profound immersion on the simple life diverse outcomes and practices emerge (Erdoğan & Karapinar, 2015; Shama, 1988). Also, focus on the beginning of the adoption of VS may result on rich results useful to promote sustainable practices. Studies in this category are relevant to theoretical development and to establish boundaries of this field of research.

**Table 5** Profile studies

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Articles</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Profile/central characteristics/identity	7	Alexander and Ussher (2012) Etzioni (2004); Alexander (2011); Sandlin and Waither (2009); Cowles and Crosby (1986); Iwata (1997); Saunders (2000)	Psychological implications; foundations; moral identity formation; dimensions
Motivations and values	8	I. Balderjahn and Hüttel (2019); Shama (1981); Balsa-Budai, Kiss, Kovács, and Szakály (2019); Shama and Wisenblit (1984); Shama (1988); Kraisornasuthasinee and	Motivations, values, behaviours and levels of adoption of VS; Lifestyle and work behaviour

		Swierczek (2018); Pravet and Holmlund (2018)	
Conceptual characteristics	7	Haenfler et al. (2012); McDonald et al. (2006); Pestle, Cornille, and Solomon (1982); Craig-Lees and Hill (2002); Gambrel and Cafaro (2010); Zamwel et al. (2014); Feola (2014)	Lifestyle movements; Identity; Attitude scale; Thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviours; VS as virtue; VS as political movement; Grassroots innovation
Levels of VS	3	Shama (1988); Erdoğan and Karapinar (2015); McDonald et al. (2006)	Degrees of voluntary simplicity
VS and downshifters	3	Chhetri, Khan, Stimson, and Western (2009); Chhetri, Stimson, et al. (2009); Kennedy, Krahn, and Krogman (2013)	Characteristics; satisfaction levels of downshifters
Extreme Voluntary Simplifiers	2	Bekin et al. (2005); Librova (2008)	Goals of extreme voluntary simplifiers; radical forms of self-sufficiency
VS parents	1	Walther and Sandlin (2013)	Green capital and social reproduction

**2.4.5.3 Studies of Practices (25 studies):** this group of studies focuses on the consumption and anti-consumption practices of voluntary simplifiers, with an emphasis on the analyses of market interactions and impediments (Shaw & Moraes, 2009) and disposal activities (Cherrier, 2009b). The studies include topics as diverse as energy conservation, relationship with technological products, food practices and tourism (table 4).

**Table 6** Studies of Practices

Topic	Articles	References	Examples
Anti/non-consumption practices of VS	5	Hüttel, Ziesemer, Peyer, and Balderjahn (2018); Seegebarth, Peyer, Balderjahn, and Wiedmann (2016); McGouran and Prothero (2016); Leipämaa-Leskinen, Syrjälä, and Laaksonen (2016); Kaynak and Eksi (2013)	Anticonsumption Lifestyles; intentional non-consumption; non-voluntary anti-consumption; anti-consumption behaviours
Choosing technological products	3	Oates et al. (2008); Lorenzen (2012b); Housel (2006)	Smart technology; Purchase decisions for sustainable technologies
Behaviour characteristics/attitude scale	2	Rich et al. (2019); Iwata (1999)	Voluntary Simplicity Engagement Scale; Behaviour of Voluntary Simplifiers
General daily practices	3	Hagbert (2016); Huneke (2005); McArthur and Stratford (2020)	Daily practices and impediments; Low-impact Home Practices
Energy conservation	2	Leonard Barton (1981); Olsen (1981)	Consumers' Attitudes; Design measures of



			voluntary simplicity behaviour
Marketplace interactions/consumption resistance	2	Shaw and Moraes (2009); Kannisto (2018)	Tensions and decisions; Global nomads
Disposal activities	2	Cherrier (2009b); Ballantine and Creery (2010)	Voluntary disposal; disposal activities
Tourism practices	2	Hall (2011); Chieh-Wen, Shen, and Chen (2008)	Tourism experience; tour preferences
Food practices	2	Mourad, Cezard, and Joncoux (2019); Aguilar (2015)	Food waste; Food choices
Gift giving	1	Lorenzen (2018)	Gift-giving networks
Clothing consumption practices	1	Taljaard and Sonnenberg (2019)	Female consumers' VS clothing practices

**2.4.5.4 Narrative-based Studies (10 studies):** the group with a smaller number of articles refers to discursive narratives (Cherrier, 2009a; Connolly & Shaw, 2006) that have carried out analyses of discourses from off-grid lifestyles (Vannini & Taggart, 2013) in addition to some narratives of voluntary simplifiers in different contexts, as discriminated below (table 5). The studies about ways of recruiting actors (Herziger et al., 2017) are useful in the promotion of sustainable and social practices. Analysing narratives and discourses of voluntary simplifiers is an important way to explore this lifestyle and discover new values and goals to enhance the promotion of behavioural change interventions.

**Table 7** Narrative-based studies

Topic	Articles	References	Examples
Voluntary simplifiers' discourses	3	Connolly and Shaw (2006); Cherrier (2009a); Kala et al. (2017)	Fair trade; consumer-resistant identities; Narratives and Practices of Voluntary Simplicity
Off-grid lifestyles	3	Vannini and Taggart (2013); Kala, Galcanova, and Pelikan (2016); Carpenter (2010)	VS rural group; life experiences
Ways of recruiting actors	3	Lorenzen (2014); Herziger et al. (2017); Lewis (2012)	Convincing people to go green; user-generated content
Popular VS books	1	Buell (2005)	Analytical essay of VS books

## 2.4.6 Widely Used Research Methods

The following analysis summarises the methodological approaches adopted in the research on the consumption behaviour of Voluntary Simplifiers and the data collection methods (table 6). Empirical studies include both qualitative and quantitative methods and have used a variety of data collection techniques. The current analysis of methods and techniques applied in VS studies is useful to learn about previous research designs and understand how this topic has been studied.

The majority of the articles are conceptual papers which provide critical analyses (Buell, 2005; Etzioni, 2004; Read et al., 2018), offering propositions and linking theories. Thirty articles use in-depth interviews with semi-structured or unstructured forms (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002; Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018; Shaw & Moraes, 2009), with some of them combining interviews with focus groups or participant observations (Kala et al., 2017; Oates et al., 2008; Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Another 31 studies apply quantitative methods. In what refers to data analysis methods, factor analysis (Boujbel & d'Astous, 2012; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Iwata, 2006), cluster analysis (Erdoğan & Karapinar, 2015; Peyer et al., 2017) and other techniques have been used. Mixed method studies make up 7%, combining semi-structured interviews with surveys (Hagbert, 2016; Kennedy et al., 2013). Thus, although a mix of methods has been used in prior studies, the fact that there are only three studies using focus group, and one study applying the critical incident technique, netnography or case studies, points to the need for more studies applying these techniques which enable delving into motivations and perceptions.

**Table 8** Research Methods and Data Collection Techniques

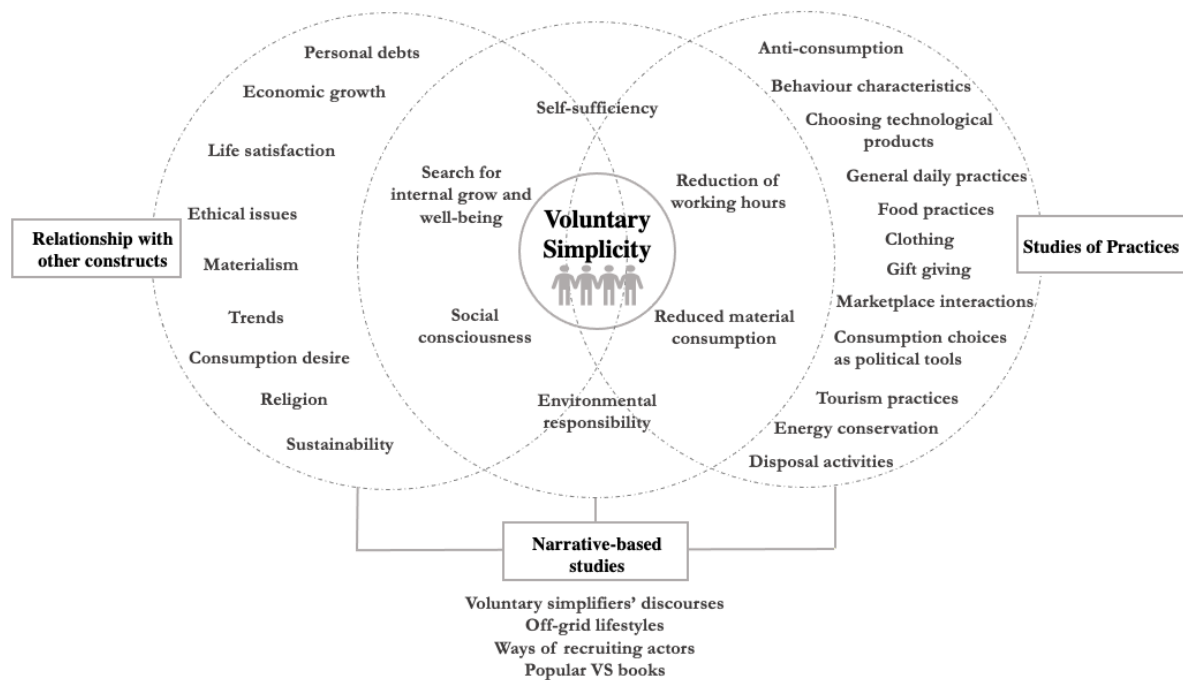
<b>Research Method</b>	<b>Data Collection Technique</b>	<b>Articles</b>	<b>References</b>
<b>Conceptual papers</b>		<b>33</b>	Read et al. (2018); Buell (2005); Elgin and Mitchell (1977); Alexander (2013); Olsen (1981); Haenfler et al. (2012); Connolly and Shaw (2006); Kasser (2009); Etzioni (2004); Alexander (2012); Gambrel and Cafaro (2010); Romano (2012); Alexander (2011); Hall (2011); Kronenberg and Iida (2011); Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma (2014); Librova (2008); Meier (2000); Feola (2014); Rudmin (1990); Leisinger (1998); Leipämaa-Leskinen et al. (2016); Friedman and Friedman (2010); Whitney Sanford (2013); Kannisto (2018); Van Steenberg and Feller (1979); Nefat (2016); Alexander (2014); Fraňková and Johanišová (2013); Kaynak and Eksi (2013); Hellöre (2008); Little (1995); S. Williams (1984)
<b>Quantitative Studies</b>	Surveys	31	Kuanr et al. (2020); Peifer et al. (2020); Lee (2019); I. Balderjahn and Hüttel (2019); Taljaard and Sonnenberg (2019); Kropfeld et al. (2018); Bayat and Sezer (2018); Chowdhury (2018); Brown and Kasser (2005); Huneke (2005); Alexander and Ussher (2012); Leonard Barton (1981); Shama (1988); Saunders (2000); Iwata (2001); Shama and Wisenblit (1984); Iwata (1997); Iwata (1999); Iwata (2006); Chhetri, Khan, et al. (2009); Seegebarth et al. (2016); Nepomuceno and Laroche (2015); Chieh-Wen et al. (2008); Cowles and Crosby (1986); Boujbel and d'Astous (2012); Chhetri, Stimson, et al. (2009); Rich et al. (2017); Peyer et al. (2017); Shama

			(1988); Lewandowska et al. (2018); Erdoğan and Karapinar (2015); Pestle et al. (1982)
<b>Mixed Method Studies</b>	In-depth interviews + surveys	4	Rich et al. (2019); Kennedy et al. (2013); Boujbel and d'Astous (2015); Hagbert (2016)
	Focus group + surveys	1	Balsa-Budai et al. (2019);
	Video testing + surveys	1	Herziger et al. (2017)
<b>Qualitative Studies</b>	In-depth interviews	17	Hüttel et al. (2018); Lorenzen (2018); Cherrier (2009a); Craig-Lees and Hill (2002); Lorenzen (2012a); Marchand and Walker (2008); Cherrier (2009b); Shaw and Moraes (2009); Ballantine and Creery (2010); Vannini and Taggart (2013); Housel (2006); McGouran and Prothero (2016); Walther and Sandlin (2013); Özgen (2012); Aguilar (2015); Kraisornuthasinee and Swierczek (2018); Carpenter (2010)
	In-depth interviews + Focus group	1	Shaw and Newholm (2002)
	In-depth interviews + Netnography	1	Sandlin and Waither (2009)
	In-depth interviews + participant observations	6	Mourad et al. (2019); Zamwel et al. (2014); Lorenzen (2014); Lorenzen (2012b); Kala et al. (2016); Kala et al. (2017)
	In-depth interviews + Focus group + Critical Incident Technique	1	Oates et al. (2008)
	Participant observation	1	Bekin et al. (2005)
	Email inquiries and daily diaries templates	1	Pravet and Holmlund (2018)
	Case-studies	2	McArthur and Stratford (2020); Botta (2015)

## 2.5 DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this review, we analysed how VS has been conceptualised in previous studies, synthesizing different VS facets, and studying how this research topic has been explored over the years in different areas. Additionally, we presented categories of studies and suggested potential avenues for future research. Figure 6 summarizes the findings of this study. This framework sums up the findings which emerged from this review in what concerns the incidence of dimensions on definitions of VS (the inner circle of the image); relationships with other constructs, studies of practices and narrative-based studies. This image constitutes a map of extant research of Voluntary Simplicity.

**Figure 7** Map of extant research of Voluntary Simplicity



By mapping VS concepts and structural categories, our study provides insights for future studies and an understanding of the systematisation of this research topic. Based on the research to date, we suggest five broad future research directions:

### 2.5.1 Clarifying VS Conceptual Domain

This article revealed six main facets of VS definitions: reduced material consumption, search for intrinsic values and quality of life, environmental responsibility, social consciousness, self-sufficiency, and working hours reduction. Further analyses about each of these facets or the interconnections between them are welcome, in particular those about the less cited and more recent aspect referred to as working hours reduction.

Our analysis of the VS conceptual domain suggests that VS is as an umbrella term (Iwata, 2006; Kala et al., 2016; Walther & Sandlin, 2013), as it covers numerous motivations and practices. There are different labels and values associated with this profile which centrality is in simplifying life, this variation is related to the plurality of ways in which individuals engage in this lifestyle. Minimalists, frugalists, low materialists, downshiffters, ethical consumers, conscious consumers and responsible consumers are associated with Voluntary Simplicity and are often mentioned in this field. Although these consumer groups can adopt VS behaviours and partially overlap with VS, they are not conceptually identical as they reflect specific values and motivational systems. For

Hosta and Zabkar (2016), there are unclear definitions of concepts and under researched topics involving the field of responsible consumption. These concepts and the relationship between them is a rich area for future studies.

In addition to clarifying VS conceptual domain, a clearer conceptualization of this construct is needed. Hence developing a comprehensive measurement scale for VS would be a very relevant contribution for future research in consumer behaviour.

### **2.5.2 Adopting Diverse Research Approaches**

The increasing number of studies in the last decade indicates that this area is a growing topic of research (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011; Peyer et al., 2017; Walther & Sandlin, 2013). Future studies can provide important contributions to enriching the knowledge in this area in several ways: by adopting cross-disciplinary perspectives, by studying VS in conjunction with related movements, and by adopting diverse research methods.

This review identified four research types through interpretative frameworks of studies in this topic, namely, studies relating VS with other constructs, profile studies, studies of practices, and narrative-based studies. These dimensions and groups of studies can improve the understanding of some opportunities for theoretical development.

Since the majority of studies focuses on the individual as a unit of analysis, a cross-disciplinary, social and collective focus of VS topic is recommended. The political dimension of VS lifestyle has been researched mainly at the individual level, rather than explicitly targeting institutions and the State (Haenfler et al., 2012). Few articles study voluntary simplifiers as political actors (Alexander, 2011, 2013; Read et al., 2018; Zamwel et al., 2014). Further research on political consumerism, focusing on consumption practices appears to be required (Haenfler et al., 2012). Hence, cross-disciplinary approaches to VS and its far-reaching implications in different spheres.

Studying VS in different national contexts may also contribute to understand to what extent VS is associated with macro-environmental variables, such as the degree of economic development or cultural dimensions. The individualism/collectivism cultural dimension, for example, may offer a relevant perspective to understand VS. On an opposite view, Voluntary Simplifiers can also be understood as a cross-national segment (Cannon Hugh & Yaprak, 2011). Researches in multicultural contexts are thus welcome.

