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Article

Beyond Abundance: Self-Interest Motives for Sustainable Consumption in Relation to Product Perception and Preferences

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Abstract: This paper presents results of a study that examined the perceptions and preferences of identified “responsible, sustainable consumers” with respect to functional products. The study is part of a larger research program that looks at material cultures and product design in relation to sustainable production and consumption. Based on empirical data gathered from among citizens attempting to follow sustainable lifestyles, the authors reflect on how the adoption of sustainable consumption patterns can not only be motivated by altruistic and environmental considerations, but also, significantly, by perceived personal benefits, including an expected increase in personal well-being. These motivations, together with how they unfold into preferences for particular product characteristics, are discussed. The paper concludes that the understanding of such motives, along with their implications for the ways in which products and services are conceived and positioned, may warrant further research as it can represent a key incentive for change towards a more sustainable future.

Keywords: sustainable consumption; product preferences; motivations; environment; self-interest; good life

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, it has become apparent that more eco-efficient industrial processes, as well as the design of greener and more ethical products, will not be sufficient to “achieve” sustainable development [1]. A significant number of scholars have concluded that, in addition to these types of innovations, the consumption of greener products must be accompanied by a reduction in the *scale* of consumption [2]. Schor [3] and Kasser [4], among others, have explored the hidden costs of high levels of consumption.

For the individual, participation in the vital but still fuzzy project that is “sustainability” can be realized by adopting more sustainable consumption patterns. Globally, sustainable consumption implies not only opting for greener products or solutions, but also consuming less [5]. Furthermore, sustainable consumption requires “getting more with less, not more stuff but more satisfaction” [6]. More specifically, sustainable production and consumption—two conditions of sustainable development—“involves rethinking how needs are met and products are conceived”, and “will involve finding a mix of products and services through which consumers will be able to buy less, use less, and dispose of less without suffering a loss of well-being” [7].

To develop such products and services, and to present them in ways that are appealing to a broad public (or, at least, to citizens already sensitive to alternative, more sustainable, modes of consumption), it seemed relevant to the authors to understand the nature of products (or product-service systems) that are especially appreciated and meaningful among responsible consumers and why this might be the case.

To this end, a qualitative study has been conducted among citizens who, on a voluntary basis, have decided to diminish their levels of consumption and opt for more ecologically and socially sound products. This research project looked at the implications of sustainable, responsible consumption [8] for product design and development. Among other things, the study examined product preferences and perceptions of meaning embodied in the aesthetic qualities of products. The methodological strategy used to gather the information is, at its core, based on key-informant interviews with identified sustainable consumers. Prior to these interviews, participant observation has been conducted among voluntary simplicity groups in order to identify different profiles of citizens promoting, at various levels, sustainable consumption. The paper briefly presents a model that has been developed and which has served as a mean of recruiting citizens who, as they especially promote sustainable consumption through their reported consumption habits, were invited to take part to the key-informants interviews.

The paper explores how the key-informant respondents’ search for a better quality of life by consuming less and opting for “greener” products and services is expressed through the manner in which they perceive and experience consumer goods. More precisely, the paper looks at products preferences in relation to perceived personal benefits from responsible consumption. Based on this study, and on the work of Soper [9], Kaplan [10] and De Young [11], the authors discuss the potential of simultaneously promoting the environmental, social and personal benefits of responsible consumption and sustainable lifestyles in general, while acknowledging the dangers of approaches to lighter patterns of domestic consumption that merely reflect personal interests. Finally, the paper considers the implications of these research results for the way products are developed and positioned.

2. Exploring Sustainable Consumption Patterns and Lifestyles

2.1. Context of the Study

The larger research program, of which the present study is a part, examines material culture, product design and production for sustainability from two principal perspectives: (1) the design and production side, including the integration of scales of production so that product manufacture, maintenance, upgrading and recovery can be achieved at the local or regional level; and (2) the design and consumption side, including the material culture of sustainable consumption and what it means for the way we develop and regard products.

