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[Bekin, C., Carrigan, M. and Szmigin, I. (2005) "Defying Marketing Sovereignty: Voluntary Simplicity at New Consumption Communities," *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 8(4), pp.413-429.]

Defying Marketing Sovereignty: Voluntary Simplicity at New Consumption Communities

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Structured Abstract

Purpose of this paper
To broaden the scope of our knowledge of collective voluntarily simplified lifestyles in the UK, by exploring whether voluntary simplifiers achieve their goals by adopting a simpler life.

Design/methodology/approach
Radical forms of voluntary simplifier groups were explored through participant-observation research. The methodology can be broadly classified as critical ethnography, and a multi-locale approach has been used in designing the field.

Findings
Although for some of these consumers voluntary simplicity seems to have reinstated the enjoyment of life, certain goals remain unfulfilled and other unexpected issues arise, such as the challenges of mobility in the attainment of environmental goals.

Research limitations/implications (if applicable)
This is an ongoing research, however many opportunities for further research have arisen from this study. Quantitative research could be undertaken on the values and attitudes buttressing voluntary simplicity specifically in the UK. The extent to which such communities influence mainstream consumers could be studied both quantitatively and qualitatively. Mainstream consumers' attitudes to the practices of such communities could prove useful for uncovering real consumer needs.

Practical implications
Despite these communities position in the extreme end of the voluntary simplicity spectrum, their role in shaping the practices and attitudes of other consumers is clear.

What is original/value of paper
This paper provides new consumer insights that can re-shape policy-making and marketing practice aimed at achieving a sustainable future.

Keywords
Voluntary simplicity – Critical ethnography – Consumption communities – Ethical consumption

Paper Category
Research paper

Defying Marketing Sovereignty:

Voluntary Simplicity at New Consumption Communities

Introduction

The current marketplace no longer represents an authentic environment for all consumers. While certain companies have successfully pioneered a more ethical approach to business (e.g. the Co-op Bank, Ecover) in response to the increasingly sophisticated and principled consumer (Titus and Bradford, 1996), others have been slower to respond. Facilitated by the Internet, interested consumers and resistance groups now exchange greater levels of information about brands and their producers (Szmigin, 2003; Reed, 1999). This has led to the increased scrutiny of supply chain practices of large supermarket chains (Uhlig, 2003; www.wye.org/business/directory/wyecyclebetterworld.htm), global outsourcing and production practices (Klein, 2000; http://nologo.org/), accountability issues (Jay, 2003), CEO packages (English, 2003; Rossingh, 2003), as well as issues directly connected to environmental degradation, such as excess consumption in developed countries (www.adbusters.org/metas/eco/bnd/; www.buynothingday.co.uk/) for which marketing is often blamed, and the need for sustainable development (Cahill, 2001; www.foe.org.uk; www.greenpeace.org.uk). Now companies that do not genuinely adopt more responsible and ethical marketing strategies are subject to cynicism.

For some this cynicism has been galvanised into something more powerful; consumers are gradually challenging the status quo by defying corporations' power in

the marketplace and redefining their commercial relationships under more equitable terms (Szmigin, 2003). Resisting marketing's hegemony in the marketplace has meant voluntarily simplifying their lifestyles. By withdrawing themselves (in various ways) from the traditional, marketplace-based lifestyle they feel they can achieve a less frantic, more principled (and hence satisfactory) way of life. Although voluntary simplicity has been well documented in the marketing and economics literature, the majority of studies (an exception is Shaw and Newholm, 2002) have been carried out in the US. They have largely examined individual consumer behaviour (i.e. what consumers say they do rather than how they actually behave), with less emphasis on investigating communal solutions to a simpler life. Given the limited research on this topic in Europe, the aim of this paper is to address collective voluntarily simplified lifestyles in the UK by exploring whether voluntary simplifiers achieve their goals by adopting a simpler life. In order to achieve this, radical forms of voluntary simplifier groups, conceptualised by Szmigin and Carrigan (2003) as New Consumption Communities, were explored through participant-observation research. New insights from the findings suggest that although this model of voluntary simplicity delivers much, certain goals remain unfulfilled, while other unexpected issues arise.

An Overview of Voluntary Simplicity

Leonard-Barton and Rogers (1980, p.28) define voluntary simplicity as "the degree to which an individual consciously chooses a way of life intended to maximize the individual's control over his own life", and Leonard-Barton (1981, p.244) adds "…and to minimize his/her consumption and dependency". Yet, the idea of voluntary

simple living is not a new phenomena; it has been advanced and practised by most religious groups, including the Puritans and Quakers (Gregg, 2003; Shi, 2003).

