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### Signing up for Voluntary Simplicity – Consumer Motives and Effects

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#### Abstract

**Purpose:** The current study examines consumers' motives in signing up for a weeklong voluntary simplicity experiment, No Impact Week (NIW), and reducing their consumption during and afterward.

**Methodology/approach:** The empirical data come from informants who filled out a pre-week email inquiry, completed a daily diary template centered on eight themes, responded to a post-week email inquiry and answered follow-up questions one month after completion.

**Findings:** Those who participate in NIW were motivated by personal factors, such as curiosity and desire to be more aware, to learn tips for eco-living applicable to daily life and to challenge themselves. People who chose not to participate did so largely because they did not understand what would be required of them. Participants incorporated the experiment into their lives, but the outcomes remained dependent on existing structures, in this case environmental and personal factors. The findings indicate the existence of a value–action gap and an awareness–behaviour gap.

**Research implications:** While a mismatch between consumers' consumption values and behaviour is not uncommon, enabling behaviour in line with values is crucial for reducing consumption. Although voluntary simplicity is a drastic form of consumption reduction that appeals only to a small but growing niche of people, the motives for and consequences of engaging in it highlight pressing issues of consumer behaviour and consumption.

**Value of paper:** The study is unique in that it links voluntary simplicity to a social marketing campaign that should appeal to those with a favourable attitude toward taking action and reducing their consumption.

**Keywords:** Voluntary simplicity, VS, Consumption reduction, Reflective diary method, Social marketing campaign

## Introduction

The current study is about voluntary simplifiers, namely people who choose ‘out of free will rather than by being coerced by poverty, government austerity programs, or being imprisoned, to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning’ (Etzioni, 2004, p. 1). Voluntary simplicity can be seen to embrace both a value component and a behavioural component since it has been defined as ‘both a system of beliefs and a practice [...] centred on the idea that personal satisfaction, fulfilment, and happiness result from a commitment to the nonmaterial aspects of life’ (Zavestoski, 2002, p. 149). Anti-consumption attitudes do not, however, necessarily translate into anti-consumption behaviours. In addition, many who embark on the transformational process never complete it.

Unable to transfer their consumption reduction intentions into behaviours, consumers struggle to overcome barriers or rationalize their shortcomings (e.g. Thieme *et al.*, 2015). To expose underlying mechanisms, academics have scrutinised motivators and the transformation process (Zavestoski, 2002; Cherrier and Murray, 2002; Bekin *et al.*, 2005; Khare, 2014). While a mismatch between consumers’ consumption values and behaviour is not uncommon, enabling behaviour in line with values is crucial for reducing consumption. Additional understanding of the process of adopting a simpler lifestyle can provide insight into the deliberations, barriers and issues involved. It could also help explain why there are inconsistencies between consumers’ attitudes and behaviours even as awareness of society’s unsustainable behaviour increases, benefiting social marketing campaigns and policy initiatives.

While voluntary simplifying can be motivated by many things from having a spiritual or religious tenet to favouring a simpler lifestyle, the current study chose to focus on how consumers who potentially strive to become voluntary simplifiers relate to signing up for and taking part in the voluntary social marketing experiment No Impact Week (henceforth abbreviated NIW) at a business school. As part of NIW, over the course of eight days, participants receive guidance on how to reduce various consumer excesses. They are given a daily theme to focus on, such as trash, transportation, water or energy conservation, which they add to previous days’ themes until the end of the week, at which point they are living with ‘no impact’. This social marketing campaign offers an opportunity for all but can be

especially appealing to those with a favourable attitude toward taking action to reduce consumption, i.e. ‘apprentice simplifiers’ (Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2005, p. 18).

Studies that map out how living with less, whether by choice or due to external factors, remain infrequent. The aim of this study is hence to more precisely examine consumers’ motives in signing up for the NIW experiment and reducing consumption during it and afterward. The study is unique in linking voluntary simplicity to a social marketing campaign that should be appealing to those with a favourable attitude toward taking action to reduce consumption.

The sample selected was neither pre-defined as voluntary simplifiers nor identified as anti-consumers; they were individuals who voluntarily chose to act according to certain guidelines or to consider doing so for week with potential extended effects. Using qualitative research methods such as questionnaires and reflexive diaries, the experiences of NIW participants and non-participants were collected in the first NIW experiment organized in Finland. The study does not address whether the experiment was a success, but rather individuals’ experiences with it – specifically, what the reasons for and barriers to signing up were and what effect the experiment had on participants.

### **Voluntary simplicity**

Previous studies indicate that the transformation from being a traditional consumer placing less emphasis on material aspects can differ among people. Cherrier and Murray (2002) describe essential elements during and after the process: sensitization to one’s internal, as opposed to external self; and signification of adjusting from a consumer to a more meaningful lifestyle. Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin (2005) found that, after the transformation, consumption occurs in ‘alternative, liberating and, perhaps more satisfying ways’ and that a simple lifestyle brings back the enjoyment in one’s life and playfulness at work. Schreurs, Martens and Kok (2012) identified life changes, for example, changing social networks, needing support from others, and undergoing personal growth. For the individual, the process can thus be life changing in promoting new values and habits.