The goals of the study were: (a) to gain insights into what might be termed a responsible, sustainable material culture by seeking to understand the choices, preferences and perspectives of identified sustainable consumers and (b) to use this information to identify key implications of sustainable consumption for the design and development of products. The study sought to understand the potential of sustainable consumption and lifestyles, the lessons for product design and production, and implications for material culture.

This paper focuses on one precise element that comes out of the study, namely indications of self-interest motives for responsible consumption and lifestyles, and their relationship to product perception and preferences. Broader initial findings were presented in an earlier paper [12]. It should be emphasised that initially, the main objective of the whole study was not to look precisely at motives for responsible consumption, nor were the authors expecting to find that self-interest represented an important facet of responsible consumption. The overall objective was to explore product preferences and meaning in a context of sustainable consumption in order to inform product design. It was while focussing on this element that data emerged from the fieldwork, in the form of narratives from identified responsible consumers, which pointed to the notion of perceived personal benefits as being of particular significance. To meet the objective stated above, research was conducted among citizens who practice some form of simple living or “voluntary simplicity”.

In terms of research operationalization, voluntary simplicity presents a number of interesting characteristics: its adherents constitute a recognized group with a relatively well defined culture; they present themselves as responsible consumers; the movement is documented in academic literature [13-15] and people who adhere to voluntary simplicity principles are accessible (e.g., through organizations, conferences, activities, and various discussion forums on the internet).

Voluntary simplifiers, who not only consume less but also opt for more environmentally and socially responsible goods and services, can provide interesting and important insights for research into consumer cultures. Although voluntary simplicity is certainly not a panacea to the ecological crisis we are experiencing, many authors [16-22] see it as a counter response to the dominant consumer culture that holds crucial lessons for a more sustainable society and for advancing our understanding of sustainable consumption. In contrast to what might be termed “regular consumption” and “regular living” in contemporary industrially developed countries, voluntary simplicity adepts are more likely to adopt attitudes and practices that include [23].

- limiting their consumption in terms of the volume and quantity of products purchased;
- choosing more socially and ecologically sound products and/or services (including more “local” products);
- using product-service systems;
- repairing, exchanging, and creating products;
- investing in their communities;
- consuming less meat and processed food;
- favouring natural materials and organic food;
- favouring living in dense cities or in rural areas (rather than in suburbs);
- placing less value or importance on work as an activity while still wishing to have a meaningful and interesting job and/or reduced work hours;
- practicing “low” environmental impact leisure activities.

2.2. Methodology

The study began with participant observation in the form of participation in pre-existing voluntary simplicity group meetings in the area of Montreal, Canada. Participant observation belongs to the tradition of ethnography, which can be understood as an approach that seeks to grasp the various cultural aspects of a social or cultural group [24]. The researcher engages in extensive work in the field in order to collect information, which will enable him or her to draw up a cultural portrait of the studied group. To use a practical image suggested by Wolcott, ethnography seeks to “[...] establish what a stranger would have to know in order to understand what is going on here or, more challenging still, what a stranger would have to know in order to be able to participate in a meaningful way” [25]. It involves a prolonged observation of the group under study, usually through participant observation, in order to identify the values, beliefs, and practices of a cultural group. Finding its origins in cultural anthropology and in sociology, ethnography globally aims at offering a portrait of a cultural-sharing group. It addresses observational and descriptive questions about the group and the individuals that compose it, including commonalities and differences between group members. Ethnography appeared exceptionally relevant for looking at the practices, beliefs, and values surrounding objects and consumption among a given group or population.

In the meetings that were attended, people discussed their experiences in relation to responsible consumption and sustainable lifestyles, and exchanged information and practical advices. Topics and themes of the meetings notably included: how much is enough?; creating community; relation to work; finances and ethical investments; celebrating the holidays simply; the real price of consumption; how to reduce your consumption; media and independent sources of information; developing closer and more meaningful relationships; frugal travel; tired of the rat race?; alternative housing; vegetarian cooking; and taking back your time.