Further analysis of the VS narratives and studies about ways to recruit actors to this lifestyle may be useful to improve sustainable social practices. In particular, narrative-based studies can be used to delve into the minds of consumers undertaking VS practices. Additionally, performing future empirical studies that combine different and complementary methodologies may contribute to the development of the area. Our analysis of most widely used research methods revealed that although a mix of methods has been employed in the literature, there is a dearth of studies using focus groups, the critical incident technique, netnography or case studies. These points to the need for more studies applying these techniques which enable delving into motivations and perceptions. Moreover, the popularity of VS topics on social media and online forums calls for additional studies using the approach of netnography to examine digital communication contexts (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). The critical incident technique may also be useful to identify and analyse significant events in the behaviour of voluntary simplifiers (Flanagan, 1954), revealing insights, including VS consumption activities, triggering motivations and adoption process. The fact that only two researches based on case studies of communities were identified, reinforces the idea that further studies focusing on collective facets of VS are necessary.

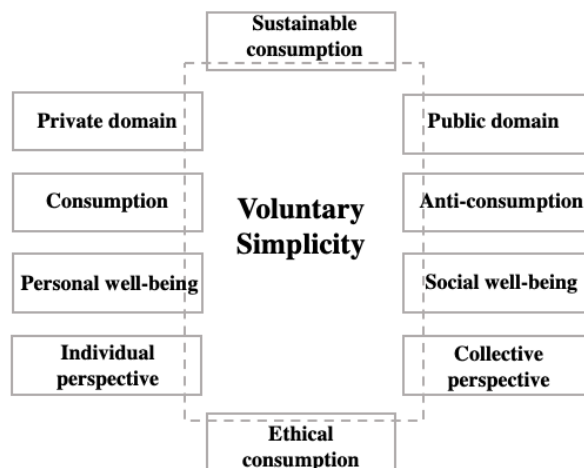
### **2.5.3 Focusing on the Voluntary Nature of VS**

Quite a few anti-consumption behaviours and profiles are important as social tools and benchmarks to promote reflection about consumption. Nonetheless, in a context characterised by overconsumption, the practice of simplicity is more associated with reduced consumption which, however, does not imply no-consumption at all, since the radical rejection of consumption is not a viable option for most people. For Gambrel and Cafaro (2010), VS is in between extremes, and for Chhetri, Stimson, et al. (2009), it is referred to as 'wise consumption'. The majority of authors associate VS with consumption reduction or low consumption, which are more feasible and realistic options in urban contexts (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Leonard Barton, 1981; Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Analysing the meaning and motivations underlying consumption choices of voluntary simplifiers may be a research opportunity for future studies that were not fully addressed in prior VS publications.

Through this review, this lifestyle may be interpreted as aiming at reconciling different focal points: consumption and non-consumption practices, individual and collective approaches, the private and public spheres, and personal and social well-being. The richness of VS lies not only on the

dimensions listed but, in their interplay, as presented in figure 7. Several VS studies emphasise multiple aspects simultaneously; other papers present different focus associating VS with other segments and topics, like slow living, energy consumption, food consumption or tourism practices. Figure 7 positions VS within these perspectives. We would like to highlight that further studies are needed to provide a more in-depth analysis on how consumers perceive and behave amidst these divergent, somewhat conflicting, poles.

**Figure 8** Positioning VS between research themes and issues



#### 2.5.4 Understanding Levels of Engagement and the Adoption Process of VS

It should be noted that there are diverse levels of VS. Between the 'non-simplifiers' and the radical profile of voluntary simplifiers, there are different degrees and natures of lifestyle engagement (Bekin et al., 2005; Etzioni, 2004). This review points out that several studies address a single level of VS lifestyle, without taking into account the different degrees of practices, values and motivations. It is important to develop additional studies focusing on these different levels of engagement in VS, in order to identify a broad range of behaviours since not all voluntary simplifiers are holistic and strong simplifiers. Quite a few consumers are taking steps towards the adoption of the VS lifestyle, namely beginner voluntary simplifiers (McDonald et al., 2006). For this group, VS is not a radical disruption, but rather it is related to the adoption of incremental practices aligned with the personal context. Investigating the process leading to life simplification through consumption is also important (Ballantine & Creery, 2010). The potential of incremental, feasible and easy to adopt steps to adjust to personal contexts is characteristic of lifestyles movements, the promotion of these practices in sustainable lifestyles and policy actions can be instruments for social change (Haenfler et al., 2012).

### **2.5.5 Identifying Marketing-related Outcomes of VS**

Our review identified several practices which have been studied within the VS literature. Most studies have covered anti/non-consumption practices of VS, the choice of technological products and general daily practices (table 3).

Based on these results, there is a need for further studies on the complexity of decision making be carried out to reinforce understanding not only of the diversity of these consumption practices, but also the meanings and symbolic system behind consumption choices aiming at the simplification of life. In addition, studies from the companies' perspective are important to adequate management practices to this behavioural trend.

Sharing economy and collaborative consumption as non-ownership models of using good and services (Heikkinen, 2018) in which participation can be motivated by sustainability, enjoyment of the activity and economic gains (Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2016), are closely associated with VS lifestyle, in the facets of consumption reduction and sustainable practices. The collaborative consumption brings relevant associations to future discussions about VS.

Finally, upcoming studies can relate VS with contemporary movements and trends such as slow living (Botta, 2015), current food choices, and behaviour of new generations, providing new reflections about VS.

## **2.6 LIMITATIONS**

In what concerns the limitations of this study, the consideration set that was used may be mentioned. We narrowed down our search terms to volunt\* and simpl\*. Further studies can use related consumer segments keywords as ethical consumers, frugal consumers, conscious consumers, responsible consumers and minimalists, which may generate more results. Including other languages, databases and different kinds of documents, like books and other scientific documents can also expand the scope of the review.

## **2.7 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY MAKING**



In terms of practical implications, the outcomes of this systematic literature review may help managers to develop adequate business strategies, given the increase in the number of voluntary simplifiers (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011; Peyer et al., 2017; Walther & Sandlin, 2013). Studies from the companies' perspective are important to adequate management practices to this growing behavioural trend. Companies need to achieve a better understanding of this consumer group in order to develop products and services aligned with this lifestyle, such as the development of sustainable and durable products and the supply of services focused on the consumer's quality of life.

The association between VS, the search for wellbeing and the facet of reducing consumption and working hours may stimulate the development of human resources policies to promote the work-life balance. As far as public policies are concerned, the positive relation between VS and life satisfaction is important for policymakers in designing and implementing measures to support populations to change consumption behaviours (Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; Rich et al., 2017), but also to develop effective strategies to promote social well-being related to responsible consumption and conscious consumption through sustainability policies (Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018).

## **2.8 CONCLUSION**

High materialism and irresponsible consumption are increasingly recognised as unsustainable practices. It is important to consider that consumption is more than just an individual behaviour based on utilitarian, financial or hedonic criteria; it is a social, systemic and political act with far-reaching consequences for the individual and for others. Although it may seem easier not to question or change consumption habits and overlook responsibility in purchasing decisions, an increasing number of consumers are developing an awareness regarding the consequences of their choices and taking action by voluntarily reducing consumption and claim to be happier with their way of life (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Etzioni, 2004; Huneke, 2005). This review has provided a systematic overview of what has been studied regarding the VS topic. We hope that this study will help researchers to conduct additional studies on this area, enabling and promoting the development of VS as regards the theory, policy and practice contexts.

### **3 THE CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOUR OF BEGINNER VOLUNTARY SIMPLIFIERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY<sup>2</sup>**

#### **ABSTRACT**

Voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle characterised by consumption reduction, sustainability, and a focus on intrinsic values. There is a dearth of studies of this consumption profile, its motivations, and its characteristics, and in particular of consumers first taking steps towards voluntary life simplification: beginner voluntary simplifiers. This study focuses on this segment and attempts to understand the values, motivations, and meanings of consumption, with the aim of better understanding the process of change and outcomes of this lifestyle.

This article presents narratives of consumers in the initial stage of voluntary simplicity exploring their consumption behaviour through in-depth interviews using the critical incident technique and focus group, shedding light on the consumption patterns and perceptions of lifestyle transformation of this group. The findings highlight multiple manifestations of voluntary simplicity as well as obstacles to adopting sustainable consumption and indicate practices to overcome such barriers. Implications and suggestions for future research on beginner voluntary simplifiers' buying-decision process are discussed.

#### **KEY-WORDS**

Voluntary simplicity; Beginner voluntary simplifiers; Consumption Behaviour; Exploratory Study

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<sup>2</sup> This article short version won the 'Conference Best Student Paper Award' of the 13th Annual Conference of the EuroMed Academy of Business; the extended version is accepted in the Journal for Global Business Advancement.

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Overconsumption and unsustainable lifestyles are social issues that point to the necessity of environmentally conscious and responsible choices. Some consumer groups, such as voluntary simplifiers, avoid high materialistic profiles and actively explore options to simplify their lifestyles. The consequences of materialism and irresponsible consumption have been extensively researched. Studies have found associations between high materialism and insecurity, social anxiety, feelings of powerlessness, low self-esteem and self-concept, social exclusion, and financial constraints (Atik et al., 2020; Burroughs et al., 2013; Kasser, 2016; Pandelaere, 2016; Richins, 2017). Pandelaere (2016) suggests that some causes of materialists' ill-being may not derive from their purchases, but from their motivations. The effects of materialism on well-being depend on the motives for consumption (Shrum et al., 2013), going beyond the behaviour and type of purchase (Richins, 2017). To understand consumer behaviour and its relationship with materialism more deeply, it is necessary to understand consumers' motivations.

Voluntary simplicity and related trends such as minimalism are attracting increasing attention from the popular press, media, and academia. There is a growing body of literature on consumers who voluntarily change their consumption habits, reduce the amount of products purchased, and seek a more balanced life (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011; Peyer et al., 2017; Walther & Sandlin, 2013). Research on voluntary simplicity is important to better understand consumer behaviour in contemporary consumer cultures (Alexander & Ussher, 2012) and its implications for increases in sustainable consumption (Brown & Kasser, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006; Peyer et al., 2017).

The decision to voluntarily reduce consumption allows consumers to control how they adopt this lifestyle (Kronenberg & Iida, 2011). Indeed, its voluntary nature is a central aspect of this lifestyle, leading to different meanings for similar consumption reduction behaviours. In certain instances, individuals adopt voluntary simplicity in multiple aspects of their daily lives. However, there are different levels of engagement, with some consumers partially adopting this lifestyle, embracing some practices and not others. Understanding the different degrees of voluntary simplicity is thus important for our knowledge of sustainable consumption practices (Brown & Kasser, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006; Shaw & Moraes, 2009). This research focuses on consumers who partially adhere to voluntary simplicity, ie consumers in the initial stage of voluntary simplicity lifestyle.

We report an exploratory study consisting of in-depth interviews and a focus group of beginner voluntary simplifiers, with the aim of understanding people who are in the process of adopting

conscious consumption through materialism reduction and behaviour oriented towards a simple life. Although these efforts at simplification may occur on a small and individual scale, they are important in developing a sustainability ethos. While voluntary simplicity has been the object of a growing body of research, few studies have focused on beginner voluntary simplifiers (Erdoğan & Karapinar, 2015; McDonald et al., 2006; Rebouças & Soares, 2020; Shama, 1988). Our literature review highlights the need for further research on the process leading to life simplification through consumption (Rebouças & Soares, 2020). Hence, this study's main research question is: What values, motivations, meanings, and outcomes lead consumers to become beginner voluntary simplifiers? This research intends to answer this question and understand the motivations for consumption reduction and life simplification. This may hold important implications for research, companies, and public policy, as the concept of beginner voluntary simplifiers can make voluntary simplicity more perceptible and more marketable (Oates et al., 2008).

This paper is divided into five parts: a literature review about voluntary simplicity; a presentation of methodology; a discussion of the findings; the study's conclusions and contributions, and directions for future research.

### **3.2 VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY: MAIN CHARACTERISTICS AND LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT**

Voluntary simplicity has been described as a low-consumption lifestyle that can have a positive impact on life satisfaction and the perception of happiness (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Boujbel & d'Astous, 2012; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Huneke, 2005). Elgin and Mitchell (1977) listed five voluntary simplicity core values: material simplicity, human scale, self-determination, ecological awareness, and personal growth. According to Craig-Lees and Hill (2002), voluntary simplifiers reduce consumption through three primary motivations: environmental, spiritual, or self-oriented causes. Aidar and Daniels (2020) mention inner growth as a central value of voluntary simplifiers; it is relevant to differentiate them from similar lifestyles. These authors suggest that researchers must investigate the different underlying drivers of simple lifestyle choices. Environmental consciousness is considered a common motivation for this lifestyle; however, other aspects cannot be ignored when studying a simple life, such as reduced consumption or lower stress (Rich et al., 2017). Personal factors, benefits of the lifestyle, and self-quality of life are common motivations for voluntary simplifiers that merit further study (Marchand & Walker, 2008).

Among the 'non-simplifiers' and the radical profile of voluntary simplifiers, there are different degrees of engagement (Bekin et al., 2005; Etzioni, 2004). Elgin and Mitchell (1977) present four categories of voluntary simplifiers: full voluntary simplifiers, partial voluntary simplifiers, sympathisers, and those indifferent or opposed to voluntary simplicity. Etzioni (2004) classifies simplifiers into three levels: downshifters, strong simplifiers, and holistic simplifiers. Huneke (2005) distinguishes between highly and less committed simplifiers based on consistency in some practices that require ongoing effort.

McDonald et al. (2006) analysed previous categorizations in the field and suggested unifying the plurality of levels and denominations in the new category of beginner voluntary simplifiers. For these authors, non-voluntary simplifiers are not interested in sustainable or low consumption practices; voluntary simplifiers are deeply engaged in the philosophy of responsible consumption and minimal practices, and while beginner voluntary simplifiers may adopt some practices of voluntary simplicity, their actions are not radical. The three groups are interpreted as fluid, with the possibility of movement among them (McDonald et al., 2006). Research on beginner voluntary simplifiers is relevant to understanding how people adopt conscious consumption (McDonald et al., 2006). Sandlin and Waither (2009) and Gambrel and Cafaro (2010) found in their research that the moral identity development of simplifiers is an 'ongoing process'. Beginner voluntary simplifiers may not become full voluntary simplifiers in the future; the term does not refer exclusively to a phase; it is a category that has its own particularities and may not advance to radical profiles (McDonald et al., 2006).

Beginner voluntary simplifiers are a group of consumers who try to analyse market systems to find ethical alternatives (Peyer et al., 2017; Shaw & Moraes, 2009). Marketing professionals and companies need to understand the consumption behaviour of beginner voluntary simplifiers in order to offer this audience consistent products and services, ensuring that companies have more coherent, environmental, and socially conscious practices. This study explores the consumption behaviour of beginner voluntary simplifiers in different aspects of the process of changing behaviour, motivations, values, meanings, and outcomes of life simplification.

### **3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research aims to understand the values, motivations, and meanings behind taking steps towards simplifying consumption. We conducted an exploratory study applying two qualitative data collection methods in order to gain an in-depth insight into beginner voluntary simplifiers: (1) semi-

structured interviews using the critical incident technique, and (2) a focus group. Critical incident technique is an inductive method for studying human behaviour by observing significant incidents (Flanagan, 1954) whereby respondents can identify and express the relevance of incidents without researcher interference, that has been used in various marketing studies, especially regarding little-known phenomena (Gremier, 2004). Regarding the focus group, this method is useful for understanding how interviewees perceive a situation, as it is a dynamic meeting where participants are encouraged to discuss specific topics they have in common in their lives (Parker & Tritter, 2006). This method was chosen to complement the individual interviews because the inter-relational dynamics of participants enriched the findings through discussions about voluntary simplicity.

Self-categorization was used to identify a purposive sample for both studies (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Cherrier, 2009b; Huneke, 2005; Sandlin & Waither, 2009; Walther & Sandlin, 2013; Zamwel et al., 2014). The respondents had some motivations and goals for simplifying life, and they identified themselves as people adhering to voluntary simplicity in an initial or partial way.

