

Research Report

Conspicuous Consumption in the emergent VanLife Community

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Abstract

As the worth of experiential consumption increases, so does the importance of experiential conspicuous consumption. Traveling is an outstanding example for experiential consumption, which resulted in increased research interest in travel as means of conspicuous consumption. The emergent VanLife community is a prime example of experiential consumption, but to this date no connection to conspicuous consumption has been made. This paper explores the underlying motivations for choosing VanLife as a vacation mode and possible connections to conspicuous consumption. For this purpose, a qualitative study was conducted. While the participants could not be directly linked to conspicuous consumption, indirect evidence of conspicuous consumption in the broader VanLife community could be found.

Keywords: Conspicuous Consumption; Traveling; VanLife, Experiential Consumption

1. Introduction

The hashtag VanLife is a current phenomenon in social media, with millions of postings on the Instagram platform alone. The exact definition of the term is still unclear, respectively the usage in the literature (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019, Rizvi et al. 2021) differs from that in the vernacular (Backof, Peter, 2017; Budde, Vanja, 2021; Kringe, Sarah, 2021). Two groups are united under the term, which can nevertheless be clearly distinguished. On one hand, the hashtag includes people who lead a modern nomadic life in their vehicle. On the other hand, there are posts about campervans and camping vacationers who assign themselves the term VanLife in the context of a trip (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019).

The characteristics of nomadic-living VanLifers and campers can complement each other. According to Gretzel et al. (2019), "VanLifers" define themselves by the type of their bus, by their individualizations when converting it, and by their brand, with retro models generally being more popular. Vacation campers, who can also be found under the hashtag VanLife, choose the van or motorhome as the place and form of their vacation for various motivations. According to Triantafillidou & Siomkos (2013), the connection to nature is a reason to camp, as is the social interaction with other campers. In addition, camping fulfills the demand for adventure, escape from everyday life, respectively the city, and also holds the possibility to learn something new (Brooker & Joppe, 2014). In the following text, VanLife or VanLifer is used as a term for travelers vacationing in a van, or motor home.

Not just the purchase and possession of a van, but also the aspect of traveling can be perceived through the lens of conspicuous consumption, a field of consumer behavior. In many cases, the consumer's decision to buy a good cannot be explained simply by the intrinsic utility derived from its consumption. Rather, it may be grounded in what the purchase symbolizes for others. Thorstein Veblen was one of the first to criticize consumer society. His work, "The Theory of leisure class", forms the basis for the theory of conspicuous consumption, which comes from the phenomenon that consumers decide to buy a good because it is expensive, and the consumer can use it to demonstrate

his wealth (Veblen, 1899). Goldsmith et al., 1996 claim that consumer behavior is influenced by the high motivation of striving for status and social prestige. This is because the higher the pursuit of status, the higher the consumer's adaptation to behaviors that increase their status, and this precisely includes the consumption of status symbols (Eastman et al., 1999). According to Mason, for the conspicuous consumer, the satisfaction derived from a particular purchase derives not from its use value, but from the public's reaction to the wealth the buyer demonstrates by having been able to afford the product for consumption. Thus, conspicuous consumption is characterized by the fact that the price of the product is, in most cases, the only factor that matters to the consumer (Mason, 1984).

Demand that is not stimulated by specific characteristics of the product but by possible increases in utility generated by external factors is described by Leibstein (1950) as non-functional demand. Utility-enhancing external effects are increases or decreases in consumption as well as rising or falling prices. In the context of non-functional demand, Leibstein distinguishes between three demand effects of conspicuous consumption. The Veblen-effect describes an increase in consumption by a consumer, through an increase in the price of a good. The snob-effect is the decrease in demand, due to an increase in consumers consuming the same good. The snob has an increased urge for exclusivity and uniqueness. The difference between the Snob and Veblen-effect is that the former reflects a function of consumption, while the latter reflects a function of price. The bandwagon-effect describes the demand for a good, which increases because others consume the same good. The bandwagon-effect is associated with the desire to conform to the people with whom one wants to be associated.