More than forty (40) meetings of two hours duration were attended, representing over eighty (80) hours of participant observation. Three different groups, which all met once per month for a two hours duration and welcomed between 5 to 20 persons at each reunion, were attended. Being involved in these activities has allowed for the examination of different profiles, including the underlying motivations, of people interested in the voluntary simplicity lifestyle. Field notes were taken as a

means of data collection. No visual or audio data were produced during this research phase, as the researcher did not want to disturb the natural dynamic of the group by making the participants feel that they were being observed. Furthermore, the researcher on the fieldwork did not use videotapes to record the meetings because of the excessive amount of data that is generated with this method. In addition, although participants were aware of the presence of the researcher-participant, the researcher did not want to take the risk of inflicting stress or embarrassment upon people in their environment. Videotaping also raises delicate ethical issues, as the researcher needs to have authorization from the participants in order to use such devices. This procedure would have been cumbersome in the case of the present study as the composition of the groups changed from one meeting to the next. This would have caused operational complications at each meeting and was judged unnecessary as this initial exploratory research stage acted as a preamble to the central methodological component of the research, being the key informant interviews that are described later.

Among other things, participant observation allowed for the identification of four profiles or types of “simplifiers” [12].

1. *“Eco-efficient” Simplifiers*

People may consume greener products but do not necessarily consume less.

2. *“Better World” Simplifiers*

People who work altruistically to adopt responsible consumption patterns primarily as a result of their commitment to a “better world” but partly because of perceived personal benefits. They are concerned about social injustice, corporatism, inequity, and environmental and social degradation. Most are not particularly interested in reducing their working hours and usually see higher purchasing power as an opportunity to bring about change to society. They tend to value an “efficiency” approach to consumption in opting for more sustainable products and, although they tend to reduce their consumption levels, are inclined to consume more than the following type of consumer.

3. *“Quality of Life” Simplifiers*

People who see a more sustainable lifestyle primarily as a way to improve their quality of life and, as well, a way of positively responding to environmental and social problems. They often have reduced (or are considering reducing) their working hours and are more likely to adopt a “sufficiency” approach to consumption while also opting for more sustainable products. The group tends to consume less than profiles 1 and 2 above. People belonging to this category are more likely to bring changes to their lifestyles. In their case, greener consumption is part of a larger transformation that includes an important change in the way they perceive “the good life”.

4. *“Involuntary” Simplifiers*

People who tend to use the simplicity discourse to explain a certain “involuntary” simplicity. Although they consume less, they do not necessarily choose more sustainable products, as their concern for larger environmental and social issues seems not to be a significant part of their motivation for “simplifying”.

Those described by the second and the third profiles respond to the challenges of sustainable consumption by appealing to both the principles of *efficiency* (i.e., consuming more eco-friendly products and/or services) and *sufficiency* (i.e., consuming less) in making their consumption choices and lifestyle changes.

To understand the experience of citizens working to act and think as responsible consumers, in-depth individual interviews were undertaken with eleven (11) participants who especially belonged to the second group (*“Better World” Simplifiers*) and third group (*“Quality of Life” Simplifiers*) as the authors were looking to interview people who both opt for greener solutions and consume less. The paper presents and discusses results that emerged from these key informant, semi-directed interviews of one to three hours duration (depending on whether respondents wanted to meet once or twice).

Key informant interviews belong to the tradition of phenomenology. A phenomenological study aims at reporting the lived experiences of several individuals concerning a phenomenon, a concept, or topic [25]. It seeks to offer an understanding of the essence of an experience, or a phenomenon, or a concept among a select number of individuals. The data collection phase is conducted through separate in-depth interviews of usually 6 to 15 individuals. The phenomenological report realized by the researcher should end with the reader understanding better the essential structure of the experience. In other words, the reader should come away with the feeling that “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” [26]. It is, in fact, the study of the lived experiences and the way those experiences brings us to develop a worldview [27]. Such a strategy is appropriate for exploring in great detail people-products relations, as it values the individual experiences of people. It can be understood as an approach which, compared with other qualitative research traditions, particularly seeks “to describe the world as people experience it” [28].

