

**Marketing, voluntary simplicity, and life satisfaction:
A Belgium-Canada comparative study**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study conducted among a sample of Belgian ($n = 105$) and Canadian ($n = 353$) simplifiers where it is shown that adopting the values of voluntary simplicity has a positive effect on the perception of a satisfying life in general. The results also show that what determines the extent to which consumers integrate these values may differ across cultures.

Keywords: Voluntary simplicity, anti-commercial rebellion, life satisfaction, cultural values

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this research is to explore the relationship between what consumers think of marketing and the extent to which they are satisfied with their life in general. While some marketing researchers argue that the ultimate goal of consumption is to attain an enhanced state of well-being (e.g., Andreasen, 1994), research in the domain of positive psychology indicates that happiness is more a function of one's internal life, as defined through the fundamental values that the person adopts (Larsen and Eid, 2008). In that sense, the values of voluntary simplicity are particularly relevant since they relate directly to marketing activities and explicitly call into question material consumption. Indeed, research has shown that the position that consumers take as regards marketing activities and consumption can lead them to question the materialistic values that most people agree with and to adopt values that challenge the virtues of consumption, namely the values of voluntary simplicity (Boujbel and d'Astous, 2017). It is through the integration of these values, among other things, that the sense of a satisfying life may develop.

Although the literature on voluntary simplicity is abundant (see Rebouças and Soares, 2020), there are few studies that have looked at the determinants and consequences of this lifestyle. In addition, research on voluntary simplicity (VS) has been generally conducted in a single country, ignoring the possibility that the adoption of the VS lifestyle may unfold differently depending on a country's fundamental cultural values. This research aims to contribute to fill this knowledge gap by examining the effect of consumers' critical responses to the adverse consequences of marketing activities (e.g., overconsumption, waste of resources, impacts on the environment) on the adoption of VS values, as moderated by culture, and the ultimate consequences of this relationship on consumers' subjective well-being.

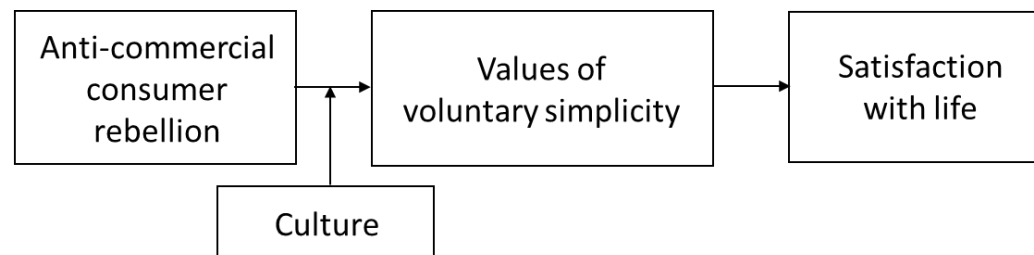
CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The general conceptual framework that guides this research is displayed in Figure 1. One determinant of a person's attitude toward living a simple life is the recognition that marketing activities have negative effects on the environment and encourage overconsumption and the waste of resources. As shown by Boujbel and d'Astous (2017), the extent to which a person expresses his or her rebellion toward commercial activities has a positive effect on the adoption of the values of voluntary simplicity and this, in turn, increases his or her level of felt well-being. Living as a simplifier means that daily activities are accomplished such that one's dependence on institutions (e.g., businesses) and overall consumption are minimized, with the ultimate objective of attaining life satisfaction and happiness (Zavestosky, 2002). Thus:

H1: The degree of a consumer's anti-commercial rebellion has a positive effect on the extent to which the values of voluntary simplicity are adopted, which in turn has a positive effect on satisfaction with life. Moreover, in this relationship the values of voluntary simplicity act as a mediating variable.