An interview guide was prepared for the semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews focusing on the values, motivations, meanings, and marketing implications of adopting beginner voluntary simplification (appendix 1). The critical incident method was applied in this study by asking respondents at the beginning of the interviews to recall stories (critical incidents) about their experience of simplifying their life through consumption behaviours in order to better understand the moments they decided to change their consumption habits and how the process of simplifying consumption proceeded. In the second section of the interview, the participants were questioned about their level of materialism, their consciousness of consumption, their motivations, the values associated with the lifestyle, and the meaning behind voluntary simplicity. Finally, the participants were asked about the outcomes of their search for a simple life. An interview guide was also used to conduct the focus group discussion (appendix 3).

In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 male and female beginner voluntary simplifiers aged between 21 and 68 years (appendix 2). The focus group consisted of eight female participants between 24 and 35 years of age, and the meeting lasted 70 minutes (appendix 4). Homogeneity was observed during participant recruitment for the focus group to facilitate communication and sharing of opinions (Parker & Tritter, 2006). The group interaction highlighted participants' perceptions about challenges, common motivations, and practices in voluntary simplicity.

The studies were conducted between January and March 2019. The collected data were transcribed and carefully systematised into categories in order to identify multiple aspects of beginner voluntary simplifiers' consumption behaviours. Content analysis was used to reduce and structure data through the development of thematic categories and the identification of relationships (Malhotra et al., 2012).

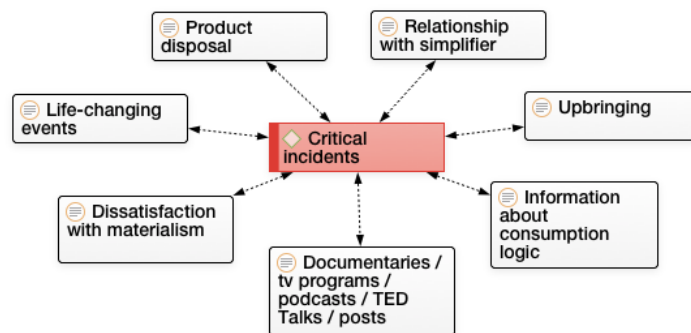
### 3.4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis is structured into the following categories: critical incidents, motivations, barriers, values, meanings and associations, marketing outcomes, buying decision process, and general observations.

#### 3.4.1 Critical Incidents

In this study, we analysed the process of moving from non-voluntary simplifiers to beginner voluntary simplifiers. The critical incidents that influenced respondents' consumption behaviour were grouped into seven main categories (Fig 9).

**Figure 9** Critical incidents



Among the incidents that contributed to changing respondents' consumption profile, the practice of product disposal was cited as an important activity. This finding is in line with Ballantine and Creery (2010). Interviewees talked about donating things that are not significant anymore; the sense of detachment was a remarkable experience for them. Pedro, a 50-year systems analyst, stated:

*One big step was to give up 90% of my CD collection to friends and relatives, because I did not need them anymore. I had vinyl records, and I did not even listen to them. This means a personal break in the way of thinking and acting, a move towards a new way of seeing.*

Experiences of dissatisfaction with materialism were also cited as significant incidents leading to a choice for a simple life. Some of the respondents had changed consumption patterns because of

a spiritual experience, their upbringing, or conversations with other simplifiers. Respondents also described experiences with highly materialistic people, which made them reject conspicuous consumption, or a consumption experience that led to frustration, as expressed by Carla, a 25-year architect:

*At one point, I consumed a lot and realised that I was exaggerating, not because I was spending too much, but because I was spending unnecessarily. I felt superfluous ... that was it.*

TED Talks and podcasts about simple life were cited as important information that provoked transformations in beginner voluntary simplifiers' consumption behaviour. Interviewees cited Instagram posts with inspiring examples, TV programs incentivizing minimalism and documentaries, such as 'the true cost' and 'minimalism', that pointed out the complex consequences behind consumption choices, as Marcela's quote illustrates.

*There was something recent that was the documentary 'Minimalism'. When we watched it, we went through, and we are still going through, a change, it became a 'doing minimalism' action. It was then that we 'woke up' and started to apply it to our home and consumption in general.*

Important life changes such as moving home, getting married, or having children triggered a reflection about respondents' lifestyles and the desire to live a simple life. Maria, a 27-year-old teacher, stated:

*I moved and began to reflect on things that were stored. I wondered why they were kept. Was I waiting for a special moment to use them? Why do I have so many things? I realised that I did not need more space to store my things. What I needed was to have fewer things, so that's how I started.*

Seeking information about the logic of consumption encouraged this group to change their consumption patterns. Marcos, a police officer, noted:

*It all started with Zigmund Bauman's book 'Consuming Life', when I came to realise that I was totally into it, not consciously, but led to it. We are driven to live around consumption all the time... that was the big start.*

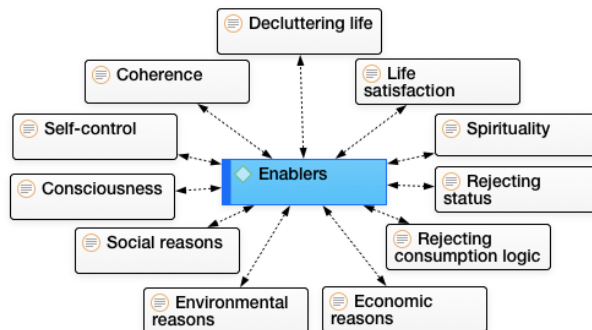
Voluntary simplicity was also described as a journey. Interviewees associated voluntary simplicity with small steps, often justifying some incoherence or highly materialistic habits by arguing that they were still in the process of changing consumption habits. This is in line with the results reported by Huneke (2005). Some beginner voluntary simplifiers also shared the desire to adopt more sustainable and social practices in the future, step by step, as learning progresses.



### 3.4.2 Motivations

This beginner voluntary simplifiers group presented multiple motivations for simplifying life (Fig 10). We identified different enablers that are helpful drivers to engage in this lifestyle.

**Figure 10** Motivations



Among the enablers, spiritual motives were cited as important reasons. Life satisfaction and the motivation of decluttering life are also positive causes to engage in simple life. These findings are in line with Huneke (2005) and Alexander and Ussher (2012). Respondents associate voluntary simplicity with a happy life with fewer problems. Victor noted,

*I do not try to simplify my consumption because it is more economical, simply because I feel that this simple way of living is what satisfies me. A simple living satisfies me.*

Coherence, self-control, conscious choices (Huneke, 2005) and greater self-reliance are positive aspects that motivate them to voluntary simplicity, as Liz shared:

*I want to be a simple person in the big picture, in the sense of dealing with others and a lot of other things ... if I do not do it also for consumption ... there is no way I will achieve coherence between how I want to live and how I am really living.*

Rejecting the logic of consumption and the status derived from high levels of materialism have also been mentioned as enablers of voluntary simplicity. Social reasons were the most cited drivers, such as the motivation to help people in need and the intention to share possessions with others; environmental reasons are also important causes for engaging in voluntary simplicity. Economic reasons were less cited as impulses for a simple life.

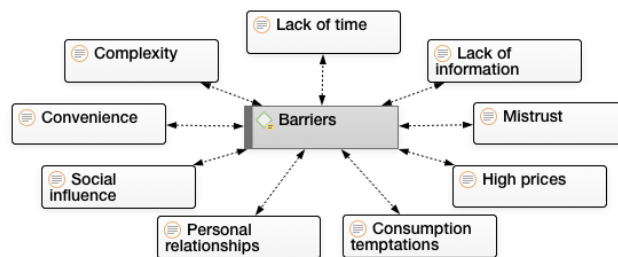
*I think it is important to nurture a more sustainable logic for the planet. I think this simple lifestyle logic has to do with sustainability. As a society, we have materialised many unsustainable lifestyles that are unsustainable at various levels, from the level of consumer incentive that goes beyond one's ability to afford values and products that destroy one's own health. I think that what motivates me is simplicity, such as individual and collective sustainability. (David)*

These results align with Craig-Lees and Hill (2002) as environmental, spiritual, and self-oriented. Among the enablers, environmental motivations include consciousness, environmental reasons, and rejection of the consumption logic; the spiritual group of motives includes some religious causes, social reasons, social status rejection, and the search for coherence, while the self-oriented ones embrace life satisfaction, decluttering life, self-control, and economic reasons.

### 3.4.3 Barriers

The participants acknowledged and pointed to some difficulties in adopting the voluntary simplicity lifestyle. The barriers are obstacles, that is, constraints that limit the adoption of simple life, cited as a response to why they did not consistently adhere to some responsible practices (Fig 11).

**Figure 11** Barriers



Regarding perceptions about brands, mistrust was cited as a common difficulty, as there are doubts whether the promoted practices are truthful. Ana shared her mistrust about the consumption logic:

*I always think I am being deceived, that they are selling something that is worth 'x' for the price of '10x', a process in which producers gain '0,001x'... I often think that I am being exploited.*

Interviewees reported inconsistent behaviours as a confession of sorts about their incoherent practices and the inconstancy of this lifestyle. Some of the respondents felt guilty when talking about these barriers; others simply justified these negative motivations and did not intend to make further progress in this lifestyle. Convenience is an important aspect that neglects ethical practices. They also reported impulsive buying behaviour and unawareness of relevant issues. Aligned with these findings, McDonald et al. (2006) identify a 'tension' between the practice of reducing consumption and the marketing opportunities related to this public. Huneke (2005) concluded that beginner voluntary simplifiers did not report such high levels of consistency and undertook fewer

activities, affirming that consistency was a distinguishing aspect between more and less highly committed simplifiers.

*I need to analyse brands through their concept and processes... also the social aspects of these companies... I am interested in these issues, but out of laziness, I do pursue them... in some way, they do not affect me directly. So, this is something that I need to work on, but is in the very initial process. (Carla)*

Interviewees assume that adopting conscious consumption is complex and difficult to balance with the lack of time in daily life, and with the lack of information about products around them. These findings are in line with those of Huneke (2005) and Alexander and Ussher (2012). Respondents expressed their interest in knowing more about the production processes and human resource practices of companies. High prices of sustainable products are cited as barriers to full engagement in voluntary simplicity and presented as a disadvantage of some sustainable and ethical brands. These aspects are used to justify some incoherent practices in daily life, as Maria noted:

*I do not know very much about brands that respect the environment, and that do not conduct animal experiments, they must promote more ethical practices. And in addition, some of these brands charge high prices, making it difficult to acquire their products.*

Some marketing strategies, such as the richness of options, aesthetic attributes, and the supply of new models, are temptations to acquire more products. Respondents also emphasised social aspects as barriers: the judgement of others, social patterns, and the relationship with people with different lifestyles, as Andrea shared:

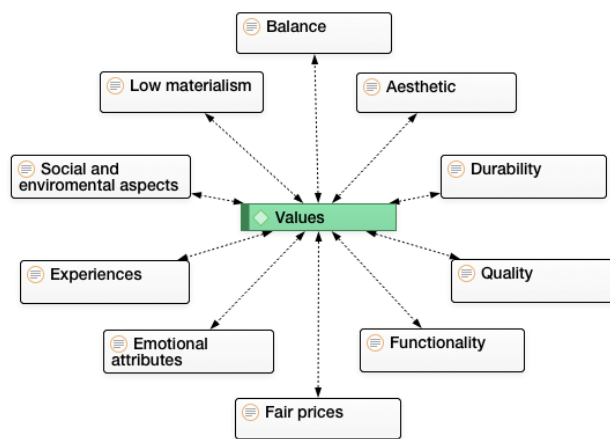
*Sometimes, I want to dress simpler, but worry about my appearance and what people think makes being simpler more complicated.*

We can observe divergent drivers that position this group within conflicting motivations and barriers, such as rejecting social status versus social influence, or rejecting consumption logic versus consumption temptations.

#### **3.4.4 Values**

This topic presents categories in which these beginner voluntary simplifiers are regarded as valuable in voluntary simplicity (Fig. 12).

**Figure 12** Values



A balanced living, striving for a simple life without excess seems to be important to respondents, as mentioned by Huneke (2005), with some consciousness, self-control, contradictions, and concessions. They also value a work-life balance (Bekin et al., 2005), and the equilibrium between their individual styles and the consideration of the local community (Shaw & Moraes, 2009).

Low levels of materialism, material simplicity, and minimalism are important values for the interviewed beginner voluntary simplifiers, as found in other voluntary simplicity studies (Balsa-Budai et al., 2019; Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Etzioni, 2004; Huneke, 2005; Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018; McDonald et al., 2006). They value fewer possessions, associating this with well-being and lightness. Owning less (Shaw & Newholm, 2002) is a consequence of the consumption reduction of this beginner voluntary simplifiers group. Respondents also value detachment from material things and social status detachment, seeking some distance from a consumerist society, and expressing their resistance to consumption culture.

They emphasise certain emotional attributes when talking about values, such as their history with certain objects and sentimental aspects of their possessions. The objects that they decide to keep are of great importance in their lives and histories. This finding shows that there is a closeness and distance from material possessions in voluntary simplicity, as mentioned by Marchand and Walker (2008). These meaningful possessions do not necessarily have high value to other people; they are commonly associated with old things, handmade articles, or special gifts. Experiences in daily life (Huneke, 2005) are also valuable to the interviewees; they often contrast them with materialism, emphasising that they now have more time to seek valued experiences in a family-oriented life (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002), instead of spending time looking for new products on websites and in stores.

Some aesthetic values were cited associating voluntary simplicity with simple designs, order, and harmony, with their visual aspects reflected in multiple facets of their lifestyle. Respondents also value durability, functionality, and quality (Alexander & Ussher, 2012). A preference for quality over quantity has also been reported in other studies (Feola, 2014).

*First, I check if the object is really necessary and important to my routine; then, there is a question of price, if it fits the budget; if it is far over budget, I will look for another product with the same function. I also do not value the cheapest, because I also value quality; I usually say that we buy neither the most expensive nor the cheapest, we try to stay in the middle. I also wonder if it's something I will need for a long time... it must be of good quality, so I do not have to buy another one again any time soon. Lastly, there is an aesthetic issue, which I also care about. The aesthetic issue is also very important, since my possessions are related to the expression of my personality.*  
(Marcela)

Social and environmental aspects are important in the decision process of respondents, such as the appreciation for the sharing economy (Thornton, Campbell, & Owusu, 2019) and fair trade. The beginner voluntary simplifiers group demonstrated indifference towards brands, reporting that signalling social status through brands is not important for them, unless these companies represent similar values to their own lifestyles. They also emphasise transparency when talking about brands, valuing the clear connection between company actions and the communication of these practices. Social responsibility is related to a sense of community (Huneke, 2005), with relatedness, connecting with people and the community (Kasser, 2009; Rich et al., 2017), and morality (Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018). Environmental values are associated with concerns regarding animal welfare and resource scarcity (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018; McGouran & Prothero, 2016; Moisander & Pesonen, 2002). They report concerns about product disposal because the amount of waste produced is a concern for them. Participants also emphasise the local economy (Rich et al., 2019), giving preference to food produced nearby and by small businesses. They seem to place more confidence in this kind of business.

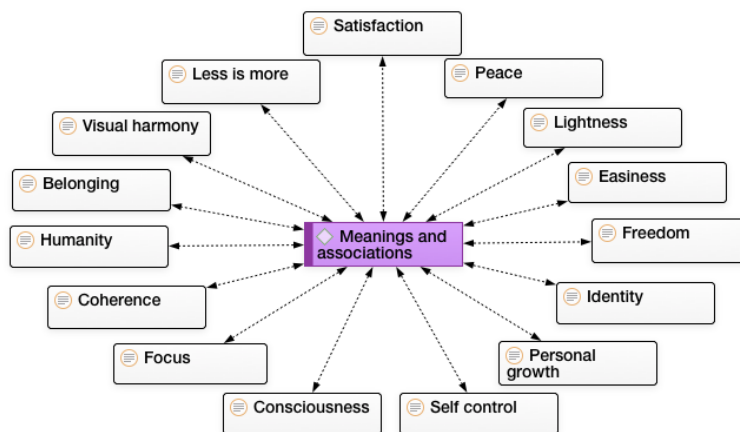
Shaw and Newholm (2002) found that voluntary simplifiers drive their consumption choices through strong internal values. Some of the beginner voluntary simplifiers' values are neither strong nor internal values, in alignment with the more superficial and initial profile of responsible consumption of this group. Some values are dependent on others; fair prices are sometimes cited

as a condition for conscious consumption; emotional attributes are more important than low materialism.

### 3.4.5 Meanings and Associations

Common symbolisms of simple living were selected from the data to develop a network with 16 categories of voluntary simplicity meanings (Fig 13).