Richard Gregg, who coined the term ‘voluntary simplicity’ (Leonard-Barton, 1981; Leonard-Barton and Rogers, 1980; Zavestoski, 2002) argued that it involved inner values of sincerity and honesty with oneself, and avoidance of material possessions thought to distract the individual from the pursuit of his greater purpose in life (Gregg, 2003). The idea of simple living was also a feature of the counter-culture of the 60s and 70s. Zavestoski (2002, p.153) argues that while the current manifestation of voluntary simplicity shares many of the characteristics of the anti-corporate, nature-focused counter-culture, it has “more to do with existential crisis than with economic crisis”. Etzioni sees voluntary simplicity as an attenuated form of the values of the counterculture, defining it as “the choice out of free will (…) to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning” (Etzioni 1998, p.620). Although the contemporary version of voluntary simplicity may have slightly different manifestations than that of the 60s and 70s, its aspirations are still much the same. The 60s was also about a fuller, more meaningful life, and rebellion against being told to consume, what to consume, and how to consume. Since then the concept has gained varied definitions, particularly integrating voluntary simplicity into a secular world (Zavestoski, 2002).

In their response to the macro goal of simplifying their lives, individual consumers have been shown to exhibit a range of micro-strategies. Shaw and Newholm’s UK study (2002), and Dobscha’s US research (1998) present common patterns of

simplifier behaviour. A simplified diet or vegetarianism are typical responses, as is increased consumption of organic produce, and avoidance of processed or genetically modified foodstuffs. Communal living presents potentially greater possibilities of ethically producing and processing one's own food. Both studies identified transport as one of the most contentious items on the voluntary simplicity agenda; some choose public transport, cycling or walking over cars, while others would moderate their car usage or 'car-share'. Yet both highlighted the difficulty of totally avoiding car usage, and the challenges this created in their search for environmentally-friendly lifestyles. Again, the ability to find communal solutions to transport issues may have greater possibilities (i.e. 'car-share'). Other simplifier strategies include buying second hand products, or recycling existing products to extend the lifecycle and/or to reduce/modify/avoid consumption. How prevalent are these behaviours among community residents; are there inconsistencies in their approaches as identified by past studies? For example, in Shaw and Newholm (2002) one respondent declared that the morally right behaviour was to cycle, while spending enormous amounts of money on the best quality off-road cycle and specialist equipment. While not entirely removing themselves from the marketplace, individuals in past studies have reported avoiding marketplace interactions wherever possible, either by not using certain products, cutting usage levels, or finding alternative solutions. Again, is this behaviour reflected in community approaches to simplified living? As well as *what* people do, it is important to understand *why* they opt for this 'alternative' lifestyle.

Motivations Behind Voluntary Simplicity

Cases of downshifting and voluntary simplicity have been widely publicised in the US and to lesser extent in the UK. Numerous examples exist of people who have resigned from well paid jobs to either run less lucrative businesses from home, undertake part time work, or retrain for more 'fulfilling' employment (Budden, 2000; Birchfield, 2000; Schachter, 1997; Caudron, 1996). Often these life changes are motivated by a desire to achieve a better 'work-life balance', to spend more time with children, or to reconnect with nature. These can mean enormous personal and financial adjustments, and motivations for voluntary simplicity are inextricably diverse. Indeed, individuals may adhere to its principles due to concerns as varied as the environment (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002; Ottman, 1995), health or religion (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002), and ethical implications of personal consumption choices (Strong, 1997; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). In 1977, Elgin and Mitchell identified five underlying values as the core of the voluntarily simplified lifestyle, comprising material simplicity, a desire for human-scale structures and institutions, a desire to gain more control over own life, awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural environment, and a desire to develop inward, personal growth (Leonard-Barton, 1981). Shaw and Newholm (2002) additionally highlight the important link between ethical consumption behaviour and voluntary simplicity, whereby the social and environmental impacts of consumption have led many ethically-concerned consumers to reconsider their marketplace choices.

For Zavestoski (2002) people are starting to realise that material assets cannot compensate a life of stress, unhappiness and lack of meaning, and that higher needs

and a satisfying sense of self cannot be met via consumption. In fact, stress and hectic lifestyles account for much of the publicised cases on voluntary simplicity. Southerton *et al.* (2001) refer to the ‘harried and hurried’ existence of many consumers who consider themselves to have insufficient time, to be always busy and unable to accomplish what is important to them. Schor (1992) argues that the proliferation of consumer goods, coupled with the importance of conspicuous consumption in defining consumer status underlies this drive to ‘work more to consume more’.