Figure 1

The conceptual framework



As mentioned above, it is relevant to look at this hypothesized mediated relationship in different cultures in order to verify its generalizability. For instance, the VS values of consumers who belong to a culture that tends to question the power of institutions (e.g., governments, firms, trade unions) as regards the everyday conduct of life may depend on anti-commercial rebellion to a greater extent.

The cultural value framework developed by Hofstede (1984) represents for many researchers a useful tool to examine the impact of culture on people's behaviors (see e.g., Fernandez et al., 1997; Milner, Fodness and Speece, 1993; Sivakumar and Nakata, 2001). In its original formulation, the framework allows to contrast societies on four basic cultural value dimensions: *power distance* – the degree to which individuals accept that power is distributed unequally; *uncertainty avoidance* – the degree to which individuals are uncomfortable with ambiguity; *individualism/collectivism* – the degree to which individuals are socially interconnected; and *masculinity* – the degree to which individuals are characterized by masculine values such as competition, achievement, and aggression.

The scores of Belgium and Canada with respect to these four cultural values are displayed in Table 1. These two countries were selected for three main reasons: (1) the researchers were granted the permission to contact members of an organized group of simplifiers in each country, (2) the participants share a common language (French), and (3) there are notable cultural differences between members of these two countries. Concerning this last point, Hofstede's (1984) cultural value scores suggest that in general Belgians are more likely to accept inequalities among people than Canadians (higher score on power distance) and are also less comfortable with respect to uncertainty than their counterparts (higher score on uncertainty avoidance). The two countries are comparable with respect to the two other cultural value dimensions.

People living in societies that score high on power distance generally value the concept of social hierarchy in a favorable way (Hofstede, 1984). They see their social position as being right and tend not to challenge entities perceived as having a higher social status. By being common providers of products and services, firms are likely to be seen by these consumers as having some dominance over their lives and this higher social status should confer them some immunity as regards their commercial

activities. Therefore, the effects of anti-commercial rebellion on the adoption of the values of voluntary simplicity should be less important in a country characterized by high power distance since consumers in this country would be less likely to embrace the VS lifestyle based on their perception that the commercial activities of firms are inappropriate.

Table 1

Contrasts between Belgium and Canada with respect to Hofstede's (1984) cultural value dimensions

	Power distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty avoidance
Belgium	65	75	54	94
Canada	39	80	52	48

Members of a culture that is characterized by a high level of uncertainty avoidance have low tolerance for ambiguity. In general, they value situations which are clearly defined and try not to engage in behaviors that are perceived as being out of the ordinary. They are guided by principles which are often grounded on ethical values. Although they may disapprove firms whose commercial activities are perceived as unethical, this attitude would be mainly based on their perception of how things ought to be and should not have a profound influence on their own conduct. Therefore, among these consumers, the impact of being critical vis-à-vis the negative consequences of commercial activities is not expected to change their system of values in a significant way. Moreover, because the marketing activities of firms can be seen as beneficial or detrimental to society, this can lead to a certain level of ambiguity among these individuals. Therefore, the impact of being critical vis-à-vis the negative consequences of marketing activities should not change their system of values in a significant way.

On the basis of the above rationale, the following research hypothesis is put forward:

H2: The positive effect of anti-commercial rebellion on the extent to which the values of voluntary simplicity are adopted is stronger among consumers that belong to a society characterized by low levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Moreover, this moderated effect on satisfaction with life is mediated by the values of voluntary simplicity.

METHOD

In order to test the adequateness of the conceptual model, a survey was conducted among a sample of simplifiers in two different countries: Belgium and Canada.

Data collection in Belgium

The Belgian data were collected with the collaboration of a 40-year old association named "Les amis de la terre" (the Earth's friends) (www.amisdelaterre.be) whose objective is to promote the concept of living a simple life as well as to call for social transformations with respect to relations with the environment and economic inequalities. The members of the association were contacted by means of a motivating letter from the association's president in which a link to the online questionnaire was provided. A total of 105 French-speaking persons accepted the invitation to

participate to the survey. Their age ranges from 23 to 88 years with a mean of 50 years. The sample comprises a greater proportion of female respondents (59.8%). While 71.6% of the respondents described themselves as regular simplifiers, 27.5% said they adopted this lifestyle on an occasional basis (no significant difference between males and females). The respondents are well educated since 75.8% had earned a college or university diploma. Their family income is somewhat low as 55.3% said that it was between 10,000 and 35,000 euros per year.