**Figure 13** Meanings and associations



This lifestyle is associated with personal satisfaction, happiness, peace, calm, and order. The respondents associate their previous materialistic behaviour with a lack of peace. The personal space to enjoy life, lightness, and ease is also linked with a simple life.

*I think a simple life is easier, happier... people worry about accumulating things, worry about having. In a simple life, one is not so concerned about having, and one lives more lightly. (Clara)*

They closely associate freedom, autonomy, and identity with their personal meaning of a simple life. The consumption profile was associated with individual identities. Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016) and Shrum et al. (2013) report similar associations. Shrum et al. (2013) argue that materialism is an aspect of identity; it is about the acquisition and use of things, services, experiences, and relationships to provide symbolic value.

*I associate a simple life with the expression of my personality, comfort, and well-being. (Marcela)*

Sandlin and Waither (2009) found that the moral identity of voluntary simplicity is a continuous and complex learning process involving self-practice, self-regulation, and an individualised approach to personal moral development. Personal growth has an important meaning for some beginner voluntary simplifiers who associate a simple life with individual, moral, or spiritual development. Humanity is also an essential association for beginner voluntary simplifiers, all of

whom emphasise human values and social responsibility when talking about voluntary simplicity. The focus on experiences and relationships is also part of this association. For beginner voluntary simplifiers, belonging to a particular group is an important aspect of simple living. Some of them are aware of the image their lifestyle conveys to others and do not want to come across as superfluous or ostensive; they want to belong to groups far removed from a luxurious lifestyle and conspicuous consumption.

Self-control, consciousness, coherence, and focus are interrelated aspects commonly associated with voluntary simplicity. Simple living involves thoughtful consumption (Kronenberg & Iida, 2011); the capacity to reflect on purchases is closely related to conscious consumption and to the voluntary aspect of this lifestyle. For example, Marcela shares the following:

*A simple life for me is trying to consume only things that are a priority. Not buying something just because I found it beautiful, or just because it's on sale... there has to be an explanation, a deeper reason for buying it and it needs to have a meaning for my life, it has to be a real necessity, it cannot just be because it is cool or because everyone has it.*

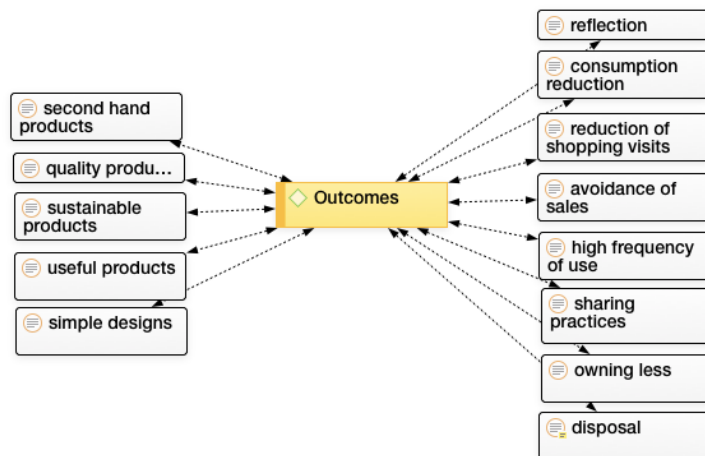
Visual harmony is linked to a simple life, associating some visual characteristics with broader aspects such as emotions, energy, personality, and order in multiple contexts of life. 'Less is more' is the most popular association in this group of beginner voluntary simplifiers. They associate this concept with different contexts: the frequency of new purchases, the objects they already own, the visual aspect of the products they choose to buy, and the aesthetic they prefer in architecture, art, or their personal image.

*Some objects were occupying a space in our house, a visual space, a physical space, and a mental space... I cannot quite explain that mental space... But we disposed of them... I associate physical weight with mental weight. I would like to be able to keep all my things to a minimum. There are things that I still cannot get rid of, and that is okay, maybe it is not the time... (José)*

#### **3.4.6 Marketing Outcomes**

The following topics analyse the practical consequences of partial engagement in voluntary simplicity, such as product preferences and general consumption habits (Fig 14).

**Figure 14** Marketing Outcomes



*Product preferences:* With regard to product preferences, interviewees mentioned they leaned towards second-hand products, as stated by Shaw and Newholm (2002). They pointed out the sustainable and economic advantages of this practice, as David shared:

*Whenever I can choose a second-hand product, I prefer it... I no longer worry if 'this bicycle is new' or if 'this instrument is new'. Acquiring something new is no longer a concern for me.*

They also emphasised purchasing quality and useful products, instead of luxuries and ostentatious products, as Marcos quoted:

*I bought an expensive sound box, but I know that it is durable and has good quality; it will not cause me problems. For me, durability and quality break the logic of consumption.*

Interviewees talk enthusiastically about sustainable products, sharing positive consumption experiences they had.

*I made an investment in a menstrual cup. I used menstrual pads for years, and a menstrual cup brand caught my attention; they have a deep communication strategy regarding sustainability, which is coherent with the brand message, which is something I truly value. (Marcela)*

Respondents generally prefer simple designs and casual products, with the intention of not being associated with luxury consumption or wealthy social status. While they may pay for better options, they prefer products and services that are less distinctive so as not to be part of a culture of ostentation and instead to be able to spend their money on more meaningful experiences, as Maria shared:

*We try to maintain consumption simplicity when it comes to choosing a car. We can choose a simple car and not pay so much... today we could have a better car than the model we have, but why? If the model we already have does the job... There is no need to have a better car just because society values the more expensive ones, as a demand for ostentation.*



When participants talked about simplifying their consumption, all of them used the example of clothing. This is similar to the study by Alexander and Ussher (2012). Clothing seems relevant to their consumption profiles and to communicating their identities. This consumer group considers the fast-changing nature of fashion incoherent and unwelcome. Our participants demonstrated particular interest in timeless and durable clothes suitable for multiple occasions that stay in good condition for several years. The timeless aspect is commonly associated with aesthetic characteristics, including a preference for simple lines, neutral colours, and discrete details.

*General consumption habits.* All respondents talked about the habit of reflecting before purchasing; they already have or are in the process of acquiring some control over consumption choices, making conscious decisions that take some time and exerting patience when evaluating options. Many studies of voluntary simplicity emphasise reflection (Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; Kasser, 2009; Marchand & Walker, 2008; Rich et al., 2017; Shaw & Moraes, 2009; L. E. Williams & Poehlman, 2017). Sara, a young architect, stated that:

*Before changing my lifestyle, I did not think about consumption. I wanted something and just went shopping for it. Do you understand? Now I stop and think, I reflect once, twice, and three times if I really need that thing; then, if it is really indispensable, I will buy it.*

Some respondents referred to avoidance of sales; they do not buy just because of promotions; there must be other motives to purchase. Consumption reduction is a very common practice among the interviewees; they try to reduce shopping visits (Huneke, 2005), rejecting the habit of thinking often about consumption needs. They try to use their possessions frequently.

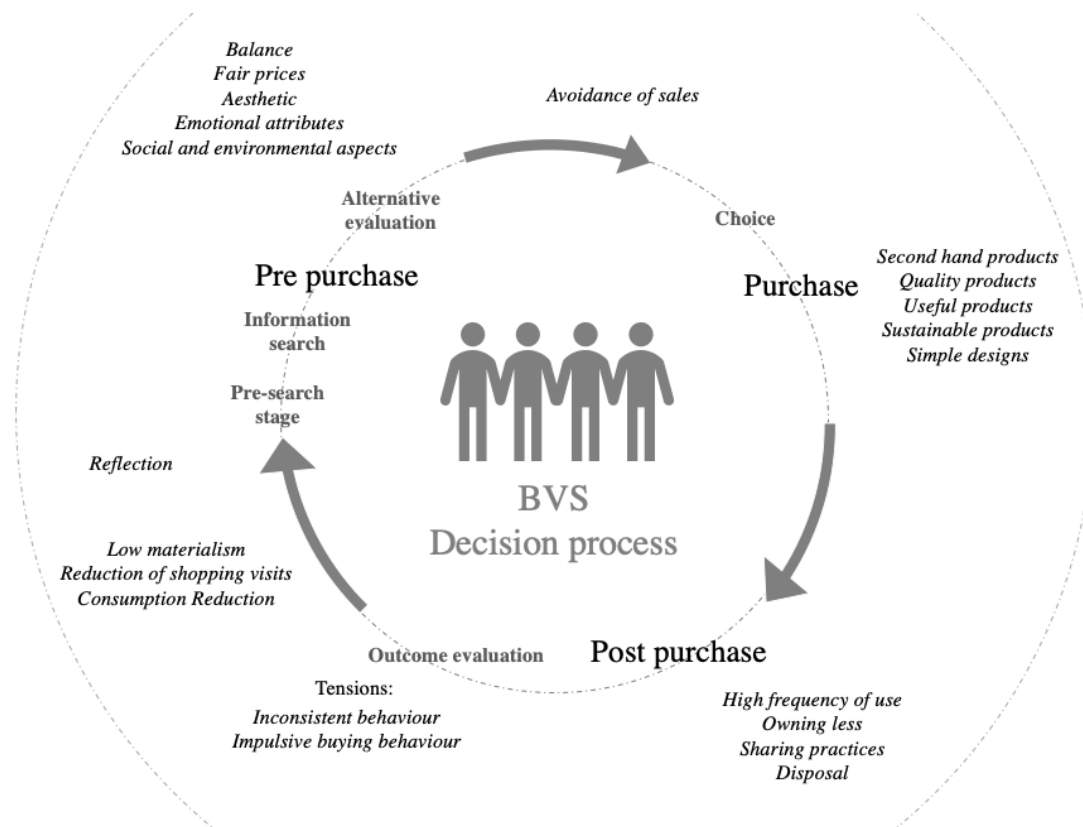
*I do not buy so much stuff anymore, first of all, because there is no need to visit malls and stores often just to pass the time... I also do not buy fashion magazines, they just end up occupying more space... I do not think about what to consume all the time. Our society is obsessed with these thoughts and what to consume all the time. (Olivia)*

Sorting waste and recycling are cited by beginner voluntary simplifiers as common daily practices. Frequent donations of products are also a habit reported by this beginner voluntary simplifiers group. This happens when they buy new things or receive gifts. This disposal practice is commonly related to social intention and is viewed as a solution to the issue of accumulation of possessions. According to Etzioni (2004), when people are positively motivated by non-materialistic values, they are more inclined to share their excess resources. The act of disposal for voluntary simplifiers can be seen as a form of empowerment that contributes to the circulation of materials (Cherrier, 2009b). Respondents consider the sharing economy as a possible solution to materialism issues.

### 3.5 BEGINNER VOLUNTARY SIMPLIFIERS' DECISION PROCESS

To understand the beginner voluntary simplifiers' buying-decision process, we used a simplified version of the buying-decision process (Fig 15) to summarise our findings, which are displayed in a circle because each stage reinforces future consumption decisions. The external area contains aspects closer to each phase of the model, and some topics pertain to different stages. According to McDonald et al. (2006), the decision-making processes of beginner voluntary simplifiers are complex, and their study is 'crucial' to understanding voluntary simplicity and for the development of sustainable consumption.

**Figure 15** Beginner voluntary simplifiers' buying-decision process



### 3.6 GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Regarding the level of engagement of VS, some interviewees reported wanting to further their pursuit of the simplicity philosophy, while others were not interested in going deeper into voluntary simplicity. The second group stated that they were at a comfortable level of engagement, despite recognising incoherencies and failures in their consumption behaviour. This corroborates the

findings of McDonald et al. (2006) who state that beginner voluntary simplifiers may want to remain in this partial stage. In contrast, the first group demonstrated guilt, followed by confessions of consumption inconsistencies and tensions. They admitted impulsive consumption behaviour and making many choices that were not pro-environmental.

Some respondents considered the aesthetic aspect an important value and part of the symbolism of voluntary simplicity; they prefer simple designs, such as products with fewer colours and simple lines. From one perspective, the visual aspect may be associated with a lifestyle characterized by harmony, autonomy, and well-being. From another perspective, this visual association may be related to the superficial engagement of beginner voluntary simplifiers, as it may be easier to choose products with simple designs than to engage in more complex responsible practices.

Prior research on critical incidents has shown that effective communication strategies stimulate the process of changing behaviour to reduce consumption and adhere to environmental and social practices. Some important facts in consumers' lives are linked with their identity attributes, reinforcing how they perceive and present themselves to others. Contacts with highly materialistic individuals, certain consumption experiences, or conversations with other simplifiers also demonstrate the power of transformation of consumption patterns. These results may stimulate the development of communication strategies, including testimonials about simplifying life and conscious consumption.

The beginner voluntary simplifiers group acknowledged the influence of social media. Some of them mentioned having *unfollowed* specific influencers on social networks as an exercise in detachment of materialistic values. They prefer following information/profiles about minimalistic events, responsible consumption practices, and people who defend sustainable consumption.

Belonging to particular groups is relevant to some respondents, justifying their partial engagement in voluntary simplicity. This aspect reveals insecurity about what others, mainly professional partners, friends, and family, think about their consumption choices.

All the beginner voluntary simplifiers in the focus group agreed that small practices and easy steps are the best way to start changing consumption. They shared information on incremental changes in their daily lives. Most interviewees did not perceive radical, major practices as viable and truthful transformations.

A central characteristic demonstrated by this group of beginner voluntary simplifiers was the pursuit of balance; all of them emphasised balance in describing their options and justifying their partial level of engagement in voluntary simplicity. Some of them did not consider radical engagement in

voluntary simplicity a balanced and desirable way of life, thus raising the questions: Are beginner voluntary simplifiers moderated by falling between two extremes, overconsumption and no-consumption, or is this level of engagement in simple life simply an incoherent lifestyle marked by a partial adoption of conscious and pro-environmental behaviours?

### 3.7 CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This research intends to contribute to understanding the motivations, meanings, outcomes, and values of beginner voluntary simplifiers, a group between non-voluntary simplifiers and full voluntary simplifiers, to shed light on the factors that trigger the adoption of voluntary simplicity.

Despite the growth of studies on holistic simplifiers, it is important to focus on the behaviour of beginner voluntary simplifiers (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; McDonald et al., 2006; Oates et al., 2008). Understanding beginner voluntary simplifiers can reveal more about the two other groups, full voluntary simplifiers and non-voluntary simplifiers (Oates et al., 2008), acknowledging the call by McDonald et al. (2006) for further studies on the marketing implications of beginner voluntary simplicity.

The main findings of this study suggest meaningful directions for further research. Table 9 lists the main findings of the different networks according to the research objectives.

**Table 9** Summary of findings

<b>Motivations</b>	<b>Values</b>	<b>Critical incidents</b>	<b>Meanings associations</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Barriers</b>
<b>Decluttering life</b>	Low materialism/ Aesthetic	Product disposal	Less is more/ Lightness/ Visual harmony	Owning less/ Simple designs/ Disposal	
<b>Environmental reasons</b>	Durability / Environmental aspects	Information about consumption logic / Documentaries/ tv programs/ podcasts/ TED Talks/ posts		Second hand products / Sustainable products Avoidance of sales / Consumption reduction / Reduction of shopping visits	Mistrust / Lack of information / Complexity/ Lack of time
<b>Rejecting consumption logic / Rejecting status</b>					
<b>Social reasons</b>	Social aspects/ Fair prices	Relationship with simplifier/ Upbringing	Humanity / Belonging	Reflection	Personal relationships/ Social influence
<b>Spirituality/ Self-control/ Consciousness</b>	Balance	Life-changing events	Peace/ Freedom/ Self-control/ Focus/		Consumption temptations

			Identity/ Personal growth/ Consciousness	
<b>Life satisfaction</b>	Experiences/ Emotional attributes	Dissatisfaction with materialism	Satisfaction/ Easiness	
<b>Coherence</b>			Coherence	Convenience
<b>Economic reasons</b>	Quality / Functionality		Quality products / High frequency of use / Useful products	High prices

The integration of different motivations and the complexity profile of voluntary simplicity may offer contributions regarding urgent issues of consumer behaviour, such as high materialism and irresponsible consumption. To the best of our knowledge, these themes have not been explored together in the context of the values, meanings, motivations, and outcomes of beginner voluntary simplifiers.