As the importance of experiential purchases grows and materialistic purchases lose their dominant position, those observations and conspicuous consumption can be found in experiential consumption as well (Howell et al., 2012; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Yang & Mattila, 2017). A study by Bronner and de Hoog (2017) determined some key aspects of conspicuous consumption while traveling. While more than 60% of vacationers agreed with the statement that the way people spend their summer vacation reflects the 'kind of person' they are, only 13% disagreed with this statement. As conspicuous consumption is deeply intertwined with the perceived perception by others, a connection to travel is highly probable. Two-thirds of vacationers were interested in sharing their vacation with others. They also identified two factors for conspicuous consumption regarding travel: (Social) status demonstration and identity demonstration. While there was an almost perfect correlation between age and conspicuous consumption, other socio-demographics such as social class or gender were not relevant (Bronner & de Hoog, 2018). However, they have a large influence on the perception of travel destinations as conspicuous or inconspicuous (Phillips & Back, 2011).

The predisposition of younger generations to conspicuous consumption was also observed by Liu et al. in Chinese college students. Over 90 % of the Chinese students were sharing their travels through social media and 32.7 % were thinking that this behavior was to gain recognition from peers (Liu & Huang, 2019). The usage of social media tools and platforms has a direct impact on conspicuous consumption because the user has full control over the information shared (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011) and, as mentioned by Taylor & Strutton (2016), can therefore be used to present the best version of oneself, which is achieved through the carefully designed representation of positional goods. The desire for self-promotion is positively related to conspicuous online consumption, as are envy and narcissism, which are also positively related to the desire for self-promotion (Taylor & Strutton, 2016). Travel is often associated with happy moments that people would like to remember (Kuhlhüser, 2017), hence it is a common form of (self-)representation on social media for virtually presenting goods or activities with travelogues.

While it is established, that traveling and conspicuous consumption can be interrelated, it remains unknown whether traveling with a van or a campervan in particular can be described as conspicuous consumption, or whether there is a correlation between the two variables. Is owning and traveling with a van seen as a status symbol? Is the motivating factor behind VanLife the prestige gained through its consumption? This study will attempt to answer those questions in the following.

2. Materials and Methods

To investigate the possible relationship between validity consumption and the VanLife movement, the qualitative research method of in-depth interviews was chosen to determine contextual relationships and personal motives of the interviewees (Bock, 1992, p.91). The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide, which was designed to cover various sub-areas. First, the general vacation behavior of the interviewees was examined, followed by questions about purchase decisions, individualization, and traveling with a van. Finally, the need for social recognition and the usage behavior of social media were discussed. To allow a natural flow of conversation, the semi-structured form of the interview was chosen and general questions about travel were used as a warm-up. To explicitly determine the motives behind the statements, the interview subject was not told in advance and the questionnaire was structured to get general vacation preferences before VanLife was mentioned.

The eight interviews conducted lasted from 32 to 60 minutes and were conducted by zoom or in person. The interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 30 and were either working or studying. The interviews took place mostly in the evening. Six men and two women were interviewed, who own an upgraded van. Interviewees were selected by the conductors due to the fact, that they own a van and have prior experiences in van travel, additionally the participants were known by the conductors beforehand.

The resulting texts were processed with the help of a qualitative content analysis based on Mayring (2016). The structure of the questionnaire served as an initial orientation for a category system, which was inductively supplemented from the text. Subsequently, the entire text was coded again and then analyzed. The category system can be found in the appendix of this paper.

3. Results

There seems to be a great amount of commonality between our participants with regard to their vacation behavior. They seek vacation as a means to escape their daily life, work, and to some extent even society as a whole and to gain freedom, as one participant put it: *“Ich verreise so um dem zu entfliehen, weil wir in Berlin wohnen und hier sind einfach viele Menschen, dann suche ich das Gegenteil.”* (Interview 3) expressing the need to escape their hustling environment of Berlin.