Data collection in Canada

In Canada, the data were collected among members of the “Réseau Québécois pour la simplicité volontaire” (Québec’s network for voluntary simplicity) (www.simplicitevolontaire.org). At the time of data collection, the network had a total of about 1,600 members who were all invited to participate to the survey with a procedure identical to that used for building the Belgian sample. A total of 353 persons accepted the invitation to participate. Their age varies between 18 and 80 years with a mean of 44.6 years. As in the Belgian sample, the proportion of female respondents is greater (63.2%). The participants said that they practiced voluntary simplicity on a regular basis (60.6%) or occasionally (36.8%). Their annual family income shows some significant variance as 20.2% said that they earned less than 20,000 Canadian dollars (about 13,600 euros) whereas 19.6% reported an annual income of more than 80,000 Canadian dollars (about 54,000 euros). They are well educated with 69.5% having a university diploma.

Measures

The three concepts in the theoretical framework were measured with existing scales. Anti-commercial consumer rebellion (ACR) was assessed with 5 items taken from a scale developed by Austin, Plouffe and Peters (2005). While the original scale comprises 4 dimensions that are presumed to circumscribe the ACR concept, only the dimension that refers to concrete actions taken by consumers (i.e., the *avoidance* dimension; e.g., “I boycott products made by companies that are unethical”)) is used in this study. The extent to which a person adopts the values of voluntary simplicity (VS) was measured with a 6-item scale developed by Shama and Wisenblit (1984) (e.g., “I believe in material simplicity, i.e., buying and consuming only what I need”). Finally, subjective well-being was assessed with the well known Diener et al. (1985) 5-item Satisfaction with Life (SWL) scale (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”). All items were scored on 7-point bipolar numerical scales with end points *totally disagree/totally agree*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Psychometric qualities of the measures

The items of each scale were subjected to a factor analysis in order to verify the scale’s unidimensionality. This was performed for the three concepts individually, in the Belgian sample, in the Canadian sample, and in both samples altogether. In all cases, a single factor emerged explaining a fair proportion of the variance (minimum = 40.81%, maximum = 71.12%). These results confirm that the scales are unidimensional. Their reliability is good, ranging from $\alpha = 0.68$ (VS values in the Canadian sample) to $\alpha = 0.89$ (ACR in the Canadian sample) with a mean of $\alpha = 0.82$.

The discriminant validity of the three scales was assessed by conducting a factor analysis using all items (i.e., 16 items). This was done in each sample and for all

observations as well. In all cases, three factors emerged as expected. However, one item belonging to the VS values scale systematically loaded also on the factor representing the ACR concept (“I consider myself ecologically responsible”). A decision was therefore made to remove this item from the scale and the new set of 15 items was subjected to factor analyses. In all cases, the items loaded on their proper factor. The resulting factor structure matrices confirm that the intra-factor loadings are generally high (Belgian sample: minimum = .50, maximum = 0.83, mean = 0.74; Canadian sample: minimum = 0.51, maximum = 0.88, mean = 0.76; total sample: minimum = 0.55, maximum = 0.87, mean = 0.76) and that the absolute cross-factor loadings are generally of low magnitude (Belgian sample: minimum = .02, maximum = 0.29, mean = 0.14; Canadian sample: minimum = 0.00, maximum = 0.21, mean = 0.11; total sample: minimum = 0.03, maximum = 0.20, mean = 0.10). The results bring strong support for the discriminant validity of the scales. For all scales, the mean of the items was taken as an indicator of the concept.