Voluntary simplicity can be an avenue for understanding the antecedents and consequences of sustainable living (Rich et al., 2019). The results of this research shed some light on the perceptions and practices of beginner voluntary simplifiers and suggest useful implications for research, companies, and policy makers in the study and promotion of responsible consumption. The beginner voluntary simplifiers group present several voluntary simplicity characteristics, but certain aspects may be most useful to incentivize the process of changing consumption. Identifying the values and motivations related to reducing consumption can provide an understanding of consumers' preferences, particularly the importance of balance. Symbolic associations regarding voluntary simplicity are important in the design of public policies to reduce high materialistic behaviour; these meanings may also be relevant to understanding the richness of the symbolic associations of a simple life.

In terms of practical implications, the outcomes of this research may help managers to integrate some of our results with business strategies, given the increase in the number of consumers adopting voluntary simplicity (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011; Peyer et al., 2017; Walther & Sandlin, 2013). Companies need a better understanding of beginner voluntary simplifiers in order to develop sustainable and durable products and suitable services focused on this group of consumers' quality of life. This research can encourage coherence and transparency in products and services, as these may increase consumer loyalty and trust from beginner voluntary simplifiers and related groups. Many businesses have shown a

particular interest in voluntary simplicity in order to tailor their services and products to this lifestyle through market segmentation, such as tourism (Chieh-Wen et al., 2008; Kannisto, 2018), food and organic products, and fashion.

### **3.8 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Qualitative analysis allows for deeper immersion in the subjective aspects of a particular topic, enabling unique findings. However, this approach also has limitations in terms of the rationalisation of data and the broad applicability of the conclusions. The small sample size of in-depth interviews is also a limitation of this study, as it does not allow for generalisations. However, this study nonetheless contributes to clarifying the different typologies, motivations, and behavioural patterns of beginner voluntary simplifiers.

Future research can focus on the effects of communication strategies as critical incidents in promoting sustainable consumption and a simple life. It would also be interesting to research the relationship between aesthetics and a simple life in order to better understand the meaning and symbolism of sustainable consumption.

As far as public policies are concerned, the positive relationship between voluntary simplicity and life satisfaction is important for policymakers in designing measures not only to support populations in changing consumption behaviours (Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; Rich et al., 2017), but also to develop strategies to promote social well-being related to responsible consumption (Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018).

#### **4 THE ADOPTION OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY: UNDERSTANDING CONCEPT, DRIVERS, PRACTICES AND THE CONSUMER BUYING DECISION PROCESS OF SIMPLE LIFE FIRST STEPS<sup>3</sup>**

##### **ABSTRACT**

Voluntary simplifiers are consumers who seek for consumption reduction focusing on inner values to improve the quality of their everyday life. This lifestyle has been gaining popularity and may contribute to mitigate some sustainability and high materialism-related current problems. The main objective of this netnographic research is to develop an understanding of the adoption of Voluntary Simplicity (VS).

We conducted an examination of 21.198 comments on an online community with content analysis. Findings of the first levels of engagement in VS are discussed, including the VS concept, the main drivers for simplifiers decisions, a map of practices, and a conceptual model of the buying decision process. These results are identified in terms of the values, motivations and meanings around VS adoption. The findings combine factors that influence purchase satisfaction and decision complexity. Insights obtained from this study can help develop the understanding of consumption reducing consumers, providing guidance for decision-making of companies and public policy makers in fostering increasingly sustainable strategies and practices.

##### **KEY-WORDS**

Voluntary Simplicity; Netnography research; Buying Decision Process; Consumption Reduction

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<sup>3</sup> This article is in submission process

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Consumption practices become harmful when they financially or mentally damage consumers or are very aggressive to the environment (Herziger et al., 2017). Current consumer practices within capitalist marketisation-based models of economic production and distribution have led to overconsumption and, conversely, to disillusion with market logic, fostering multiple expressions of conscious consumption, voluntary simplicity (VS), consumer resistance and anti-consumption (Attik et al, 2020).

The implementation of sustainable consumption is ‘one of the most serious challenges for modern economies’ (Lewandowska et al., 2018) and has become a dominant theme in recent VS studies (Aidar & Daniels, 2020; Rebouças & Soares, 2020). VS is a “lifestyle focused on reducing of consumption by focusing on inner values that may be associated with sustainable and social purposes” (Rebouças & Soares, 2020) and has been gaining increased popularity.

A systematic review of the literature on VS showed that this area is a growing topic of research with six recurrent aspects in VS definitions applied in order of frequency: reduced material consumption; search for intrinsic values, well-being and quality of life; environmental responsibility; social consciousness and focus on relationships; self-sufficiency; and working hours reduction (Rebouças & Soares, 2020).

A lot of publications about environmental lifestyles use the term simplicity (Librova, 2008). Nowadays, the VS lifestyle concept has been popularly associated with other groups of consumers such as frugal consumers, minimalists, downshifter, environmentalists and responsible consumers. These labels have also been studied within the general questioning/resistance to consumption logic and share some of the traits of VS. However, voluntary simplifiers are an intrinsically different group. The emphasis on inner growth as a great purpose or balance to life is a key distinction between voluntary simplifiers and the other groups mentioned above (Aidar & Daniels, 2020; Demirel, 2020). For example, minimalists are distinct from voluntary simplifiers because getting rid of possessions does not mean refusing new items (Boutroy, 2020).

It is important to emphasize that different consumer groups may have similar behaviours but with different motivations and values behind consumption, even between different categories of life simplification (Lewandowska et al., 2018). So, some consumers groups can overlap with VS behaviour, but with different motivations.



VS can stimulate alternative markets rearrangements and different consumption norms, questioning the consumption culture (Boutroy, 2020). Simplifiers are relevant to understanding the antecedents and consequences of limiting consumption (Rich et al., 2019). Seegebarth et al. (2016) show that voluntary simplicity has an important influence on reducing overconsumption. However, there is a dearth of research about VS. Research focusing on the motivations, meanings and practices of VS is needed, especially studies that allow an in-depth understanding of the adoption of this lifestyle.

Studies focusing on the adoption of VS may result in rich results useful to promote sustainable practices (Rebouças & Soares, 2020). Hence, the current work aims to answer the research questions: How is Voluntary Simplicity's adoption process? Which practices are common in the process of VS adoption? How is the buying decision process of voluntary simplifiers in the first steps of this lifestyle engagement?

We conducted a netnography of 21.198 comments on an online community focusing on VS's adoption process, trying to understand drivers, practices, and the buying decision process of those aspiring to live more simply. As results, this article delineates a discussion about VS concept through simplifiers own perspective; main drivers to lifestyle adoption; a map of voluntary simplifiers practices on the first levels of engagement and a buying decision process model of VS adoption.

## **4.2 VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY: CONCEPT, DRIVERS AND ADOPTION**

There are several labels associated with this lifestyle centered in simplifying life. This variation is related to the plurality of ways in which individuals engage in this lifestyle (Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018; Shaw & Moraes, 2009). The different forms of adhering to the voluntary simplicity lifestyle depend on the motives behind simplification (Bekin et al., 2005). Multiple paths can be taken when discussing simplifying one's life (Rich et al., 2019).

VS is a flexible lifestyle, inherently personal, that can entail different contexts and attitudes (Aidar & Daniels, 2020; Kasser, 2009; Osikominu & Bocken, 2020). It involves questions and self-reflection, some creativity to propose proper solutions and personalised application (Alexander, 2011). For Gambrel and Cafaro (2010), simplicity comprises reduced and conscious consumption, which generates more careful consideration of decisions, another relation with objects and a more focused life, which is intrinsically different from a mere return to nature or poverty. Simple living

requires reflection and complex decisions between consumption, necessities and happiness (Kronenberg & Iida, 2011). Simplifiers often have careful shopping attitudes and intend to buy items for long-term use (Iwata, 2001). They are less sensitive to pleasure or discomfort related to consumption desires (Boujbel & d'Astous, 2015).

Adopting a voluntarily simplicity lifestyle can be considered in the category of sustainable consumption. However, it focuses more on psychological needs and ethical considerations than traditional sustainable consumption (Kronenberg & Iida, 2011).

The desire, thinking about or coming across something not possessed, is fundamental to human motivation before action (Boujbel & d'Astous, 2015). Material simplicity is associated with the virtue of coherent disposition of consumer decisions, closely related to virtues of temperance, frugality and wisdom, enabling others virtues as justice and generosity (Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010).

People who often feel dissatisfaction and disillusionment with materialism related material simplicity with reduced consumption, trying to break the 'earn and spend' cycle (Huneke, 2005; Osikominu & Bocken, 2020). They are also reducing work hours or/and working with purpose through activities with meaning for the self, others, or the community (Huneke, 2005; Rich et al., 2019).

Previous studies suggest that there are different levels of engagement in VS (Erdoğan & Karapinar, 2015; McDonald et al., 2006; Oates et al., 2008; Shama, 1988). The process of VS adoption and the first levels of lifestyle engagement is commonly associated with self-directed reflection, going through practices involving work and routine adaptations, getting rid of things, eating, dressing and increasing education (Osikominu & Bocken, 2020). Boujbel and d'Astous (2015) separate those who adopt VS on a regular or occasional basis. Individuals with higher engagement levels in VS are associated with more ethical behaviours (Huneke, 2005; Shaw & Newholm, 2002), and those primarily motivated by self-centred reasons are in the low level of engagement (Shaw & Newholm, 2002).

Besides the multiple motivations that incentive VS, exploring the main drivers that encourage simple life adoption may incentivise sustainable and pro-social behaviour. VS's conceptualisation and delimitation from the practitioner's perspective may enrich this research field through the confirmation and understanding of VS boundaries and the distinction with similar consumer groups.

Many studies apply the label 'Voluntary Simplifiers', including different levels of engagement in their analysis. However, we believe that it is imperative to differentiate these groups because of their various behaviours. Our study focuses on adopting this lifestyle, analysing practices, the decision buying process in the initial stages of lifestyle, and the main drivers behind the seek for a simple life.

### **4.3 METHODOLOGY**

This research focuses on individual interactions on online communities in order to understand the social narratives online regarding VS adoption. Netnography is a method to explore the desires, meanings and feelings of consumers who interact on online communities (R. V. Kozinets, 2002). The methodology research approach of netnography has been applied across many fields, mainly business and consumer studies (Costello, McDermott, & Wallace, 2017) in order to replicate ethnographic research in online communities by adopting a participant-observational approach. It is a collective method approach, at a 'meso level', not the micro of individuals, nor the macro of entire social systems (R. Kozinets, 2010). Accessibility is essential, with sufficient human feeling on the contact with others.

We conducted the research on reedit.com, a website with multiple communities called subreddits, where people post, vote and comment about their interests. The online community selected for this research is a widespread online discussion about voluntary simplicity lifestyle (<https://www.reddit.com/r/simpleliving/>). It follows the criteria of being relevant, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich, as R. Kozinets (2010) suggested. The simple living virtual community is a group of people that share social interaction with a sense of belonging and self-identification as members. We joined the community in October of 2018 to follow the discussions and understand the group dynamics.

We monitored the discussion boards of the community from November of 2019 to march of 2020. As of March 2020, the forum had a total of 227K members. All the reviews are in English. According to R. Kozinets (2010), netnography can be applied on three types of data: archival data, elicited data and fieldnote data. Our research applied these different categories: archival data, i.e. e., pre-existing posts and comments on the forum that are related to research questions; elicited data, resulting from the researcher's interaction on the social media; and reflexive fieldnotes resulting from the researcher's perceptions and the experience in the community.

We followed the six steps of the netnographic method: research planning, entrée, data collection, data analysis, ethical standards and research representation (R. V. Kozinets, 2002). We started by monitoring existing contributions, articles, videos, images, and links cited on the forum, collecting data to detail interpretations. We had the equivalent of 635 posts containing 21.198 comments. The discussions aligned to the research objectives were selected to be content analyzed. The posts included stories, links, images and videos about the adoption of VS.

After gaining familiarity with the language of participants, the researcher entered the forum and made questions to complement the data and elicit direct interactions with the online community. The discussions' immersion and engagement were relevant to develop the problems and become familiar with the forum culture.

For the data analysis process, posts and comments were examined, data was organised in categories through a continued comparison of results. The data analysis process turns the collected data into a research representation as a refinement process (R. Kozinets, 2010). After the first analysis, we selected 164 posts with 6691 comments related to adopting simple living for content analysis. We cut and pasted posts associated with beginning the lifestyle into the atlas.ti word processor. Data collected were analysed using content analysis. The first code cycle had 14 codes and 667 quotations; the second code cycle resulted in 8 codes and 627 quotations; finally the third code cycle contained three networks summarizing the research objectives.

In what concerns the ethical standards, the research was conducted in a public forum, and all participants have pseudonyms. We identified ourselves and the research goals during forum participation. In the exhibition of findings, the presentation of comments was reduced to safeguard identities.

#### **4.4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

We group our findings under four main topics: VS concept through simplifiers' perspective; drivers; a map of practices based on recurrent comments; and the buying decision process of VS adoption, encompassing strategies, motivations and particularities of simplifiers consumption behaviour.

#### 4.4.1 Concept

Discussion about VS concept is often present between those in the first steps of simple life adoption. They seek to know what it is and the lifestyle boundaries to become aware of the implications involved in the changes they are undertaking. When beginning, people want to know the possibilities that can be achieved in their personal lives. They want to slow down everyday life and reject struggle and external pressures, as Mary shared:

*Simple living isn't a competition of who can live the most like a medieval peasant, it's living in a simple way that makes you happy.*

Another participant, Jane, discussed her feeling of inclusion in this lifestyle through the associated inner values:

*I'm new to the community but it seems like r/simpleliving is a bit more inclusive than say r/Anticonsumption or r/minimalist because simple living has more subjective standards and encourages people to figure out what personally fulfil them.*

It is also standard sharing the meaning of simple life, aligned with the statement that VS is subjective by nature, with individual criteria associated with a full and enjoyable life. These descriptions reveal the VS concept from the perspective of simplifiers, seen from their personal experience with the lifestyle. Peter, for instance, described some of the practices and values associated with the definition of simple life for him:

*"I know simple living has a lot of definitions, so if like to hear your way of simple living. I am only partway on my journey towards a simpler life, but so far:*

1. *valuing time over money*
2. *valuing my family over stuff*
3. *traveling less, as is don't have a lot of money but enjoying my surroundings.*
4. *reading a lot*
5. *crafting more (I knit and make cards)*
6. *watching my favorite TV shows (I know this one will be controversial)*
7. *petting my animals and volunteering at a local shelter."*

Another participant, John, defines VS with few words, focusing on the consumption reduction and in enjoyable activities:

*Reject consumerism and do more with less. Do meaningful, rewarding things.*

Participants emphasize the boundaries of simple life when defining it, seeking to make the best of circumstances:

*Assess your real needs for the present with an eye on the future. Consider your goals and determine what you'll need to accomplish them. Be flexible and realistic, knowing that your desired/acceptable level of "simplicity" will vary through different seasons of life. Focus as much (or more) on spiritual health and cultivating good relationships than on how much stuff you have (or shouldn't have.) Don't completely sacrifice things you love (hobbies, etc.) for the sake of having less stuff. Be wary of fads and don't get caught up in purity spirals. (Davidson)*

They also state what VS is not. Victor shared the following:

*"You don't have to have a super-minimalist life in every regard. Tools are useful. Books can be read again. Clothes can bring back pleasant memories. Use the stuff. Bring it back into your life. Simple living isn't about some brutal purge or a race to the most ascetic. The Simple Police aren't going to come round and arrest you for having a couple of shirts you don't wear any more."*

The definitions of VS reveal and confirm the drivers listed below. Time, wellbeing and identity are the most discussed characteristics of their perspective of a simple life. This research found recurrent discussion topics that uncover core drivers and significant VS lifestyle concept associations. Drivers are critical factors to accomplishing a simple life. The comments are linked and anchored by three central aspects that are primary motivations and concerns leading to the VS lifestyle adoption: time, identity and well-being. These aspects are present in the majority of participant concerns about VS adoption. They seek well-being to increase quality time and be themselves. These results reveal the pursuit of time management and looking for enjoying life balancing emotional, financial and physical health as prior drivers seeking a simple life.

#### **4.4.2 Drivers**

Drivers refer to core and stronger motivations that lead most practices and the buying decision process of VS adoption. Themes involving time, identity and well-being are the most exposed in discussions amid multiple values, meanings and motivations reported by simplifiers.

The adoption process of respondents focuses on subjective standards, confirming that voluntary simplifiers drive their consumption choices through deep and strong underline motivations (Demirel, 2020).