Individual interviews were selected as a suitable method to study precise elements of participants’ material culture and how they experience responsible consumption. Interviews were performed until the data saturation point was reached. The saturation point designates the moment where the researcher realizes that the collection of further data does not provide new and significant elements of understanding: at that point, he or she should terminate the data collection [29]. Qualitative research tools were used in conducting overall research as they allow an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study [30]. The very nature of the research goals called for the use of a qualitative approach as they concern personal experiences and involves “grounded” understanding of people’s relation with the world of objects.

The interview guide used to conduct the interviews focused on the following themes:

- the ways in which respondents experience responsible consumption and their underlying motives;
- the place functional objects occupy in their lives;
- the qualities they value in functional objects;
- their representations surrounding the concept of sustainable product;
- the way positive aesthetic experiences are lived;
- the resulting visual culture.

To stimulate exchanges with the interviewer, participants were invited to photograph objects they value. In addition, products and/or photographs of products were presented to the interviewees, who were invited to comment on the meanings and values they felt were embodied in the object's formal qualities and the relationship of these meaning and values to sustainability.

The in-depth interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed using Microsoft Word, for a total of about 600 pages of text. A pseudonym was used to identify each participant, even though most of them were comfortable with the researcher using their full name. Each intervention was identified with the participant's pseudonym in order maintain traceability in the later stages as to the source of any quotation. Once all the interviews were transcribed, the content was organized following each question of the interview guide. In preparation for analysis, for each question, the fieldwork researcher read through the text and assigned codes to designate themes that emerged from the data. The codes were later used to organize the content of each question with Atlas-TI, a qualitative data analysis application. Still using Atlas-TI, all content for each question was organized based on codes. More precisely, at this stage, the meaning units, that is the text material or quotes, were placed under the codes to which they belonged. An "output" document was then produced for the qualitative analysis.

Although participants' selection was based on theoretical sampling where the authors were looking at interviewing people who respond to the second and third profiles of simplifiers described earlier and not based on socio-demographic representativity, to potentially situate the reader about the profile of the participants, some information are here provided: the 11 participants were between 20–59 years of age; 5 were female and 6 male; 3 were married and 8 single; 5 had a college or professional degree, 3 had an undergraduate degree and 3 a postgraduate degree; 3 were located in a medium sized urban area and 8 in a large city, notably Montreal city; and occupation included coordinator of non-profit organization, technician in mechanical drawing, actuary, translator, student, coordinator of cultural activities, journalist, engineer.

Based on the interviews and the work of other researchers in the field, the following section describes some self-interest motives that have been identified as principal incentives for engaging in responsible consumption patterns. Links are considered between these motives and particular product characteristics that were appreciated by the interviewees.

3. Results: Perceived Personal Benefits and Product Qualities

Among key informant interviewees, perceived individual or family benefits acted as important motivations for adopting sustainable modes of consumption, and more sustainable lifestyles in general. Together with concerns about the earth and social justice, a desire for a higher quality of life and for more freedom and autonomy appeared to be important factors. Here, the authors wish to emphasise that this paper focuses on the self-interest motives for responsible consumption in relation to product perception and preferences, and that participants' commitments to responsible consumption also included significant eco- and socio-altruistic motives that are not discussed in this paper. With regard to self-interest or perceived individual benefits, the following elements emerged as central factors: having more time, reducing stress and a healthier, more balanced lifestyle. The following sub-sections address how these motives are expressed through respondents' relationship with the world of goods and their product perception and preferences.

Commuting by either biking or running to my work allows me to incorporate a way to get some exercise while also saving money.... Before buying a product I consider its price in terms of the time I had to work in order to acquire the amount of money in question. This way of seeing things allows me to better perceive the cost of a product for my life.

In thinking about my relationship with things, I want to be in charge, I don't want them to run my life.

The more you want time for yourself, the less you need to spend. The more you spend, the more you need to work and the less time you have, so for me luxury is not about a gold ring or a gold watch, for me luxury is time.