This sense of needing new solutions to the meaningless life problem and stressed and hectic lifestyles leads us to a discussion of some of the structural drivers of voluntary simplicity.

Structural Drivers of Voluntary Simplicity

Leonard-Barton and Rogers (1980; Leonard-Barton, 1981) definitions imply an inherent limitation on individuals’ freedom posed by the structural idiosyncrasies and powers of the market – the powerlessness over one’s own work, the product of work (production) and consumption as the only domain in which control by the individual is possible. Indeed, this is consistent with Marx’s notion of alienation; as we are what and how we produce, when we are separated from our products we are alienated from our sense of self (Zavestoski, 2002; Szmigin and Carrigan, 2003). So this loss of control over what we produce, this alienation and loss of connection with the means of production has meant that we have become, as put by Fine (1984) after Marx, wage

slaves. Consumption becomes part of the alienation, as it is detached and removed from the process of production (Bocock, 1993).

It is important to consider the manners in which such alienation and unbalance in the production-consumption dynamics may change due to consumers' responses to such condition. Voluntary simplicity seems to present an alternative to the paradoxical work-to-consume ethic and the complete lack of control over production. It means regaining control or even an interest in the production side of market relationships. It means "work less, spend less, and doing things differently in a leisurely manner" (Juniu, 2000, p.71). Despite the real or perceived fears of failure, loss of status (Hill, 2004), or decision-making power that voluntary simplicity brings (Joyner, 2001), many are willing to take the risks associated with such lifestyle changes.

Voluntary Simplicity: A Matter of Degree

The extent to which individuals embrace voluntary simplicity is varied. People may retain high-profile jobs but go part-time; start their own business to achieve more rewarding employment; seek lower paid, more fulfilling or creative jobs, early retirement or volunteering. People may simply choose to reduce consumption to the 'necessary', or purchase more ethically. The forms of simplification may well derive from the varied nature of the motives behind simplification. Etzioni (1998; 2003) suggests that the intensity of voluntary simplicity ranges from moderate to extreme levels, and proposes a typology comprising three different kinds of voluntary simplicity. He defines *Downshifters* as the most moderate simplifiers; economically

well off who choose to give up some luxuries but not the luxurious lifestyle. It is a rather inconsistent approach as people in this group may not adhere to most of the principles of voluntary simplicity, which probably generates much scepticism. For instance, Brooks (2003) points to the rise of the American "Liberal Gentry", for which conspicuous simplicity involves the (expensive) replacement of their old possessions for items that will symbolically represent their new simplified lifestyle. *Strong Simplifiers* encompasses people who give up high-paying, high-stress jobs to live on much reduced incomes, early-retirement packages, or new careers in exchange for either more time or occupations that are personally more meaningful. The *Simple Living Movement* comprises the most dedicated voluntary simplifiers, those who change their lifestyles completely in order to adhere to the principles of voluntary simplicity. They often move to the countryside and are guided by an anti-consumerist philosophy. Shaw and Newholm (2002) point to the confusions in terminologies, arguing for a distinction between *Voluntary Simplicity* (a generic term for all who voluntarily reduce income and consequently consumption for altruistic or selfish reasons), *Downshifting* (a version of voluntary simplicity that is self-centred and focused on resolving the unsatisfactory 'hurried and harried' condition of current life), and *Ethical Simplicity* (a version of voluntary simplicity that is motivated by ethical concerns). Despite the literature to date on simplifiers, most is concerned with its American manifestation, the measurement of attitudes and values, and focused on individual consumer behaviour. In order to broaden the scope of our knowledge in this area, the present study aims to explore the behaviours of voluntary simplifiers in the UK who have intentionally chosen to live in communities that strive to achieve a better balance between the production and consumption process, i.e. the New Consumption Communities conceptualised by Szmigin and Carrigan (2003). The next

section outlines the research undertaken to better explore the realities of present day voluntary simplifiers.

Methodology

New Consumption Communities can be viewed as a break from mainstream consumer culture, thus an appropriate method to explore them is ethnographic research (Peñaloza, 1994). It comprises the contextualised observation of what participants do rather than what they say they do (Robson, 1993), and considers their ability "to report fully and accurately on their behaviour" (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003, p.215). However, as argued by Sears (1992) after Apple (1983), ethnography alone does not concede serious importance to the struggles and resistances against current ideologies which are present in the everyday lives of some groups. However, critical ethnography does (Peñaloza, 1994; Dey, 2002; Thomas, 1993). As with conventional ethnography, critical ethnography requires a participant-observer researcher, and is concerned with researcher subjectivity, how informants are treated and represented, and situating the study in a wider context (Peñaloza, 1994).