#### **4.4.2.1 Time**

Our analysis demonstrates that concerns about time are central in VS adoption. It regards work, hobbies, health, food choices and social relations. It is about making the most of the time, slowing down life.

Discussions reveal that time-theme goes beyond merely work-related issues. Respondents look for ways to slow down the clock, enjoy each day, and find space for things they value. About this, David shared a citation from the Viridian Design Movement:

*"Sustainable practices navigate successfully through time and space, while others crack up and vanish. So basically, the sustainable is about time – time and space. You need to re-think your relationship to material possessions in terms of things that occupy your time. The things that are physically closest to you. Time and space..."*

*Furthermore, many of these objects can damage you personally. The hours you waste stumbling over your piled debris, picking, washing, storing, re-storing, those are hours and spaces that you will never get back in a mortal lifetime. Basically, you have to curate these goods: heat them, cool them, protect them from humidity and vermin. Every moment you devote to them is lost to your children, your friends, your society, yourself...."*

Most agree that having time to do meaningful things is more important than material things, as Marcus stated associating with his work:

*I work part time (30 hrs) and honestly, it's amazing. If someone offered me 3x my salary to work 40+ hours, I wouldn't take it. All my needs are covered. You don't need the nicest clothes, newest car or biggest house. These things don't matter. Finding inner peace and relaxation is worth so much more than material things. Time is money. Trust me, downsize. You won't miss anything. You'll get used to buying less and maybe even take pride in being more frugal. Come join this life.. it's great!*

Participants share the importance to have time to practice good, healthy habits, to be in the moment and to find peace. For example, Liz shared the following:

*I find myself spending more time walking, slowing down and looking at things, and way less time thinking about the constant barrage of stuff and people I would be inserting into my brain from social media.*

Another participant, Brandon, shared about downsizing work to have free time:

*I have time to actually REST during my weekends, instead of spending the whole weekend doing laundry and running errands just to get ready for the next workweek. In fact, this weekend I just decided to take a spontaneous solo road trip to visit some family six hours away, which wouldn't have been as do-able with a regular weekend. My time is worth so much more to me than the money.*

Most participants in the community emphasize making adjustments in routine, balancing work-time and having free-time to hobbies and to health improve their well-being. Time seems to be the ultimate goal with a meaningful simple life. For example, Mary shared the following:

*Very satisfied. I have adequate time for friends, family, adequate sleep, adequate time for exercise, time off alone, time for my hobbies, plus I don't have to look forward to retirement because I'm already happy with this level of work.*

These findings are in line with recent studies stating that simplifiers privilege time over money (McArthur & Stratford, 2020; Osikominu & Bocken, 2020; Rich et al., 2019).

Rich et al. (2019) associate the time-theme items with work/life preferences however our results reveal that time-theme is broader than work-related issues. The lack of time is a pervasive, chronic problem in modern societies. Time scarcity thus is a widespread phenomenon with multi-dimensional consequences which has implications for marketing and consumer behavior (Godinho, Prada, & Garrido, 2016; Nilsson, Gärling, & Marell, 2017).

#### **4.4.2.2 Well-being**

Our findings suggest that the online community members adopt VS seeking for what makes them happy. They intend to live a life well-lived while saving to invest for future goals. We identified the desire for a happy personal lifestyle by developing a philosophy of moderation, doing meaningful things. These findings are in line with studies that state that simplifiers do not suffer the loss of well-being (Ingo Balderjahn et al., 2020; Hüttel et al., 2020). David, for instance, found joy in ordinary simple life:



*I really do think that the joy of a small, ordinary life is so beautiful and real, and so much better than thinking you MUST achieve extraordinary-ness.*

Furthermore, Peter stated the desire for a happy, healthy and financially secure simple life:

*It's easy to look rich. People make many assumptions about others. You may be wildly wrong with your assumptions... It took me a long time to realise I just want a simple life. I don't want what everyone else has. I just want to be happy, healthy, and financially secure. And I'm very frugal...People used to scoff about me being tight, but I've just bought a holiday let in the Canary Isles and have another two in the pipeline in another Med country. Not just through saving, but through being financially smart as well. Now their opinions of me have changed and everyone wants a piece of the action. I now have several sources of passive income and my husband can give up employment and we can have more time together.*

Enjoying little things and to live a purposeful life is frequently shared by respondents, as Vitor stated:

*Having fun and enjoying the little things is what makes life worth living.*

Our findings state that the seeking well-being is a central encouragement to adopt VS, aligned with inner grown and self-quality of life. The association of simple life with happiness is studied in multiple studies in this area (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Ingo Balderjahn et al., 2020; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Etzioni, 2004; Huneke, 2005; Hüttel et al., 2020)

#### **4.4.2.3 Identity**

Identity is the primary goal of pursuing a simple life. Respondents desire a definition of themselves based on their values, not by their possessions. They seek to redefine the relationship with things and with work in seek for an authentic identity. Sebastian shared his feelings around materialism and individualism:

*"I used to feel bad if my friends had the latest iphone and I didn't. Now I finally realized this and I don't care about stuff as much. Glad I escaped that chaos. Stuff does not define me"*

Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016) and Shrum et al. (2013) report similar associations. Shrum et al. (2013) argue that materialism is an aspect of identity; it is about acquiring and using things,

services, experiences, and relationships to provide symbolic value. Furthermore, Johana stated about the harms of status comparison:

*"It took me a long time to get past the comparison thing. Once I realized I was happy being me, others didn't matter anymore."*

Participants also emphasise that how they related to objects and possessions is a process involving an evaluation of their added value to their lives. Mary discussed her feeling about identity and simple life:

*I simply ask myself, is this possession truly adding VALUE to my life? I'm definitely a minimalist, but don't get me wrong I own a LOT of stuff. Musical instruments, guns, technology, etc. But ALL of those things serve a solid purpose in my life, fulfill some hobby or passion, and add to the joy that's already in my life. I don't find my identity or purpose from owning things, but most of the time, whenever I have a bunch of useless crap laying around, I feel stressed/cloudy/unfocused. Don't suddenly just start throwing everything away because you watched some documentary about materialism. Really consider what things you own actually add value to your life.*

Sandlin and Waither (2009) found that voluntary simplicity's moral identity is a continuous and complex learning process involving self-practice, self-regulation, and an individualised approach to personal moral development.

These VS main drivers are encouragements to the several practices discussed in the section below.

#### **4.4.3 Practices**

We analysed the primary consumption practices from the most commented issues around simple life adoption (Fig 16). The map is divided into eight areas, each listing related products, services, and general preferences of this group regarding simplification.

This map of practices may shed some light on the motivational forces behind VS adoption decision making. This topic focuses on ordinary daily decisions, practices around special events, or significant facets as preferences involving the job. These themes are recurrent in the first levels of the simple life, encompassing strategies, challenges and personal experiences. The most discussed practices are decluttering, work, routine and hobbies.

**Figure 16** Map of practices during VS adoption



#### 4.4.3.1 Material and digital decluttering

The consumption reduction is the most important aspect associated with VS lifestyle. Decluttering is frequently the first practice when adopting simple life, inspired by TEDtalks, movies, books and documentaries. Participants shared organizational tools, Pinterest inspirations, and functional products to achieve visual order, like shelves, dividers and hooks. The Konmari method and popular decluttering strategies are cited as the 18-month rule method. Participants also incentive donations to charity shops. They commonly mentioned kindle, library cards and storage devices for digital data to reduce paper clutter. Those who are pursuing a simple life talk about material declutter and digital detox as similar and relevant issues. They associate the practice of declutter with distress, free mind, peace, organization and visual order.

Material simplicity has also been pointed an important aspect in VS studies (Balsa-Budai et al., 2019; Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Etzioni, 2004; Huneke, 2005; Kraisornsuthasinee & Swierczek, 2018; McDonald et al., 2006).

Respondents associate the practice of material declutter with valuing experiences in daily life (Huneke, 2005), as David shared:

*"It has been amazing to see how thrifty we can be and how happy I am to be freed of the materialistic mindset. I now find joy in people and experiences, not things."*

They also associate material simplicity with the mental state, as Johane stated:

*"I initially did it to reduce stress and not own many stuff, now I continue doing it for mental clarity and intentional living as well. I'm also trying to practice minimalism/essentialism; I try to only have stuff that I need and/or spark joy, especially stuff that are multifunctional and not only for one-task use. I believe it's important to see it as being resource-effective instead of only cost-effective. I love nature, so I try to live as low waste and sustainable as I can every day...I try to live by the phrase "Everything is connected"... I've only been able to do everything above since last year, to be honest. The changes were gradual..."*

Digital minimalism is a very relevant practice around the adoption of simple living. Participants shared actions as cancelling unnecessary subscriptions/services, installing virtual tools, and decreasing screen time to reduce anxiety and reach peace, as Flora shared:

*Learning to use technology and not be used BY it has been and is an ongoing practice that has been absolutely vital to my practice of a simple life.*

#### **4.4.3.2 Work**

Discussions about work are common in the adoption of VS. Simplifiers seek to work smarter and with flexibility, balancing time with inner growth. They value ethical or socially driven companies and the equilibrium between their styles and the local community's consideration (Shaw & Moraes, 2009). For instance, Peter advice those who are unhappy with a current stressful job:

*Life and time are too precious to spend it so miserably. I would say cut expenses quick, save money and get out of there, whether that means finding work doing something else (a career change) or going part-time with your work.*

Most agree that work need to be meaningful and with sustainable practices, as Carl shared:

*I'm dealing with something similar. Although I absolutely love my colleagues and work environment, I feel like my job isn't making the world a better place and actively create waste/carbon emissions.*

*I decided a few months ago to start a sustainability/green team at work and we've been working to reduce our carbon footprint, raise awareness and identify more sustainable suppliers. I feel a lot more motivated at work and it's meaningful to me. I figure my industry is always going to exist-might as well make it better for the planet and turn my passion into action!*

They also value a work-life balance (Bekin et al., 2005; Huneke, 2005). Frank shared:

*Working conventional hours (those in sales know this is hard to do!) has freed me up to spend meaningful time with friends, work on hobbies, and spend time outside which are all very important to me, more so than winning sales contests. Despite this work-life balance, I still feel like I'm "slacking off" and not dedicating myself to the job fully or not "moving up the ladder" as quick as a should be because I'm not making sales my entire life. Anyone else have similar experiences? I guess I'm trying to find that balance between career progression / pushing myself to be better and the maintenance of a more moderate career pace that allows me to live a more relaxed, purposeful life.*

#### **4.4.3.3 Routine**

Most participants intend to maximize control over daily activities through well-planned routines with simple morning/evening rituals. Sharing the day's sequence is a common practice in the forum; they seek to understand how to achieve an enjoyable, simple life through ordinary activities. Silvia, for instance, asked about routines to reach some inspiration:

*"People who are living their best simple life, what's your average day like? I enjoy learning about the day-to-day lives and future goals of people who have found their version of simple living. I'm looking for some inspiration. Where do you live? What's your average day like? What do you do for money? What do you do for pleasure? What drives your simple living? Do you have goals for simplifying your life further or plans for the future?"*

Samantha answered Silvia's question describing her routine and values:

*"I want to enjoy each day... wake up feeling excited about what I want to accomplish that day. Make my own schedule. Do some work but not too much. See friends. Go to yoga class. Make dinner at home. Go for an evening hike. Not wake up looking at emails that came through the night before and dreading what's waiting for me when I get into office and rushing in to make that morning meeting..."*

Participants share several practices as mindfulness and meditation; and organizational tools as journaling and calendars. When asked about simple tools for productivity and organization, Joseph mentioned:

*"TODOIST app for my daily personal to-do list; Google Calendar for appointments, birthdays; einfeld Calendar" (google it) to keep track of my workouts; At work, I use a bullet journal to write down my daily to-do items and keep notes"*

Several earlier studies highlighted similar practices aiming at controlling their daily life through planning (Leonard Barton, 1981). Organizing a routine with free time for enjoyable activities makes possible the practice of hobbies discussed below.

#### **4.4.3.4 Hobbies**

Adopting VS is associated with making it possible to add hobbies to daily life. Daniel stated that *"Hobbies are supposed to fill you up and get you out of yourself. They are a respite."*

Participants shared a preference for outdoors and creative options, such as crafting, gardening, wood working, etc. They also cited reading, music activities and yoga. Phill, for instance, suggested free hobbies in the simple life routine:

*"I would add hobbies. Try to find hobbies that involve the outdoors since they are free, for the most part. I hike, camp, and surf for recreation. Aside from the initial equipment investment, they are all free hobbies."*

Marcus talked about flow and well-being when describing his experience with hobbies:

*When I used to commute, I found podcasts and audiobooks really helped me de-stress in traffic and made me care less... If you can, get out in nature and walk once a week... found myself often in awe and it really helped change my mindset about what was important in life... pick up a hobby where you create something... I switched to creative hobbies and my life is so much better for it. Flow is just amazing for your well-being.*

Participants also emphasize social options as gaming, volunteering or going to local art shows.

#### **4.4.3.5 Food**

In what concerns food, participants prefer simple meals prioritizing local and healthy options, as David stated:

*Eating good is simple, it's just not easy. It's a lot of work and conscious effort. But it's really as simple as this: eat whole foods. Avoid processed foods as much as possible; avoid refined carbs and simple sugars; stop eating junk food and fast food.*

Simplifiers prefer multi-purpose kitchen items, as good knives. They value efficiency, practicing one meal day. Some of them decided to eat less meat. Some do not feel guilty spending on quality food with relaxing and enjoying meals, citing coffee or tea time. They value the experience with food.

#### **4.4.3.6 Clothing**

Clothing is associated with identity. Participants state that when reducing items, the remaining clothes align with their lifestyle, prioritizing comfort and mix-match pieces. Rental services, ethical and natural-made are also pointed as sustainable and valued practices. Some of the community members show photos of their new capsule wardrobe and motivate others to share similar practices. About clothing, Liz shared:

*I've stopped buying random clothing and junk. I now carefully select each piece that might enter my home. It needs to have its use, be worn and have a place in my current wardrobe.*

This result is consistent with the contribution of Alexander and Ussher (2012). In their multi-national survey about the VS movement, these authors found 51% of the respondents acknowledged that living simply 'had a significant impact in their clothing choices'.

Simplifiers share organization strategies for wardrobes, getting rid of repeated clothes and those not aligned with their style. They also prioritize high-quality items.

#### **4.4.3.7 Gift-giving**

There are several comments about the experience of receiving/ giving gifts seeking to align with the simple living viewpoint. Participants cited a preference for consumables, digital options, vouchers, books, art supplies and products from local stories. Victor shared:

*"I regularly buy ground coffee, beer. Occasionally buy shaving balm. Renew clothes when I need them. Buy the odd game from Steam (sale games, maybe 1-2 per year), occasional second-hand*

*book or cheap Kindle book when I can't find them for free or from a library. So, I always ask for beer, coffee, shaving balm, Steam vouchers, vouchers for a clothes shop and Amazon vouchers. People are happy because they know what to buy me; I'm happy because I'm getting things I like/ need and nothing I receive is wasteful."*

Participants also discussed about experiences e.g. a cooking class, theatre tickets, or options that encourages learning and creativity. Paul shared:

*My family has started doing experiences, so my mom takes us to dinner or the water park, my sister is taking the kids to a play. That sort of thing.*

Preference for sustainable options as plants and non-plastic items are also cited.

#### **4.4.3.8 Fitness**

Physical activities are discussed as a strategy to reduce stress and as a simple living tip. They intend to add fitness at routine with outdoor activities, as Marcus suggested:

*Give yourself a buffer period. Anything that keeps your hands busy but your brain free helps. Walking or biking to work is a great way to divide the day.*

Mary also shared about simplicity when adding exercise to her routine:

*Walking to work. It helps me wake up in the morning and disconnect from work on the way home. It's simplified my relationship with exercise as well*

A sequence of motivations interrelate all the discussed VS practices: Simplifiers adopting the lifestyle generally intend to reduce consumption to make work adjustments that may reduce income. The work reduction or flexibilization allow them to re-organize routine adding hobbies, improving general well-being with adjustments on food decisions, clothing and adding physical activity. These improvements free up simplifiers from the materialistic mindset. They prefer experiential or consumable gifts and try to pass away VS values in the practice of gift-giving, trying to convince family and friends to adopt less materialistic habits at social events.