I wanted to know if I really needed a highly paid salary to do what I want in life, but what I really needed was time. I was working late hours, and you know, with my two children... What also struck me is that I was working in order to buy stuff.... Then I decided to do things differently

For these respondents, a high level of consumption and the associated dependence on work and/or credit to acquire products, as well as the pursuit of income growth, is perceived as having severe negative impacts on the individual and family, and on the quality of social relations with others. As they reduce the level of their consumption and (by extension) expenses related to the consumption of goods, respondents commonly express a feeling of being less dependent on work and income. Four of the eleven respondents reported having shifted from a full-time job to a part-time job or had reduced their working hours in an attempt to overcome the work/spend cycle and benefit from more time.

Responsible consumption is also a way to tend towards a reduction of purchases, and more globally, a reduction of everything that is material around you. I think we all need to do this because we are cluttered by a bulk of objects.

I think that in some ways, getting rid of things you don't really need allows you to gain the time you were using to maintain this stuff, so primarily it gives you more time to spend with people.

I realized that I don't give an important place to objects, or not much importance.... I evaluate which objects are useful and which are only encumbering and cluttering up my interior space and give away things I don't need.

Considering all the energy that you spend and put into objects, I try to have less. It is better to have objects that last longer, that are of better quality and that I will keep longer.

The participants indicated that they regard possessing a large number of products as a source of stress because the products have to be maintained and repaired. They stated that having "too much" is a burden because of the energy and time required to care for and care about these possessions. All reported trying to reduce the number of objects they possess by giving away goods they do not use or that are not important to them, or by avoiding or reducing purchases in order to minimize accumulation.

In general I try to avoid objects full of gadgets or superfluous options and I try to take the ones that are as simple as possible. ... The less you have gadgets on your object, the longer it will last because it will be less likely to break.

The less an object has components and all this, it is easier to repair, it will last longer and there will be less need for replacement and this I think too is in line with responsible consumption.

When it is simple, it is as if I was given back some power over the objects.

You need to think in terms of durability and not to be too dependent on money and having to work like a fool in order to afford everything the companies try to make you believe you need. ... Commercials are trying to sell things to do a function that could be done with stuff that we probably already have.

When acquiring products, respondents expressed a preference for objects with a limited number of features. “Simpler” objects, characterized among other things as those offering fewer features and options than most contemporary, mass-consumption products, are perceived as less likely to break and therefore less likely to require money, time and care to repair or replace. Objects presenting fewer, but carefully selected, features and options appeared to be appreciated for these reasons. Such qualities also make for a certain experience of autonomy, whereby the owners have the feeling that they have control over their objects and can repair them if broken, or at least understand what is wrong. Another benefit of perceived “simplicity” is that products designed for one specific use, in contrast to multifunctional products, are seen as more likely to last over time. Although respondents mentioned preferring “products that do one thing, but do it well”, as one participant put it, some do not hesitate to use objects for functions other than their intended one. For example, one respondent, who preferred having fewer objects in her kitchen environment, explained using the lower part of a cake tray to serve vegetables or other foods. She also uses a self-standing pasta and vegetable colander as a fruit bowl even if she has to remove the fruits from it when needed for the intended function of the object. She was pointing out that she can do “more with less” and that, in many cases, only conventions prevent us from transforming object functions in order to respond to our needs with fewer goods.

The first question that I ask myself is do I really need this, and can I rent it instead of buying it, can I borrow it? And often finally the answer is yes, there are other ways, we don't always need to go and buy a product. And if I wish to buy something, I will give myself some time to think about it before proceeding, to be sure it is not impulsive buying.

If we are making less money then we are almost forced to be more creative with the objects, the things, and the way we are consuming.

You start disconnecting from your life when you have too much. ... I see every object now as an investment of my time, as something that may take away from something else I could be doing or I want to be doing as far as having to pay to purchase it, and having to pay to maintain it.

I think that it is important to think about the usage of a product. The use you are making out of a product needs to be justified and needs to be worth it, considering the energy that has been put into this object and all the energy you put into your work to get the money to acquire it.