Choosing the Communities

Three communities' directories acted as sampling frames. Communities that presented religion as a primary focus were ruled out. Another filter was that potential research subjects be based in England for geographical proximity. Thirty-four communities

were then identified as having an environmental focus, which has been deemed as an important motivation for ethical simplicity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ten communities were randomly selected and contacted via e-mail, which requested the volunteering visit for research purposes. Five agreed to be researched; the other five were either not willing or did not reply. The visits began in February 2004, and ranged from three days to one week. Some communities were visited several times over an extended period, while others were visited only once. The variation, timing and duration of the visits were a result of acknowledging the sensitivities of the different communities, and their willingness to provide access. Acting as a full-time volunteer in these communities meant experiencing their life and performing a range of activities including vegetable gardening, composting and cooking. It also meant listening to conversations about positive and negative personal views of community life, and socialising at natural settings. A number of informal, short interviews were carried out. Newsletters, flyers, business brochures were collected, and the communities' websites were continuously analysed and checked for updates. As has been documented (Punch, 1986; Mitchell, 1993; Arnould, 1998; Jackson, 1983; Bulmer, 1982) participant-observation is not a straightforward research method, and requires a high level of ethical sensitivity about the relationships being built, and the information being communicated. Hence, the real names of the researched communities and their informants have been replaced by pseudonyms to guarantee their anonymity and preserve the rapport built to date with community members. The

research findings below are taken from an ongoing study, and thus only the four most complete community studies to date are presented and contrasted in this paper.

Voluntary Simplicity at New Consumption Communities (NCCs) [1]

Gaining More Control over Their Own Lives

Stone Hall Community presents a strong sense of self-sufficiency, which is consistent with Leonard-Barton and Rogers (1980) and Leonard-Barton's (1981) definitions of voluntary simplicity. They have their own water spring and sewage system, composting, and wood burner heating system, reducing dependency on the local Council's services. All members work full-time for the community running three community businesses: the holistic education centre (meditation, yoga, permaculture, healing, crafts and cooking courses, taught either by members or outside teachers), the crafts shop (selling stained glass works produced by community members, second-hand clothes, eco-friendly shampoos), and the kindergarten (for local children, run by an outside person with assistance from one community member). These community businesses, alongside their substantial production of vegetables and their participation in local bartering and exchange trading systems, allow Stone Hall to be nearly self-sufficient while still connected to wider society.

Fallowfields Community is largely dependant on educational weekend workshops and their camping site rental as sources of communal income, but lately has been struggling to survive. An example is their recent need to take party-catering jobs in

exchange for extra money. Sunny Valley and Woodland communities are less self-sufficient but very committed to the principles of voluntary simplicity. Sunny Valley hires their facilities out as a course venue, which brings in some (limited) income. The surrounding small cottages are sold to outsiders by the community trust, and the organisation of the local community's composting scheme brings in some extra annual cash. They have a strong commitment to food production and making communal income, but there is the awareness that they are still part of the wider society:

> *"Once my father turned to me and said 'you know, Nicky, out there in the real world…' and I said, 'dad, we are also part of society'! I told him about all the book-keeping and accounting we have to do, and that once we join the co-op we all become directors. Then he started to understand that we do our own things but we are also part of the wider society" (Nicky, Sunny Valley).*

At Woodland the story is quite similar; there is a strong commitment to food production and environmentally sound living, but there is no sense of community business or communal sources of income.

Diverse Degrees of Participation in the Marketplace

In all communities foods and other necessities that cannot be produced on site are bulk-bought. However, Woodland members do not work full-time for their community so most members hold part-time jobs. Yet unlike any other community,

they will not accept outside help (i.e. current government grants for instalment of solar panels and wind turbines), even if it means being less environmentally sound:

> *"We prefer to do things ourselves, without being tied to outsiders or institutions" (Rose, Woodland).*

At Fallowfields members may choose to work full or part-time for the community. Such flexibility becomes a challenge for individuals' commitments to engage in community work. This results in little food production and makes Fallowfields highly dependent on the marketplace for foodstuffs. The NCCs present different operating structures, as well as different levels of self-sufficiency and hence degrees of marketplace participation.

Still Harried and Hurried?