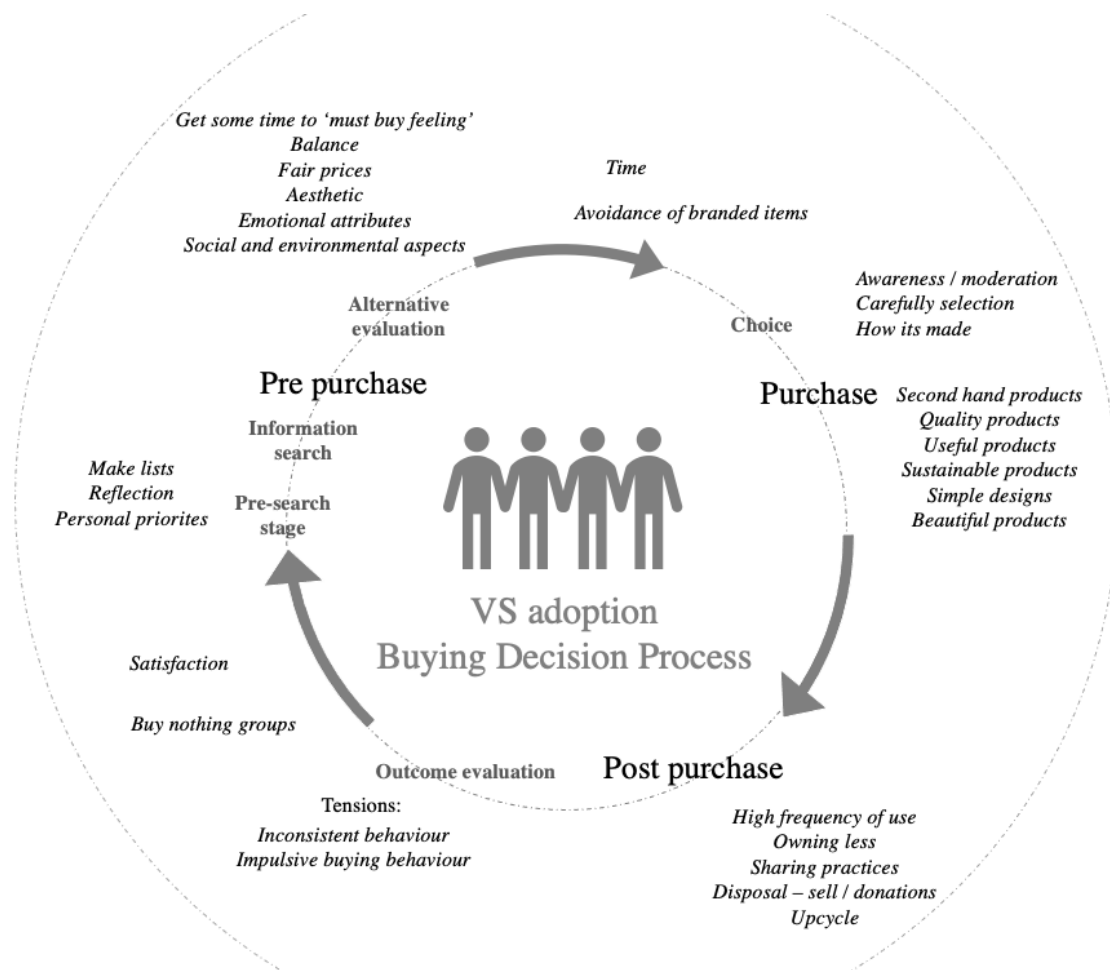
### **4.5 BUYING DECISION PROCESS**

Based on the comments on the online community, we analyse the buying decision process of simplifiers, including the different stages, and important factors in each stage.



The buying decision process of simplifiers in the first engagement level of VS shows a conscious effort to control purchases with rationality and purpose. Particular buying preferences improve purchase satisfaction and well-being in the long run. Some topics pertain to different stages. This buying-decision process is displayed in a circle because each stage reinforces future consumption decisions; most post-purchase practices influence pre-purchase experiences. Some simplifiers acquire new items just if they get rid of the old ones responsibly (fig 17).

**Figure 17** Buying decision process in the first engagement level



#### 4.5.1 Pre-purchase

This phase involves time to avoid impulsive behaviour; reflection about own necessities and sustainable factors to choose products and services. The pre-purchase is more valuable to simplifiers than purchase and post-purchase phases because they intend to avoid regrets. Francis shared:

*“One of my favorite yardsticks for buying something is: will I create the space and ritual to maintain it. If not, I don't actually have the mental and emotional space for it in my space.”*

These consumers look for more than products; they seek different added values linked to the products. They share strategies to control impulsive behaviour and to plan purchases aligned with beliefs. Liza stated:

*“I won't buy anything when I desire it... I put it in my Amazon cart and walk away a few days, look at it in a store, even handle it, but leave. If 3-4 days later I still "need" it, I may buy, but 99% of the time not. It's an acknowledgement that the feeling I MUST BUY is just that - a feeling. Feelings come and go all the time, part of maturing and growing is learning not to react to them.”*

This finding reinforces the conclusions of previous studies which show that voluntary simplicity emphasises reflection (Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; Kasser, 2009; Marchand & Walker, 2008; Rich et al., 2017; Shaw & Moraes, 2009; L. E. Williams & Poehlman, 2017)

#### **4.5.2 Purchase**

The purchase experience is permeable to specific values. Simplifiers share a preference for durability, esthetics and functionality around different categories of the product, like décor, gifts, food, clothes and hobbies. Participants also show a preference for simplified esthetics. Marianne shared about her purchase preferences:

*“I try not to hold onto anything that is not useful or beautiful”*

Marcus, for instance, shares about what motivates him in a purchase experience:

*“I just buy something when I actually need it, rather than shopping for fun or entertainment.”*

Other studies also reported an appreciation for quality over quantity (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Feola, 2014). The appreciation of aesthetic qualities of products is aligned with other studies (Boutroy, 2020; McArthur & Stratford, 2020).

#### **4.5.3 Post purchase**

The post-purchase experience of simplifiers in the first engagement levels can present satisfaction or tensions: pleasure about the good acquisitions in the purchase stage; or stress from some inconsistent or impulsive buying behaviour. In this stage, they commonly have the perception of

how little clothing and things are needed. The acquisitions are associated with sharing practices, upcycle and high frequency of use. They share strategies of getting rid, as disposition, selling, or buy nothing groups. Our findings are in line with Ballantine and Creery (2010), who stated that disposition is an essential role in the initial stages of adopting the lifestyle. Robert shared some tips about how to get rid:

*I practice being the curator of my museum and constantly scrutinize my possessions to see what I can donate or sell each month. I'm thinking most of my youth baseball card collection is next, just keeping a handful that spark a memory and sending the rest to some else's museum.*

Another participant, Clara, suggests focusing on future decisions:

*Try to sell or donate what you can to people who will use it and focus more on future decisions than past ones.*

The buying decision process of VS adoption has conscious choices and well-defined values. They try to make rational and calculated choices with different strategies as lists and wait some time to go through the phase of purchase. Probably simplifiers on higher levels of engagement have different worries and focus. Despite common sense, VS are not distant from marketing (Shaw & Moraes, 2009); they continually reject, adopt, and reflect on marketing offers. This article responds to Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones (2012) call for further study of how VS's lifestyle movements encourage adherents to do consumption practices in their daily lives.

## **4.6 CONCLUSIONS**

Understanding simplifiers in the early stages of engagement may offer clues to stimulate consumption reduction and cultivate inner values in a balanced life.

VS can be an alternative to the work-to-consume cycle and the lack of consciousness on consumption (Bekin et al., 2005). It contributes to sustainability, well-being and material consumption literatures (Kronenberg & Iida, 2011). This research aims to uncover VS's adoption through concept, drivers, practices, and decision-making to attain sustainable lifestyles.

Our findings suggests that time, identity and well-being are the primary motivations and concerns leading to the VS lifestyle adoption. These results' theoretical relevance summarises multiple simplifiers' motivations, values, and meanings into three main aspects. These drivers are the antecedents of the majority of participants discussion when adopting a simple life. It can help

provide direction to structure interviews and research meetings, also be useful to analysing qualitative content.

Voluntary simplifiers in the stage of adopting the lifestyle seek consumption reduction focusing on inner values to attain the quality of time in their everyday lives. This primary motivation frequently includes aspects as minimalism, work, routine, and hobbies to achieve happiness. These topics are associated with daily practices, which suggests that the VS adoption is solidly based on small incremental decisions that may turn (or not) into significant lifestyle changes. Our findings associated with everyday responsible consumption are in line with the study about ordinary critical consumers by Boutroy (2020).

Time, well-being and identity are the main findings of this study and should be added in VS definitions. The traditional concept of voluntary simplicity as 'living a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich' from Elgin and Mitchell (1977) is still current.

According to the literature review made by Rebouças and Soares (2020), a few of reviewed articles emphasise the reduction of work hours in the VS conceptualisation; our findings show that this aspect associated with the time theme is an essential topic of discussion between simplifiers.

Simplifiers consider the focus on relationships (Rebouças & Soares, 2020) among drivers, practices, and decision processes. Simplifiers in the first levels of engagement value time with beloved ones, experiences involving household and community instead of consumption activities, and worry about others' materialistic profile. They also seem to combat the need for social approval, principally from their partners, family and friends.

Marketing and companies may see consumption reduction as a threat or an opportunity (Erdoğan & Karapinar, 2015). The practice of voluntary simplicity can be an incentive to increase individual and social welfare and incentive ecological practices (Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; Hüttel et al., 2020; Rich et al., 2019). This study provides some insights to managers in terms of sustainable niche marketing. The group of Voluntary Simplifiers and their values can stimulate long-term, durable and high-quality products (Seegebarth et al., 2016). The drivers in the different engagement levels may differ, and this issue is a suggestion for future research.

Implications about this theme include a diversity of marketing outcomes across various products and service settings: food, fashion, tourism, decoration, fitness, and a range of useful apps to improve and organize routine. These marketing niches promote solutions about simple life and

sustainability. This theme also has implications for other areas as design, architecture and transports.

The map of practices may help companies to align their decisions with this affluent audience. It provides several practical solutions that enhance sustainable lifestyles. This map also has simple directions to increase the well-being of simplifiers. It may point out clues to sustainable projects from public policers. It is the government's responsibility to take care of citizens' well-being; this environmentally responsible lifestyle may be an option to achieve well-being. The experience in the online context is important to attain contemporary changes in ordinary critical consumers.

As with any study, the current research has some limitations. To begin with, all the comments are in English. Data collection was conducted in only one online community and should be extended to other online communities. The sample of this study was reasonably large for this type of research.

The pandemic context makes our results even more relevant to current social adaptations in the context of home office demands and the urgent need for balance every day to restore the population's mental health, plus the economic crisis that points to the need of consumption reduction. A simple life as a lifestyle and a philosophy may help consumers and public policymakers to seek well-being in these difficult times.

Seeking simplicity is not a simple process, but it seems to become less complicated with the construction of habits and a healthy way of consuming and living with others and the environment. Despite this lifestyle's evident importance to social, marketing and environmental context, it has boundaries and shortcomings. It does not aim at becoming a comprehensive solution for the current social and ecological problems. However, it is seen by many consumers as a valuable lifestyle with solutions to current sustainability challenges.

## **5 GENERAL CONCLUSION**

Studying consumers is important because their behavioural patterns and repeated simple daily decisions can redirect market paradigms. The individual consumption actions may seem unimportant in the face of the big scale of other market forces. However, even marginal/niche market consumer movements have a critical power to shift market trends. This work focuses on the individual values, motivations and meanings of consumer choices around VS adoption.

Nowadays, although for some it may seem easier not to change consumption habits and act without responsibility, some consumers are questioning consumption logic and searching for alternatives. In this research, we have focused on those consumers who voluntarily reduce consumption, driven by social consciousness, environmental and individual concerns, and some of them affirm to be happier with their way of life (Alexander & Ussher, 2012; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Etzioni, 2004; Huneke, 2005). Both the voluntary nature of the simplicity movement and the process of changing consumer habits need to be better understood in order to encourage more ethical and coherent consumer systems.

This thesis is about voluntary simplifiers in the first engagement levels. It seeks a better understanding of this lifestyle adoption. This study explores the values, motivations, meanings and marketing outcomes through three empirical studies with this consumer group.

This chapter presents the main thesis conclusions, comprising reflections about each study's findings and the relation between its results. It also discusses research contributions to theory and practice, followed by the limitations and suggestions for future studies.

### **5.1 MAIN CONCLUSIONS**

This study is about the consumption behaviour of voluntary simplifiers in the process of VS lifestyle adoption. To answer the thesis research questions, we follow a qualitative approach, conducting three empirical investigations through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and netnography methods.

This research examines VS adoption through values, motivations and meanings. There is a dearth of studies analysing these themes from the VS's perspective in the first levels of engagement (Osikominu & Bocken, 2020). Based on that, we explore VS definitions to understand the boundaries of this consumer group. This study also analyses marketing outcomes through

characterising the buying decision process of VS adoption and uncovering a map of practices of simplifiers in the first engagement levels.

The thesis is structured into three articles. In the first article, we analysed the VS research field through a systematic literature review. The review study is the first systematic study of 106 peer-reviewed articles about VS lifestyle. It has relevant findings revealing the research perspective about the theme through six recurrent aspects of the VS concept (reduced material consumption; search for intrinsic values, wellbeing and quality of life; environmental responsibility; social consciousness and focus on relationships; self-sufficiency; and working hours reduction); categories of research types (studies relating VS with other constructs; profile studies; studies of practices; and narrative-based studies); and a research agenda reflecting about gaps and study opportunities. This first article also concludes that VS is a growing area of research, with topics highly discussed in different media, facing current environmental and consumption social issues. In particular, based on the research to date, it shows five broad future research directions: 1) clarifying the VS conceptual domain with a clear conceptualization of the VS construct; 2) adopting cross-disciplinary perspectives, by studying VS in conjunction with related movements, and by adopting diverse research methods; 3) focusing on the voluntary nature of VS, analysing the meaning and motivations underlying consumption choices of voluntary simplifiers; 4) developing additional studies focusing on different levels of engagement in VS; and 5) the need for further studies on the complexity of decision making to reinforce understanding of the meanings and symbolic system behind consumption choices aiming at the simplification of life.

The second article is empirical research exploring beginner voluntary simplifiers through in-depth interviews and a focus group. These studies uncovered critical incidents that motivate lifestyle adoption as life changing events, social relationships and experiences with materialism. It also identified values, motivations and meanings, associated with decluttering, environmental aspects, social reasons and life satisfaction. Through barriers, this study revealed confessions of consumption inconsistencies and tensions around VS first engagement levels. Marketing outcomes were also displayed through product preferences and consumption practices, sharing information on incremental changes in simplifiers' daily lives. A summary of results was exhibited through a buying decision process of BVS, with topics organised around the classical steps of pre-purchase,

purchase and post-purchase, displayed in a way that each stage reinforces future consumption decisions.

Finally, the third article explored the consumption behaviour of voluntary simplifiers in the first engagement levels using netnographic research in an online community. We analysed around 22 thousand comments about VS adoption. Our results reveal recurrent discussions of VS definitions about the lifestyle boundaries and the implications involved in the changes simplifiers are undertaking. It also found three main drivers, as critical factors to accomplishing a simple life that are primary motivations and concerns leading to the VS lifestyle adoption: time, identity and well-being. A map of practices was organised into eight areas of simplifiers' everyday lives, listing related products, services, and general preferences of this group regarding simplification: material and digital decluttering; routine; hobbies; work; fitness; food; clothing; and gift-giving. Finally, we discuss the VS adoption's buying decision process showing a conscious effort to control purchases with rationality and purpose and with particular buying preferences that improve purchase satisfaction and well-being in the long run.

The main conclusions of the thesis are systematised in table 10.