Participants indicated that they had rethought modes of consumption and found alternatives to purchasing new products. They reported that they were inclined to rent objects and to make use of product-service systems such as car sharing or toy rental services, as such options permit them to benefit from the utility of the product only when needed, while investing less energy, money and time in the various aspects of its maintenance. Notably, one participant mentioned a service he found particularly interesting, and in which he planned to take part, which allows citizens to rent art pieces created within the community and to exchange them every month or two with others subscribers. He appreciated that these artefacts are becoming accessible through this service and that this system challenges the traditional “owning” and “possessing” culture while allowing more people to benefit from such artefacts. Another alternative that can lead to a reduction in the number of products purchased, opting for second hand goods either via purchasing or local exchange trading systems, was common practice among respondents. For example, one participant uses *FreeCycle*, a platform available on the Web that allows people to give and acquire products for free in their geographical area. In such ways, and in order to experience a better quality of life according to their standards, participants sought alternative ways to respond to their needs.

When you decide to evaluate what are your real needs and how many hours of work are necessary to meet these with a part time job, you can have enough for everything that you really need and then you get time with your family. You get some time to make things that you will not buy because you have time to make them... It's a different way to see the relationship between work, time and money.

It is great when you can see how it works... Like this, if it breaks, I can think that I will be able to fix it.

The more complex and fragile the object that you buy is, the more you are dependent... I think we need to keep a certain autonomy and manual objects allow this.... Responsible consumption and simple living is aimed at the autonomy to do things yourself.

For me this (Cat Tree) is beautiful, in the sense that my boyfriend made this using scraps he found at work, like spare carpet and wood, and the cats love it, it's the creativity behind it that I like... It's like \$150 for a thing like that and we said no, no, no.

Partly because alternatives are not easy to find, but also to reduce expenses, “do it yourself” (DIY) appeared to be a popular practice among respondents who, for instance, reported being inclined and taking pleasure in making their own products and in repairing goods. While the creative interventions of participants with regard to making objects can be seen as modest, their benefit and contribution does not lie so much in their professionalism or refinement as objects, but rather in the fact that they are user-generated and represent an individual, conscientious counter-response to consumerism.

In sum, key informant interviewees expressed the idea that consuming in a more sustainable way plays a positive role in the pursuit of the “good life”. This took the form of a reduced level of consumption and preference for products or product-service systems that allowed them to invest less time, money, and care in replacement, maintenance or repair.

4. Discussion

4.1. Self-Interest and Altruism

Before discussing potential implications related to a greater acknowledgement of self-interest motives for responsible consumption and for the way products and services are developed and positioned, the next section offers a brief perspective on the notion of self-interest. The notion appears to be a somewhat sensitive issue in the context of sustainability because it can be perceived as a cause of our underlying environmental and social problems.

According to De Young, self-interest is traditionally seen as a major source of environmental problems. He reports that this “presumption” was central to much of the early research on environmentally responsible behaviours. Self-interest was strongly associated with the egocentric nature of humans as “gain-maximizers, having evolved to consume resources with little or no concern for efficiency, to pass waste and costs on to others, and to form small groups that exclude and neglect the interest of others” [11]. These behaviours would seem to be in stark contrast to socio-centric and eco-centric motives needed for environmentally responsible behaviour. However, the author notes that more recent research suggests that self-interest and personal benefits derived from environmentally responsible behaviours can be part of the solution to environmental problems and can work in concert with altruistic motives. For De Young, it is important to distinguish between “self-interest” and “selfishness”, since the former is often not acknowledged as a constructive and positive motive but is, mistakenly, equated with the latter. He argues that “selfishly consuming resources or creating waste without concern for others is quite different from taking care of yourself” in order to be in “a much better position to take care of others who cannot take care of themselves or to advocate for the environment”.

In the same vein, Kaplan sees the altruism-centred approach as “having several inadvertent consequences, including contributing to helplessness and stressing sacrifice rather than quality-of-life-enhancing solutions” [10]. Kaplan asserts that the altruistic model, closely linked with the “dour environmentalist stereotype”, undermines appeals for environmentally responsible behaviour and may prevent powerful linkages with critiques of materialism as unhealthy and unsatisfying at the level of the individual. Kaplan writes:

At an intuitive level it is not surprising that people resist making changes that they perceive as reducing their quality of life. It is also not surprising that people are concerned about the future of the environment. Perhaps a broader view of human nature, one that encompasses more than material gain, could provide a way out of this impasse. A central failing to the altruistic position is that it attempts to put aside the issue of gain, of self-interest, in human behavior. The “economic man” position, by contrast, argues that

gain is all that matters. Neither position is satisfactory; there is need for a position that is neither so extreme with respect to the issue of gain nor so narrow in its focus.