It would be misleading to present life at NCCs as less hectic than that of people engaged in full-time employment outside the communities, something that members become aware of even before they decide to join. It is unlikely that anyone primarily looking for more free time would want to join. At Woodland each member is expected to contribute at least fifteen community-work hours a week. The researcher's room was located in a busy hallway and it was usual to hear people discussing the tasks that still needed doing, no matter how late it was. The same is true of other communities; members may only work part-time in the marketplace but there is always a lot of work to be done and few people to do it:

> *"In the future I would like to see more people working full-time in the garden... But for that we need to find more members for the community" (Alice, Stone Hall).*

The difference from the outside world seems to lie in flexibility: people are able to work while talking to and caring for their children, and while contributing to a cause of their choice.

Work as Play

Work is neither rushed nor efficient in these communities. There are many tea breaks and chatting while work gets done, which makes it fun and humane although time-consuming. At Stone Hall one experiences time differently to the outside; it is as if there is no rush in the world, and most activities can be undertaken as a playful challenge. Of course tasks have deadlines, but there is a re-organisation of time and collective distribution of tasks which makes it possible to enjoy work. It is more about restoring the enjoyment of life at work than reducing working hours. While this was not the same in all researched communities, especially Fallowfields, this light-hearted, leisurely approach to work could be due to the productive structures of these communities being legally organised as trusts, which compulsorily makes them non-profit but people- and community-oriented.

Personal Motivations as Multidimensional Constructs

NCCs' goals are diverse encompassing environmentally sound holistic education for sustainable lifestyles, peaceful living, and inner development. Nonetheless, these communities show that individuals' personal motivations for joining vary across and within communities. Often each individual adheres to a lifestyle change due to several motives, consistent with the literature on the motivations and values underpinning voluntary simplicity. Woodland's Louise decided to move to the community seeking a better quality of life for her child and because of her own environmental concerns. Although she misses some of her old luxuries she prefers this way of life. Daniel, also a Woodland member, is an architect. He became interested in sustainability and sustainable design at university, later he began to visit communities, coming across Woodland through his daughter's friend. For Cynthia, a young Londoner who was visiting Sunny Valley Community, it was about reconnecting to nature and re-engaging in the production of what she consumes. At Stone Hall Community Alice praised communal living as a great environment to raise a child:

> *"To me, at the moment, the best thing about living here is that this is a great place to raise a child. There is always a lot of support and many people to help... I can work with Thomas around and that's not a problem" (Alice, Stone Hall).*

Paula chose Fallowfields for its location, close to where her grandchildren live; Andrew is interested in integrated systems' theories (the buttress of permaculture and sustainability), and two other temporary members are interested in organic gardening.

While overall ethical concerns can be identified as personal motivators for simplified lifestyles, there are other, more self-centred drivers for the adoption of communal life, making personal motivations multidimensional constructs.

Motivations Impact Intra-group Interactions

The diversity of personal motives and priorities may be an impediment to the overall purposes of the communities. As the fieldwork days passed at Fallowfields Community subgroup conflicts became more evident. In particular, temporary members believed that permanent members expected them to do most of the work:

> *"Some people have to work really hard here and get treated like garbage, while others are living a comfortable life" (Philip, Fallowfields).*

What really bothered Philip, a temporary member, was his perception that Fallowfields Community espoused an interest in rebuilding the community, yet were not tolerant of diversity of thoughts. He argued that temporary members felt coerced into taking part in 'group therapy' activities prescribed and designed by the ruling group. Such conflicts created a disconcerting environment. Hindering intra-group communications, they were emotionally demanding, requiring members to take sides in the conflict. The multidimensional nature of personal motivations clearly has a deep impact on community goals, practices and intra-group relationships.

Ethically-Simplified, Production-Engaged Consumption Strategies

Numerous practices reflect simple living, concerns with the consequences of consumption behaviour, and indeed their inextricable trade-offs. Vegetarianism or reduced meat consumption are common practices. At Stone Hall meals are completely meat-free and organic, but this does not limit members' creativity and experimentation. When purchased externally, they try to buy food which is local and organic. The major issue is fruit purchase:

> *"Two days ago I complained about the Venezuelan fruits they bought. I don't want to eat Venezuelan fruits. I want the Venezuelans to eat Venezuelan fruits. We should be buying whatever there is here" (Alice, Stone Hall).*

Nevertheless, not all communities are vegetarian; wherever meat is consumed provenance is important. At Fallowfields they keep sheep for milk, but will also eat the meat:

> *"…I used to be a vegetarian because of the way animals are treated but now I eat the lamb that is slaughtered here… What is better, to eat our lamb or imported GM soy from Brazil?" (Stuart, Fallowfields)*

Sunny Valley and Woodland are quite similar in that respect. Most members are vegetarians but not all, so keeping animals for self-consumption is a practice, and every time meat is prepared a vegetarian option must be served.