Moderated mediation analyses

The data were analyzed with the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) by means of template 7 for moderated mediation models and using 5,000 bootstrap samples. This entails first regressing the mediating variable (i.e., VS values) on the independent variable (i.e., anti-commercial consumer rebellion), the moderator (i.e., country) and their interaction (Model 1). Second, the dependent variable (i.e., satisfaction with life) is regressed on the mediating variable and the independent variable (Model 2).

Table 1 Moderated mediation: Regression results

<i>Model</i>	<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Regression coefficient</i>	<i>R²</i>
1	Values of VS	ACR	0.43***	0.09***
		Country	1.19**	
		ACR × Country	-0.22***	
2	SWL	ACR	0.07	0.11***
		Values of VS	0.52***	

Notes: (N = 444); * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Values of VS: Values of voluntary simplicity; ACR: Anti-commercial consumer rebellion; SWL: Satisfaction with life.

The results of these multiple regressions are displayed in Table 1. As can be shown, in Model 1 the interaction between country and anti-commercial consumer rebellion (ACR) is statistically significant ($p < .001$), as expected. More precisely, the effect of anti-commercial rebellion in the Canadian sample is positive ($b = 0.20$) and statistically significant ($p < .01$) whereas it is not significant in the Belgian sample ($b = -0.02$; $p > .80$). In Model 2, the effect of the mediating variable on the dependent variable is statistically significant ($p < .001$) whereas the effect of the independent variable is not. These results are consistent with the conceptual model since they show that the mediating effect of adopting the values of voluntary simplicity in the relationship between ACR and SWL is moderated by culture. More precisely, they confirm that the mediating effect of adopting VS values on SWL is more pronounced among simplifiers living in a society (i.e., Canada) where power inequalities are

questioned (e.g., firms cannot do whatever they want) and nonconformist behaviors (e.g., boycotting products) are tolerated.

In addition, the PROCESS macro provides point and confidence interval estimates for the indirect effects. In the present case, the ACR \rightarrow VS values \rightarrow SWL indirect effect's point estimate in the Canadian sample is equal to 0.11, statistically different from zero as confirmed by the 0.95 confidence interval ([0.05,0.17]), whereas in the Belgian sample it is equal to -0.01 and not statistically different from zero (0.95 confidence interval: [-0.11,0.07]). Moreover, the point estimate of the index of moderated mediation, which corresponds to the difference between the conditional indirect effects (see above), is equal to -0.12, a value that is statistically different from zero (0.95 confidence interval: [-0.24,-0.02]). Hence, the results of these moderated-mediation statistical analyses strongly support H1 and H2.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this research show that consumers' adoption of the values of voluntary simplicity has a positive effect on their perception of a satisfying life in general. However, they also show that what determines the extent to which consumers integrate these values may differ across cultures. Whereas in societies characterized by low levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Canada), consumers' concrete resistance to marketing practices that are unethical or detrimental to the environment play a significant role in their adopting values and behaviors that question material consumption, this appears not to be the case in societies that display higher levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Belgium). Further research is necessary to identify the determinants of VS values in these latter societies and to verify that the same results hold in other cultures that display similar differences in cultural values.

Additional research is also necessary to isolate the effects of power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Indeed, in this research the country moderation effect observed in the relationship between consumers' anti-commercial rebellion and the adoption of the values of VS may be due to differences as regards power distance, or uncertainty avoidance, or both. It would be useful in future studies to obtain individual measures on these two cultural values (see Yoo et al., 2011).

Finally, it is interesting to note that the impact of agreeing with the values of voluntary simplicity on subjective well-being, as estimated among Canadian and Belgian consumers in this research, is positive and statistically significant (Belgium: $b = 0.78, p < .001$; Canada: $b = 0.49, p < .001$). This result suggests that this relationship does not change as a function of these particular cultural values (i.e., power distance and uncertainty avoidance). Research must be conducted however to verify whether this relationship depends on other dimensions of culture.

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