Most of them put great emphasis on the value of vacations. They try to fill in as much trips as they are able to squeeze into their year as possible: *“Ich habe viermal Ferien und in den Ferien sollte ich auch einmal Urlaub gemacht haben.”* (Interview 8). Their vacation destinations are for the most part in Europe, especially in Germany, Scandinavia and the Mediterranean. Even when they are not traveling by van, they tend to favor nature a lot over cities or bustling tourist destinations. Additionally, there was a trend towards traveling by car or train instead of flying. All of them travel with their partner or a small group (three to four people) of friends or family, traveling alone was seen as boring.

The subjects' motivation for using the van to plan their vacation can be deduced from their vacation preferences. One of the respondents clearly describes that it is the best form of vacation for him *“Aber für mich persönlich, finde ichs einfach nur genial. Ist genau meine Urlaubsform.”* (Interview 7). The three biggest motivators for our respondents are flexibility in vacation planning, the possibility to travel spontaneously and especially the feeling of freedom: *“Dass man überall anhalten kann, wenn man möchte und da dann auch bleiben. Man ist flexibel. Man kann selbst den Rhythmus deiner Reise bestimmen und Orte entdecken, die du sonst nicht gesehen hättest.”* (Interview 3). The possibility of spontaneous short vacations was frequently mentioned: *“Dass man übers Wochenende dann mal ein paar Tage weg ist. Gerne mal ein verlängertes Wochenende und sowas.”* (Interview 2). Van vacationing can be as spontaneous as traveling for just a few days, like a prolonged weekend.

The participants express a disdain of well-travelled destinations and are disappointed if their camping spots are already occupied by other travellers: *“Und wir kamen da an und dann standen da schon drei Vans mit deutschem Kennzeichen dort. Das hat mich gestört.”* (Interview 4).

The hype surrounding the VanLife was indeed seen as a barrier. Currently the demand for used Vans is far exceeding the supply, as a result, they are sold at immense prices. Generally speaking, the greatest barrier regarding VanLife was the high financial burden.

Their decision to buy a van was influenced by several factors. Three quarters of the respondents had been on vacation with a van or a campervan before, in order to test the form of vacation for themselves before they decided to buy one of their own. In their decision to buy a van, respondents were influenced by their immediate environment.

Recently, the VanLife gained a lot of popularity, but this was not seen as bad per se. The majority identified the VanLife community or lifestyle as a hype and one respondent formulated very nicely that Corona acts like a booster. The self-presentation of many community members displeases our subjects because this does not match their ideas of the VanLife. It was noticeable, however, that the VanLife as the subjects defined it for themselves is not properly represented in the social media. The subjects' goal is to live in the moment and escape from everyday life to find themselves. However, those active on social media would share every detail of their trip, giving subjects the impression that some are just jumping on the bandwagon but do not really like the VanLife itself.

Beyond that, however, some also use the community as a source of information. *"Man lernt ja auf den Stellplätzen, dann schon hier und da mal Menschen kennen und tauscht sich aus."* (Interview 6). They are mostly companions who were met during the van vacation. Additional information sources are social media platforms, which are used to gather specific information. According to the other respondents, social media platforms are primarily used as a source of solutions to certain problems or as a source of inspiration for design ideas or destinations. Even if only used to inform others, the participant perceives posting about the van as showing off: *"Wenn würde ich informieren wollen, aber dann kommt auch immer ein ‚Guck mal was ich mir leisten kann‘ und so schwingt dann immer halt mit. Und das möchte ich nicht rüberbringen."* (Interview 7).

When photos and videos are shared, it is mainly in private circles: *"Nein, ich dokumentiere meinen Ausbau nicht selbst auf Social Media. Ich teile schon mit Freunden und Familie Fotos, aber nicht öffentlich."* (Interview 4).