At Stone Hall, Woodland and Sunny Valley reusing and reducing are important. Buying second-hand clothing is common practice; Stone Hall's Silvia enjoyed exhibiting her 'new' tops and trousers acquired from the local charity shop. For Fernando from Woodland, buying second hand furniture at the local Saturday morning fair meant getting good quality goods for reasonable prices, coupled with an excellent opportunity for socialisation. In fact, at Woodland consumption practices seem fairly modest and reduced. The kitchen's appliances are old with items only replaced if they cannot be repaired. Composting organic waste and recycling are commonly practiced. Hanna mentioned that when at someone else's house for dinner she helps out in the kitchen but feels uncomfortable:

> *"…You see them using all these jars and pre-prepared things, throwing away all that glass and not doing any composting… They just think it is too much trouble. It's terrible…" (Hanna, Sunny Valley).*

NCCs' consumption practices reflect their commitment toward simplicity, while entailing a major reconnection to the production sphere of the production-consumption process.

Reconnecting to Production

One remarkable aspect of the visit to Sunny Valley was the 'questions and answers' meeting the visitors and community members had, where the emphasis on achieving a

better production-consumption balance became clear. Members were asked how it feels to grow their own food:

> *"It feels like you are in touch with nature, with the earth..." (Barbara, Sunny Valley).*

> *"…And it hasn't travelled miles to be at our table! You can just go and pick your fresh veggies and herbs from the garden as you cook. And this is all a big part of and a big reason for living here" (Hanna, Sunny Valley).*

Nicky was more concerned about the supermarkets, with vegetables coated in wax and unnecessary wrapping. She disapproved of imported fruits and vegetables, citing the case of mange tout from Africa. Susan pointed to the social and empowering aspects of food production. She explained their pride in the food they grow and their desire to interest others; they often take part in local food competitions, and win farmers' markets prizes at the local village. Finally, Linda claimed that the lack of dependency on supermarkets was very empowering.

Such involvement with production varies across communities. Fallowfields do not fully utilise their garden's productive potential and depend on the marketplace for basic goods. Nonetheless all communities present a high level of production-consumption balance.

Mobility as a Challenge to NCCs' Environmental Goals

Communities tend to be based at fairly rural locations, often without appropriate public transport links. Despite their efforts to be sustainable and environmentally sound, community members do acquire second-hand cars, which add to the living costs and dependence on the outside world. One might think that car-sharing would be common practice among these people but while common, it is not the rule:

> *"We come to these communities having these ideas, but then things get complicated and it is better to get along than to share a car" (Fernando, Woodland).*

At Sunny Valley only two members car-share, and there is a sense of freedom associated with car ownership:

> *"If we want to get away from the community every now and again we need a car. I need to go to work and I still like to go to the pictures, you know?" (Susan, Sunny Valley).*

Fallowfields has a community car, but because not everyone works outside the community, car usage is fairly low. Similarly, at Stone Hall most members own cars, but because everyone works full-time for the community cars are shared and are rarely used. At Woodland, however, all members have cars and car-sharing is not common. That is not to say that people are not constantly trying to do so; only recently members were attempting to re-arrange a car-sharing scheme aimed at

reducing car ownership and emissions. There were also many caravans on site. Louise owned three, and the most environmentally conscious Woodland members were pressuring her to get rid of at least two but she retaliated:

> *"Woodland doesn't like the dirt and the sight of so many vehicles, so from now on if you have more than one car and only one in use, there will be a parking fee charged per day, and if the vehicles remain on site they must be kept clean… But look at that, do you see it? That's Jonathan's old boat, and it has been there [at a parking lot corner] for nearly 20 years and he never does anything with it!" (Louise, Woodland).*

For Louise caravans provided a nice and cheap alternative for holidays. Rather than flying she drives, which according to her represents less CO_2 emissions. She had no explanation for needing three but had an emotional attachment to all caravans and the good times she had experienced with them.

Clearly, despite all their efforts to consume responsibly and reconnect to production, mobility represents a major challenge in the achievement of communities' environmental goals.