**Table 10** Summary of findings

Article	Research questions	Main conclusions
<b>Voluntary Simplicity: A Literature Review and Research Agenda</b>	<p># How has VS been conceptualised in previous studies?</p> <p>#How has this research topic been analysed over the years in different areas?</p>	<p># There are six main facets of VS definitions: reduced material consumption, search for intrinsic values and quality of life, environmental responsibility, social consciousness, self-sufficiency, and reduction of working hours .</p> <p># Four research types of studies: studies relating VS with other constructs, profile studies, studies of practices, and narrative-based studies.</p> <p># Directions for further research: clarifying VS conceptual domain; adopting diverse research approaches; focusing on the voluntary nature of VS; understanding levels of engagement and the adoption process of</p>

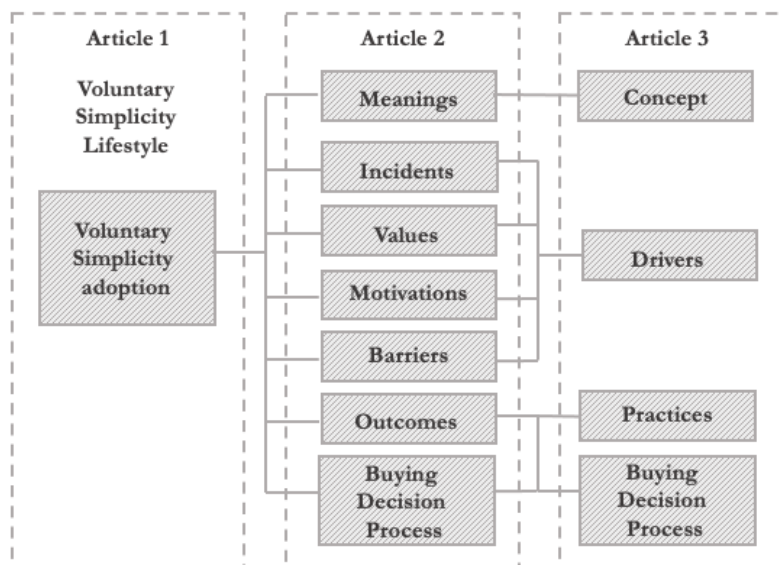


		VS; and identifying marketing-related outcomes of VS.
<b>The consumption behaviour of Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers: An exploratory study</b>	# What values, motivations, meanings, and outcomes lead consumers to become beginner voluntary simplifiers?	<p># Critical incidents that influenced respondents' consumption behaviour, grouped into seven categories.</p> <p># Motivations and values that that are helpful enablers to engage in this lifestyle, as life satisfaction, decluttering, balance and environmental reasons.</p> <p># Barriers, cited as constraints and tensions that limit the adoption of simple life, such as convenience, lack of time, consumption temptations and relationships.</p> <p># Meanings and associations regarding VS as personal satisfaction, happiness, peace, calm, and order.</p> <p># Marketing outcomes, analysing the practical consequences of partial engagement in voluntary simplicity, such as product preferences and general consumption habits.</p> <p># A circular beginner voluntary simplifier's buying-decision process model is proposed, showing how each stage reinforces future consumption decisions.</p>
<b>The adoption of Voluntary Simplicity: understanding concept, drivers, practices and the consumer buying decision process of simple life first steps</b>	<p># How is Voluntary Simplicity's adoption process?</p> <p># Which practices are common in the process of VS adoption?</p> <p># How is the buying decision process of voluntary simplifiers in the</p>	<p># Discussion about VS concept through simplifiers' own perspective</p> <p># Three main drivers to lifestyle adoption: identity, well-being and time.</p> <p># Map of voluntary simplifiers' practices on the first levels of engagement organised into eight areas: material and digital decluttering; routine; hobbies; work; fitness; food; clothing; and gift-giving.</p>

first steps of this lifestyle engagement?	# Analysis of the buying decision process model of VS adoption with particular VS buying preferences.
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The three articles complement each other. The first article allowed one to identify a gap and provided the overall direction for the empirical studies, including the adequate methodological approaches. The second article focused on the behaviour of beginner voluntary simplifiers suggesting meaningful directions for further research. The third article's findings culminate the research process initiated with the first and second articles. The three drivers (time, identity and well-being) summarize the findings (incidents, values, motivations, barriers) of the second article. The third article's Buying Decision Process results from the reflection of the first version of the same process presented in the second article. The process of maturity of analysis also occurred with the map of practices presented in figure 16, which originates from the presentation of the outcomes of figure 14. The concept discussions are also related and add to the results of the first and second articles. Hence, the three articles are interrelated and constitute a fluid path understanding voluntary simplifiers on first engagement levels through a process in which previous findings allowed to further uncover and refine the analysis of the subsequent stage. Figure 18 shows the interrelation between the results of the three articles.

**Figure 18** Interrelation between results through articles



In sum, the thesis research goals have been met as follows with the findings from the three articles:

#1 Analyse the process of moving between the groups of non-voluntary simplifiers to voluntary simplifiers: the CIT technique allowed for the identification of several incidents that promoted changes in respondents' lifestyles (see network in Figure 9). We also collected common practices in the process of VS adoption (map of practices in Figure 16).

#2 Understand how consumers become motivated to seek and adopt a simpler life and reduce their consumption: we reached this research goal by identifying the motivations and barriers in the second article (Figures 10 and 11) and summarizing the prior drivers of VS adoption through the netnography research (see section 4.4.2).

#3 Identify the values which lead consumers to become voluntary simplifiers: we identified ten categories that respondents regarded as valuable in VS in the second article (Figure 12). This research goal is also contemplated in the main drivers found in third article (section 4.4.2).

#4 Explore the meanings behind consumption around VS adoption: we explored common symbolisms of simple living and developed a network of 16 categories of VS meanings (Figure 13). These associations are also analysed in the VS definitions collected in the online community (section 4.4.1).

#5 Investigate the consumption-related outcomes of VS adoption: we analysed the practical consequences of partial engagement in voluntary simplicity, such as product preferences and general consumption habits in a network of 13 categories through in-depth interviews and a focus group (Figure 14). We also developed a map of practices divided into eight areas gathering 65 items from the most commented issues around simple life adoption (Figure 16). Finally, we analysed the buying decision process of simplifiers, including the different stages and important factors in each stage (Figure 17).

## **5.2 THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

This thesis explores VS adoption to contribute to consumer behaviour theory, managerial practices and the design of public policies.

Our results provide valuable contributions to a number of general consumer behaviour and marketing theories by supporting central tenets of these theories in the context of VS; namely, Schwartz Value Theory, Social Cognitive theory, and Self-determination theory.

In what concerns the Schwartz values theory, our studies evidence how individual practices of voluntary simplifiers reflect their values. Our results discuss that the adoption of VS is driven by internal values, helping to develop theoretical explanations to understand environmental behaviour. The findings about values, meanings and motivations around VS first engagement levels evidence the categories of egoistic, biospheric and altruistic values of Schwartz values theory (Saleem et al., 2018).

Analysing VS adoption contributes to the Social Cognitive theory by exploring the VSL's personal, behavioural, and environmental domains, focusing on the reciprocity between them (Demirel, 2020). Results show that discussions about VS values, meanings, and motivations constitute personal domains that deeply relate to VS behavioural perspective of marketing outcomes and daily practices. Therefore, personal and behavioural facets impact the environmental domain with social influences, as simplifiers' focus on relationships and their ethical concerns. The correlation between simplifiers' personal aspects, consumption practices, and social relationships evidences the explaining power of Social Cognitive Theory.

The results of this thesis support the self-determination theory based on competence, relatedness and autonomy as the three basic psychological human needs to experience growth (Rich, Hanna, & Wright, 2017; Taljaard & Sonnenberg, 2019). These needs may reinforce VS motivations and values. The self-determination theory association within daily events has closeness with VS characteristics. Simplifiers also have opportunities to experience these needs to increase well-being (Rich et al., 2017).

The VS field may be interpreted as reconciling different focal points: consumption and non-consumption practices, individual and collective approaches, the private and public spheres, and personal and social well-being. The richness of VS lies not only in the dimensions listed but in their interplay. This research adds to the body of knowledge in the broad fields of materialism and consciousness of consumption and contributes to understanding a broader phenomenon of consumers' "disenchantment with market society", which may take different forms in addition to VS including consumer resistance and anti-consumption (Atik et al., 2020; Balderjahn et al., 2020).

The pandemic context makes our results even more relevant to current individual and social adaptations in the context of the demands of the home office and home schooling, and changing family routines, calling for an urgent need for balance in daily life to restore the population's mental health. In addition, the economic crisis acts as a motive, even for those who have not suffered with

income reduction, for the advantages of consumption reduction. The pursuit of a simple life as a lifestyle and a philosophy may help consumers to seek well-being in these difficult times.

This research has many implications for marketing due to the increase of the number of voluntary simplifiers nowadays (Ballantine & Creery, 2010; Huneke, 2005; Markowitz & Bowerman, 2011; Peyer et al., 2017; Walther & Sandlin, 2013). The VS outcomes, including practices and understanding VS's buying decision process in the first engagement levels, provide valuable insights for companies to design strategies, products, and services aligned with this consumer group and a growing yearning for more socially and ecologically responsible practices. This research area can encourage businesses to seek coherence and transparency in their decisions, products and image, knowing that this effort may provide fidelity and confidence from voluntary simplifiers and related groups.

A number of marketing-related outcomes across various products and service settings, namely food, fashion, tourism, decoration and fitness were identified and can guide marketing strategy making and the development of a range of useful products, services and value propositions. This theme also has implications for other areas as design, architecture and transports.

It may point out clues to sustainable projects from public policy, such as the configuration of urban green spaces for leisure, community gardens and the promotion of volunteering. It is the government's responsibility to take care of citizens' well-being; this environmentally responsible lifestyle may be an option to achieve well-being. The experience in the online context is important to attain contemporary changes in ordinary critical consumers.

The positive relation between life satisfaction and voluntary simplifiers is important for policymakers in supporting populations to change consumption behaviours (Ahola et al., 2013; Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; Rich et al., 2017). This study intends to contribute to researching values associated with the process of changing consumer behaviour.

Every single act of consumption has social and environmental consequences. Consumers have freedom over their consumption choices, but each small act of consumption can result in harmful consequences for themselves and others beyond this freedom. Freedom must be related to responsibility in consumer behaviour.

### **5.3 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This thesis has some limitations, some of which are opportunities for future research. Qualitative analysis allows for a deeper immersion in the topic, enabling important and unique findings. Nevertheless, this approach also has limitations on the scope of rationalization of data and the broad application of the conclusions. Further research may adopt quantitative methodologies and apply quantitative measures about VS adoption and lifestyle first engagement levels to measure and uncover patterns in the studied constructs as well as test hypotheses regarding the variable relationships.

Among the limitations related to this study's scope, there were difficulties in finding and classifying BVS. The solution of self-conceptualization as a BVS has been considered a valid approach (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Cherrier, 2009a; Huneke, 2005), despite the possibility of capturing different profiles of consumption, some of which may not be directly related to the philosophy of simplicity. Clarifying the different VS typologies, motivations, and behavioural patterns is an important contribution of this study. However, future studies may develop and test comprehensible scales about this categorisation.

The Voluntary Simplifiers can be understood as a global segment, with strong global cultural identity (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977), whose cross-cultural similarities in values, motivations and behaviours are stronger than their national-cultural differences (Strizhakova & Coulter, 2013). However, further studies may prioritize cultural singularities in order to enrich findings and discriminate local characteristics. We also suggest additional studies in different national contexts to research the buying decision process of VS and to test the proposed model.

Some lifestyles and social movements involving responsible consumption, reduced consumption and social concerns, as the voluntary simplifiers, are important to rethink the actual high materialist behaviours and their adverse social consequences. Understanding the phase of adopting VS with their motivations and values is a small but essential step in promoting future social change.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW GUIDE

Good morning.

Thank you for your availability and cooperation with our research.

I make it clear that we will apply this interview with the confidentiality of data and, if you prefer, there is the possibility of future access to the research conclusions. Please, do you authorize record this interview?

*Turn on the record*

#### a) Presentation and self-identification

Voluntary Simplicity is a lifestyle with reduced consumption, search for inner values and quality of life, and social and environmental consciousness. There are different engagement levels: the strong forms (who strongly adopt or reject practices of simple living) and those between them, who take some practices of voluntary simplicity and others not – the Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers.

1. From 1 to 5, how strong do you identify yourself as a beginner voluntary simplify? Why?
2. Did you remember any incident that led to a change in your consumption profile?
3. Do you intend to become a strong voluntary simplifier? If yes - How? If no - Why?

#### b) Meaning

1. What do consumption activities mean for you?
2. What do your possessions (house, furniture, car, clothes) mean to you?
3. What possessions are important for you? Why?
4. What does taking steps to live a simple life mean to you?
5. What does simplifying consumption mean to you?

#### c) Values

1. What do you value about simple life?
2. What do you value in products and brands that represent a simple life?
3. What aspects do you take into consideration when buying products?

#### d) Motivations

4. What motivates you to simplify consumption? And what demotivates?
5. What motivates you to buy things? And to have self-control in purchases?
6. Do you remember any incident that interfered in your consumption motivations as BVS?

#### e) Outcomes

7. What changed in your consumption habits with the search for a simple life? And what is in changing process?
8. What do you think that you need to change in your consumption profile? And what not? Why?
9. What do you think that still needs to change in your relationship with brands?
10. What do you think brands can do to improve your lifestyle?
11. What is your message to brands?
12. What products or brands represent your lifestyle? Why?

f) Demographics

Gender

Age

Education

Occupation

Marital status

Do you know any BVS?

## APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEWEES

	<b>Cod</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Degree of schooling</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Social Class</b>	<b>Country</b>
1	Maria	Female	27	Masters	Teacher	Married	Medium	Brazil
2	Ana	Female	35	Masters	Architect	Married	Medium	Brazil
3	Sara	Female	24	Graduate	Architect	Single	Medium	Brazil
4	Carla	Female	25	Postgraduate	Architect	Single	Medium	Brazil
5	João	Male	32	Graduate	Accountant	Married	Medium	Brazil
6	Clara	Female	31	Masters	Journalist	Married	Medium	Brazil
7	José	Male	29	Masters	Teacher	Married	Medium	Brazil
8	Liz	Female	30	Postgraduate	Lawyer	Married	Medium	Brazil
9	Davi	Male	35	Doctorate	Musician	Married	Medium	Brazil
10	Vitor	Male	68	Graduate	Farmer	Married	Medium	Brazil
11	Alberto	Male	39	Doctorate	Teacher	Married	Medium	Brazil
12	Andrea	Female	38	Doctorate	Teacher	Married	Medium	Brazil
13	Daniel	Male	37	Postgraduate	Physician	Married	Medium	Brazil
14	Olivia	Female	21	Graduate	Student	Single	Medium	Brazil
15	Marcela	Female	29	Masters	Advertising	Married	Medium	Brazil
16	Paula	Female	47	Postgraduate	Probation officer	Married	Medium	Brazil
17	Pedro	Male	50	Graduate	Systems analyst	Married	Medium	Brazil
18	Marcos	Male	31	Graduate	Police Officer	Married	Medium	Brazil
19	Marta	Female	33	Postgraduate	Teacher	Married	Medium	Brazil

### **APPENDIX 3 FOCUS GROUP GUIDE**

Hello, we will talk about voluntary simplicity lifestyle and consumption. Here you can freely share thoughts, experiences and opinions without any worries about wrong answers. This meeting goal is that you talk with each other more than with me.

- Practices: Which consumption practices do you have (or will adopt) to reach a simpler life? How to achieve them?
- Motivations: About this process of changing lifestyle, what helps and what is a barrier?
- Can you share situations that incentivized voluntary simplicity adoption?
- Which is the ideal consumption experience regarding simple life?
- How do you deal with your consciousness in concern about simple life?
- Which are your conclusions about the focus group discussions?

## APPENDIX 4 FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Degree of schooling	Occupation	Marital Status	Social Class	Country
1	Female	29	Masters	Advertising	Married	Medium	Brazil
2	Female	30	Postgraduate	Lawyer	Married	Medium	Brazil
3	Female	31	Masters	Journalist	Married	Medium	Brazil
4	Female	35	Masters	Architect	Married	Medium	Brazil
5	Female	24	Graduate	Architect	Single	Medium	Brazil
6	Female	25	Postgraduate	Architect	Single	Medium	Brazil
7	Female	28	Graduate	Lawyer	Married	High	Brazil



## **APPENDIX 5 RESEARCHER PARTICIPATION IN VS FORUM**

What is your story? How did you engage in Voluntary Simplicity? What worked for you and what didn't? How did you go when you started? What helped in the online context?

I am looking at ways to start simplifying life, collecting real tips on what worked in the beginning and understanding its challenges. I am Raquel Rebouças, a lecturer and doctoral student and someone who believes in this lifestyle's relevance to society today.