Whether the van is a status symbol is a matter of differing opinions among our test subjects. For many, the term 'status symbol' is difficult to define and differs from person to person. Two respondents explicitly mentioned the VW brand, with which they associated aesthetics and a positive brand image: *"Oder ein Freiheitsgefühl, Statussymbol. Ist ja VW halt einfach in dem Punkt ist ja so einfach eingebrannt bei uns, dass hat so mit seinen Anteil in die ganze Geschichte gebracht."* (Interview 1) listing the brand as a general sign of freedom. Despite this, it was mentioned that a van can be associated with a status symbol dependent on the price: *"Da gehen ganz gut mal für selbst, also von Profis ausgebaute, Vans gehen ohne Fahrzeug, nur der Ausbau und die Außenanbauteile, manchmal 120-130k, manchmal 140k drauf, und natürlich gibts da nach oben kein Limit und dann wird das absolut zum Statussymbol, wenn du dann auch 'ne Auffälligkeit erreichen möchtest, dann klar, ist das 'nen Statussymbol wie ein Lamborghini, ein Porsche, was auch immer."* (Interview 7). Vans converted by professionals can easily cost 120-140.000 €, with no limitations upwards. And if you pay that much, it is seen as a status symbol, comparable to a Lamborghini or Porsche.

4. Discussion

The characteristics of conspicuous consumption in travel is already investigated (Correia et al., 2016; Liu & Huang, 2019; Phillips & Back, 2011; Sirgy & Su, 2000). The posed assumption of this paper was the existence of a direct connection between VanLife traveling and conspicuous consumption, as experiential consumption becomes more relevant. Contrary to expectations, it was hard to find much direct evidence, that supported our hypothesis of VanLife as a means for conspicuous consumption. Most interviewees did not participate much in the social exchange on social media, which would be a clear indicator for conspicuous consumption (Liu & Huang, 2019). They acknowledged this actively and were averse to the idea of sharing their vacation online: *"Aber ich mag diese Selbstdarstellung, die da häufig einhergeht, auch wenn man die beste Intention hat, [...] nicht."* (Interview 7). The showmanship that goes with sharing on social media even without the intention of showing off, is disliked. This is

supported by the extensive findings on the subjects' vacation priorities and their similar stance on sharing behaviors during the van conversion. The only outlier being one proband, that just started sharing their van conversion on Instagram (Interview 2). The main driver for choosing van vacations is the freedom, that comes with this vacation mode, as stated by nearly anyone: *“Die Freiheit, die man dadurch hat. Dass man sein Zuhause auf vier Rädern hat.”* (Interview 3). Additionally, they also exhibited a great preference towards van vacations. This increases the likelihood that the decision is based on enjoyment of VanLife, rather than on underlying motives such as showing off.

As a result, the main motivations for going on van vacations reflect their preferences fittingly: With a huge emphasis on freedom and flexibility, as well as spontaneity, all but one participant were convinced to use a superior form of travel. Especially the aspect of freedom often contradicts the idea of conspicuous consumption, as most people wanted to escape their daily life and get far away from others, which makes sharing the experience less valuable. With one even going as far as using van vacation for a “social media detox”: *“Von den drei Monaten [Vanurlaub] habe ich beispielsweise drei Wochen kein Social Media genutzt.”* (Interview 6). One participant decided to waive social media consumption for three weeks of his three-month trip with his van.

In addition, no direct indicators could be found in the search for behavioral patterns corresponding to the Veblen- Snob- or Bandwagon-effect. Everyone was either happy about the increasing interest in VanLife or at least indifferent. The only exception being if others had the same travel destination as themselves or if people did not adhere to the common camping etiquette. Since the ‘Snob’ needs the exclusivity and is averse to sharing his consumption, the Snob-effect could not be found in our sample. The Veblen-effect of increased interest with increased price was also negated because everybody saw the high-price as a problem instead of a perk. While one could argue that some of the participants were ‘Bandwagoners’, since their buying decision was based on former partners or parents who already had a van or camper, the conductors reason that the appeal was in the vacation mode and not in the mimicry of others. Some indirect indicators were found however: *“Ein Pärchen war sehr abgehoben, weil wir den Van damals nur seit ein paar Monaten hatten und nicht wie die seit 5 Jahren.”* (Interview 6). One couple thought lesser of the participant, because they had the van much longer than them.