Discussion

The NCCs presented in this study are, to varying degrees, responding to the alienation and unbalance in the production-consumption dynamics of the market (Szmigin,

2003). While community members continuously aim to resist marketing sovereignty, the day-to-day realities of simplified living, even within a community, remain challenging. Through their different operating structures, levels of self-sufficiency and degree of dependence on the market, they are redefining their position in the marketplace and regaining control over their lives. They recognise their dependence on the wider social structure but try to provide an alternative to what they perceive as the shortcomings of a consumer society. Members still consume, but go about it in alternative, liberating and, perhaps more satisfying ways. Strong values pervade their consumption decisions – bulk buying, eco-friendly products, organic food production – and introduce additional attributes to be considered in their complex consumption choices. They strive to absent themselves from the dominance of traditional marketing channels. Yet, while community living can increase the possibilities of the simpler, more ethical lives, community members have to accept that exiting the marketplace entirely is (as yet) unrealisable. Fallowfields in particular face the dilemma of balancing self-sufficiency with eco-principles, and at Woodland rejecting government aid means compromising environmental ideals.

Some have managed to reinstate the enjoyment of life through the adoption of simplified lifestyles and a sense of play at work although many remain in external workplaces. Stone Hall demonstrates the ability of the communities to develop their own solutions outside mainstream markets; childcare, adult education, food production and sales. They do not always succeed; Fallowfields and to some extent Woodland appear as a microcosm of the power structures, struggles and stresses of society at large, possibly due to the multi-faceted nature of individuals' motivations for joining these communities. But what does emerge is that while work can be

physically demanding, they have stepped out of the ‘work to consume’ vicious circle, and entered a more virtuous cycle. Although busy, members genuinely enjoy more satisfaction, freedom and control of their lives by reconnecting production and consumption. Their acceptance of lower levels of materialism realises Zavestoski’s (2002) argument that material things do not compensate for a life of stress and happiness, and challenges marketing’s traditional mantra of evermore choice and consumption (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2004). ‘Less is more’ prevails in the communities, for example, less choice in food, but greater taste and quality.

While a high degree of commitment to the ethical concerns highlighted in the literature is found in the communities’ consumption and production practices, some of the communities seem to be more about individual aspirations and responses to particular issues than actual collective, communal lifestyles guided by common principles. Nonetheless, by being together they have achieved richer forms of connection to production and the production-consumption balance. They have reconnected to and regained control over the process and product of their work and profit is not their primary aim, evident in their participation in local bartering schemes and their legal registration as trusts. But they have not completely exited the market or even aim to do so. They acknowledge they are part of the wider society as Schor (1998) suggests, and although anti-corporate or anti-brand political stances can be found, they are very much individually rather than communally supported. That they have restructured their production systems to depend less on the market and gain more control, knowledge and satisfaction over the provenance and processes involved in what they consume can be viewed as a consumer resistance.

Individuals recognise conflicts and challenges in their community lives. For example, despite having gone to great lengths to consume responsibly and reconnect to production, mobility at NCCs still represents the same challenge identified by Shaw and Newholm (2002). Individuals are nostalgic about some of the more hedonistic experiences of traditional market consumption, but these are compensated for by the balance communal living has brought to their lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

This is an exploratory study; the authors recognise the benefit of additional empirical work with a longitudinal approach to capture even richer data on the experiences of individuals in the NCCs. Examining other UK communities would extend our knowledge further, as would the exploration of European communities presenting further cultural and experiential diversity, enabling richer comparisons. Further studies on the values and attitudes buttressing voluntary simplicity are needed before further generalisations and comparisons with the US are made. Mainstream consumers' attitudes to the practices of such communities is another important area for research, and may help us to understand where there could be connections and intersections in identity, production and consumption between mainstream and alternative consumption. The extent to which such communities influence mainstream consumers also merits future research, as a potential bridge between the two. The study of ex and current NCCs' volunteers, contributors, supporters and local communities would also provide a richer, more extended view of individuals' experiences.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the findings of an on-going, exploratory research on UK voluntary simplifiers at New Consumption Communities. The findings suggest that for some the choice to simplify and join communities seems to have reinstated the enjoyment of life. This, however, has not come without trade-offs, with mobility remaining one of the biggest challenges to the attainment of environmental goals.

The experience of individuals from these communities has resonance for more than just voluntary simplifiers. Flexible or part-time work may be a route to more helpful life arrangements. With more time (or the perception of more time) people could re-engage in activities that are meaningful to them. NCCs' sustainable living practices, recycling initiatives, food production systems all have potential to be adapted and adopted on a wider scale. Given the growing interest in the wider marketplace there is potential for transfer and re-education. Local councils could assist and encourage the development of community food production through allotments, particularly in areas of economic deprivation, poor nutrition and food deserts. Car-sharing schemes can be difficult to arrange in large urban areas but car rental companies, boroughs and new transport companies could provide reliable and safe car-sharing systems by checking records of registered people and a careful matching process. This is, to some extent, provided online (i.e. www.shareacar.com/). Overly packaged goods could come with instructions on packaging reuse; alternatively responsible manufacturing companies, even large retailers could set up their own recycling schemes.