Similarly, Soper [9] argues that, in the mobilization of sustainable consumption, the role played by an alternative perspective on what constitutes the “good life” should be more fully recognised. She calls for enlarging the framework of thinking about the “civic” aspects of consumption in order to encompass what she describes as an “alternative hedonist rationale” for adopting more sustainable consumption patterns. By this expression the author is referring to “motives for changing consumption practice that derive from the more negative aspects for consumers themselves of their high-speed, work-dominated, materialistic lifestyle, and are fed by a sense that important pleasures and sources of gratification are being lost or unrealised as a consequence of it”. Soper explains that such a response may in part derive from concerns about the negative ecological and social impacts of affluent consumption and consumerist lifestyle, but is also “reflecting an altered—or now changing—conception of self-interest”. She considers that it would be judicious and reasonable to encourage this model or conception in a context where affluent nations will be increasingly called upon to take responsibility for the high ecological pressure, as well as social imbalances, generated by their heavy reliance on resources in order to sustain a flawed conception of the “good life” that relies heavily on high levels of goods and energy consumption.

In summary, De Young, Kaplan and Soper maintain that self-interest and altruism should no longer be seen as opposite poles. In the light of this discourse, it seems that envisioning products and product-service systems that more significantly consider both these motivations, and are positioned as such, could support sustainable consumption either by responding more adequately to citizens already engaged in this direction or by raising awareness among citizens about the existence of alternatives (products, services, lifestyles and even conception of the “good life”) that can be socially accepted. Essentially, the self-interest motivators that have emerged from this research are strongly linked to notions of self-realization and living a meaningful life: they involve things such as spending more time with family and friends, and are associated with reducing causes of worry or stress and alleviating a sense of discontent. In taking into account these motives and the ways in which they are expressed through product perceptions and preferences, the next section examines some of the implications of giving greater recognition to the self-interest motives of responsible consumption.

4.2. Potential Implications

Significantly, the results indicate that respondents adopt more responsible consumption practices not only for eco- and socio-altruistic motives, but also because of perceived personal or familial gains, *i.e.*, there are additional “vested interests” in their consumption decisions. The way products are thought about and how they relate to these benefits is explored below. The main contribution of these results lies in the fact that they support sustainable design discourses and strategies from a new point of view. The perspective of personal or familial gains for sustainable consumption would actually play an important role in promoting and encouraging sustainable design solutions and businesses.

From the foregoing, greater acknowledgement of perceived individual benefits for responsible consumption would help steer us towards longer-lasting and easily maintained products and new

product-service systems. This could be encouraged on the basis of potentially greater personal benefits to the broader public. At the same time, designers and manufacturers would need to be capable of developing goods that are durable and potentially modular, updatable, easily repairable, and reusable. Clearly, to be economically attractive, new interpretations of business purpose would have to be developed in parallel [31].

The most significant implications emerging from self-interest motives appear to be:

Maintenance and Upgrading: Businesses that currently see themselves solely as product providers would need to transform themselves into product/service providers and create economic opportunities from product maintenance, refurbishment and upgrading, and through building longer term relationships with their customers. New businesses involved in after-sales services could emerge to support increased product life spans, where users would be expected to look after their products and to maintain (or have them maintained and repaired) in order to reduce their expenses and dependence on work and credit. Product designers could be called upon to enlarge their practice fieldwork in the context of repair, reuse and re-design within locally or regionally based facilities [32].