Only when asked about the van as a status symbol there was an affirmative answer. Just two participants denied the claim, while three participants confirmed the statement. The last three were adamant, that their van was not a status symbol, but those of others were. A distinction mainly based on the car type used for the conversion. This is further supported by our indirect evidence. While the participants of this study did not fit the criteria, there was a consensus, that the VanLife tribe, mainly on Instagram and YouTube, is exhibiting clear signs of conspicuous consumptions: *“Also wie sich einige Menschen mit den Dingen versuchen zu profilieren ist ja schon crazy.”* (Interview 6). Some people are trying really hard to distinguish themselves through their vans. The influx of modern day influencers has not spared the VanLife community either: *“[...] und dann gibts so ein paar Instagram-Kanäle, die den kompletten Markt beeinflussen [...]”* (Interview 7). Some Instagram-channels influence even the van market. The participants also spoke lightly about the parts of the community, that prefer to talk about their van, rather than using it: *“Das sind Leute, die lieber über ihr Auto reden, als mit dem Auto wegzufahren.”* (Interview 8). Thus, the existence of a bigger (or at least very visible) group of VanLifers, who would rather fit the label of conspicuous consumption is confirmed. However, within this study the conductors failed in finding such interview partners.

This is also one of the proposed reasons why this study could not show direct examples of conspicuous consumption, due to its sampling method. All participants were relatively homogenous in age and live in close geographic proximity. Additionally, there is a disparity of female and male participant, as only two probands were female. As age plays a factor in traveling as means of conspicuous consumption (Bronner & de Hoog, 2018) and different occupations prefer different traveling destinations (Correia et al., 2016), that are more or less conspicuous, a more diverse sample would have been preferred (Phillips & Back, 2011). This selection bias occurred due to time restraints and the resulting personal search for appropriate interview partners.

Another leverage point could have been anti-consumption as conspicuous consumption: as there were multiple statements by the subjects, that were mentioning disdain of normal vacation practices, such as traveling by plane or sleeping in a hotel, as well as the need to emphasize that their van was not a status symbol. As the main focus was on the consumption of VanLife, instead of the anti-consumption of other vacations, this was quickly dismissed. However, a more balanced approach with a combination of both, such as symbolic consumption could yield some worthwhile results, because some of the participants were talking about their anti-consumption of their own accord. Symbolic consumption takes the consumption of goods to maintain and enhance self-esteem and self-concept of the consumer into account, as well as the anti-consumption to protect the self-esteem and to avoid self-abasement within the self-concept (Hogg et al., 2009). A correlation this study could not satisfactorily dissect, as the research question led to a focus on consumption, which left the anti-consumption portion of symbolic consumption without enough depth for proper interpretation.

This report, in its explorative nature, only scraped the surface of the topic on hand. As a result, there is still high potential in this research field. Current research on VanLife is limited to vans as substitute housing. VanLife as a vacation mode is still mainly unknown. Because the expression of conspicuous consumption is often found in social media, a netnography of the #VanLife may lead to a better understanding. Another angle to this topic would be moderator or mediator variables. Are there unknown variables that change the relation of VanLife and conspicuous consumption? Or is it possible, that VanLife is used as a transporter for conspicuous consumption and takes on a moderator/mediator role? The research subject also intersects with other research fields. As VanLifers are often highly experienced in their hobby and spend a lot of time and emphasis on their car and vacations, a bridging tie to Connoisseurship for example is warranted. As the VanLife-tribe experiences a considerable growth which is only amplified by the ongoing Corona pandemic, especially in the younger generation, further studies are needed to shed light on this upcoming trend.

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