Despite NCCs' position at the extreme end of the voluntary simplicity spectrum, their role in shaping the practices and attitudes of other consumers cannot be denied, especially with their high educational engagement with local communities and volunteers. The implications for marketing practitioners and policy makers engaged in the pursuit of sustainable development are many. If marketing is to connect in a truly two-way relationship with consumers and assist sustainable development it must consider such New Consumption Communities lifestyles and view them as true opportunities and places from which to learn rather than a threat, or merely the behaviour of a few deviant consumers.

[1] Communities' Profiles

Woodland Community

Situated on seventy acres of green land, Woodland Community is a co-housing initiative formed thirty-years ago by families and individuals who spontaneously chose to live together in a large old building. There are fifty-eight members, including thirteen children who attend the local school. This is supplemented by large numbers of volunteers during the summer, who are also the conduit to disseminating their communal lifestyle. The building is split into living units with bedrooms and small living rooms; some are equipped with bathrooms. These units are privately owed spaces for which initial capital is required. New members are required to buy stock-loans according to the value (size) of the unit in which they are interested. However, most spaces are communal and include a large, main kitchen with dining room, a small kitchen, a library, social rooms, laundry room, community office, and bathrooms. Nominal utility bills are paid, and according to one temporary member (Christian) it is possible to live for less than £200 per month (including food) at the community, considerably less than it would cost elsewhere. Consequently, this negates the need for full-time employment. The community remains true to its founding members' fundamental values of self-sufficiency, co-operative living and low environmental impact. While located near a village, the nearest train station is a considerable walking distance away. There is a large amount of car ownership here but with members car-sharing whenever possible.

Fallowfields Community

Fallowfields Community was founded in 1950 as an educational trust, and today the community has eighteen members (of which nine are temporary). It has a flexible approach to housing; some members live in the main building while others stay in adjacent buildings, cottages and bungalows. They have a trust that owns the buildings and sublets them to members. Rent can be paid in various forms, including a combination of money and community work hours. The original aim of Fallowfields Community was to investigate how people could achieve a more peaceful way of life. One member (Paula) said it is hard to know which came first, the adult college or the community. At the time of its formation (according to their literature) the college aimed to provide further adult education to enable people to get more involved with issues that affected their lives. Today the community appears to be undergoing a period of change or 'ethos-searching', with environmental causes having gained importance in the community. Fallowfields also sees itself as a social experiment; they are interested in social change, the challenges of communal living, and group intra-relationships.

Sunny Valley Community

Sunny Valley Community is a co-housing co-operative based on seven acres of rural land. The main building is simply decorated and equipped, and is inhabited by its eleven highly educated members – three of which are now teenagers – who are celebrating the community's 10th anniversary in 2004; this is viewed as a landmark, given the financial difficulties they experienced in Sunny Valley's early days.

Adjacent to the main building are small cottages, which are mortgaged or sold to outsiders by the community trust. Buyers do not necessarily become co-op members, although they must be 'approved' by those living at the main building. Members share the community's maintenance responsibilities at all levels, and together hire the facilities out as a course venue, which brings in some (limited) income. Because of the high affinity between community members and cottages' owners there is an eco-village feeling to Sunny Valley. Their ethos comprises a strong ecological focus and respect for diversity. The community also has good links with the local village and organises their local composting scheme.

Stone Hall Community

Stone Hall Community is, as self-determined, a holistic education centre set on eleven acres of land, run by a resident co-operative group and administered by a trust. The main building contains guest rooms, the main dining room, a piano room and the healing room, and is surrounded by adjacent buildings which together form a square stone rectory. In those buildings are the kitchen (fully vegetarian) and the washing-up rooms, the laundry room, a "first aid" room with communal laundry supplies, a toilet, the community kitchen and dinning-room, and the kindergarten. Surrounding the main buildings are fields containing livestock, gardens, a green house and a poly-tunnel, as well as a recycling shed. There is a detached housing block for members and a caravan for visitors and volunteers. In the new library building accommodation for members is also provided. All fourteen members, except the children, work full-time for the community, each with their designated roles. All members have specific skills which they put to use in the community, and most members are either well-educated

or manually skilled. Sustainability is a key driver for this community, more than any other visited. This manifests itself in their own water spring, reed-bed sewage system, composting, wood burners, and recycling efforts. Materials are simple, functional, and demonstrate a strong sense of craft-based aesthetics.

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