The promotion among the public of product life extension facilities could be made on the basis of ecological and individual benefits. According to Jackson, a “vital key task” to support sustainable consumption would be to eliminate any systematic biases that work against such facilities [33]. Ideally, increased maintenance, repair and upgrading of products, perhaps using highly skilled and craft-based methods, would provide employment opportunities and, to some extent, minimize the effect of reduced demand for new products on employment and the economy [34]. It is clear that increased product life spans, through better intrinsic durability, better care and maintenance and product upgrading seriously challenges many aspects of our current economic system, and this, too, will require development and transformation if more sustainable ways of living are to advance [35].

The viability of local re-design and re-use facilities, as well as long-lasting products, could be encouraged by the prospect of higher fuel prices in the future [36], our current system of globalised production and distribution being precariously dependent on relatively low fuel prices. As fuel prices rise, products supplied via this existing system will inevitably become more expensive; this in turn could encourage people to maintain their products over a longer period of time and support the integration of greater localization in the production and maintenance of goods.

Simplification: The interviews have also revealed a link between self-interest motives for responsible consumption and a preference for products offering a limited range of options (which are also perceived as longer lasting). Such qualities give respondents the feeling that they have greater control over their products and that they can repair them if broken, or at least understand what is wrong. It would seem increasingly important to be aware of and to understand these perceptions and ideas in order to develop products that respond to these expectations.

Product-Service Systems: The study found that participants were disposed to switch from products to product-service systems, because the latter allow them to benefit from the utility of a product when they need it, while investing less energy, money and time in caring for, being worried about, and maintaining the product. Again, there seems to be an opportunity to promote the use of product-service systems on the basis of such individual benefits.

In positioning products or services in relation to self-interest motives for responsible consumption, an important communication and marketing element would be needed to reinforce the personal advantages that complement the environmental and social benefits. These messages could emphasise the benefits of more personal time, less stress and healthier lifestyles, as identified by respondents in this study whether through the use of product-service systems (including rental services); a general reduction of consumption; the consumption of products that, by their “intrinsic” qualities are more likely to last over time; or the acquisition (via purchase or product exchange services) of second hand products. Further research would be needed to understand the relationship between self-interest motives and how they can unfold into successful, meaningful marketing messages.

4.3. Limitations

The consumers who took part in the study belonged, at various levels, to the voluntary simplicity “movement”. The data gathered is thus, to a certain degree, representative of the ideas and perspectives of responsible consumers who have participated in voluntary simplicity activities. In conducting further research in this area, data could be collected from responsible consumers who are not involved, or have not participated, in voluntary simplicity groups or activities. In addition, data gathered only cover participants’ attitudes and reported actions and not their actual actions. Interviewees can provide inexact information as they may wish to present a positive image of themselves to the researcher [37]. The collection of anonymous data would thus, for example, be useful in expanding research data from responsible consumers.

5. Conclusions

Jackson sees the issue of sustainable consumption as the “most challenging and vital policy debates of our time”, and considers that the discourse on sustainable consumption has now become “a place where it is possible (perhaps even necessary) to address not just the technological and economic questions about the human appropriation of environmental resources, but deeper and broader questions about the nature of the “good life” and the course of human progress” [38].

The study starts to indicate that the notion of the “good life”, at the scale of the individual, can occupy a significant role in the shift towards more sustainable consumption patterns. The empirical results support the discourse of scholars who argue that self-interest motives for responsible consumption should receive greater recognition, in addition to being regarded as a legitimate impetus or incentive.

Among the participants, the seeking of more personal time, less stress and healthier lifestyles are notably associated with a reduction in consumption; the desire to be surrounded with (and to possess) fewer objects; preference for products or product-service systems that require less maintenance; products less liable to be subject to replacement (something that is seen in objects with fewer features and options); and the acquisition of second hand goods in order to reduce expenses.

The overall study has indicated that reduction in levels of consumption is closely related to self-interest motives, while opting for environmentally and socially sound goods is more directly related to eco- and socio-altruistic motives.

This paper has presented data that support the idea that individual benefits associated with the adoption of sustainable consumption patterns should be more directly addressed in the theories and practices of sustainable design. The factors discussed above can take a much greater role in the marketing and positioning of such solutions to the public. Interdisciplinary research in this direction should be conducted to explore further the potential and viability of self-interest motives in the context of reducing consumption in order to achieve a more sustainable future.

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