### *Consumption needs*

Since this study is about reduced consumption, it is necessary to consider why people consume in the first place. Consumption has been associated with needs-based rhetoric. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the relation between them and dissatisfaction with a consumerist lifestyle, Zavestoski (2002) presented a modified hierarchy of needs. He identified which primary motivational bases of the self can be satisfied through consumption (self-esteem and self-efficacy) and which cannot (authenticity, or being faithful to one's internal rather than external self). He found that people come to the realization that the external aspect of their lives – having everything they are 'supposed' to – only makes them feel more miserable about their internal aspects.

Another way of framing the complexity of making sustainable choices is Max-Neef's (1991) categorization of 'needs' and 'satisfiers'. Built on multiple models of sustainable consumer behaviour, he placed four ways of satisfying needs (being, having, doing or interacting, since needs are not simply based around ownership) against an axis of ten needs (subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, freedom and, for some, transcendence). Within Max-Neef's (1991) framework, people would no longer repeatedly consume, and thus would stop engaging in behaviours that are not in their or others' best interests but instead learn to straightaway distinguish among satisfiers and make decisions maximizing their enjoyment. Everyday concepts could subsequently be seen in a new light: clothing, food and housing, for example, would no longer be defined as needs per se, but rather satisfiers, in that they fulfil the needs of protection and subsistence (Jackson *et al.*, 2004).

#### *Transforming into voluntary simplicity*

Schreurs, Martens and Kok's (2012) Transformational Model of Living with Less provides an overview of the transition process. It is centred on the principle that living with less need not be associated with a problem, such as poverty, or solving a problem, as with environmentalism, but rather as life experiences within a process. While their model identifies different stages, NIW would most likely fit their 'coming out' phase. Directly related to that phase, they identify the need for support and communication and reference group and social commitment as essential, and they note that many barriers exist, for example avoidance, lack of opportunities and capabilities, social obligations and negativity. Despite the benefits gained from the transitional process, such as expanded skill-sets and improved self-esteem, they found that undergoing a change, whether voluntarily or not, is challenging.

Because of various difficulties and barriers, many who start the transformational process never finish it. This is not merely because of personal issues but is also due to environmental factors. One model of particular importance to this study is, therefore, the social cognitive framework combining social cognitive theory (SCT) and reciprocal determinism (Phipps *et al.*, 2013). The framework posits that, although people are in control of their behaviour, they are also affected by their surroundings, whether concrete or social, as well as personal factors such as perceptions of self-efficacy and motivation. This intermingling of factors may either impact or be impacted by the outcome, in a feedback loop, as past behaviour is an important determinant of future behaviour. The model is not predictive, but rather provides a lens through which to interpret the complexity of sustainable consumption. Next, it will be used to analyse people's experiences when coming into contact with a voluntary simplicity experiment, namely NIW.

### **NIW as a social marketing campaign**

The No Impact Project venture (<http://noimpactproject.org/>) is based on its creator Colin Beavan's (2009) year-long experiment of living in New York City with his family (wife, daughter and dog), attempting not to have any negative impact on the planet, and seeing to what extent this was possible. Basically, he aimed to limit his consumption to a minimum, and for those things he could not eliminate, he volunteered with environmental non-profit organizations to give back to the community. To promote the benefits of his approach, help others start on the same path and market the ideas to a mainstream audience, the No Impact Project venture was founded. The organization acts as a non-profit, promoting and helping to organize No Impact Weeks: eight-day versions of Beavan's yearlong project. The description of NIW and how it works specifies that The No Impact Experiment is an eight-day carbon cleanse that guides participants through daily challenges, from creating no trash, to eating locally, to volunteering in their own communities. Through a guided program participants are given the opportunity to try a no impact lifestyle for themselves and discover how to live a life that is good for both them and the planet. Because such voluntary simplifier communities desire to educate localities about their practices, they can offer governments and marketers key lessons on sustainable development Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin (2005, p. 425). Small NGOs operating on individual donations, such as the No Impact Project, do not have sufficient budgets and size to allow for the type of campaigns described largely by marketing

theory. In this case, academic theory could broaden its domain to include the efforts of NGOs with no large-scale marketing reach.

The No Impact Project aims to raise awareness and encourage more people to be mindful. The NIW experiment can be taken on individually, as a family, as part of a community, through a university or, more recently, within a workplace. Participants are encouraged to blog and post about their experiences online, presumably to spark discussions, seek help, engage others and spread the word. After an online registration is completed, a 'how-to' guide is emailed to help people plan and undertake the experiment, along with pre- and post-week email inquiries to provide feedback on participants' attitudes before and after NIW. The experiment is free of charge to individuals, households and communities as it seeks to support participants' voluntary decisions to reduce their environmental impact. Recently, the No Impact Project has started charging universities a small fee to license the material used to organize and promote the event in order to further fund the organization's efforts. Information about NIW is sent out via emailing lists, social media, word of mouth and posters.

## **Method**

Because of the current limited knowledge of voluntary simplifiers, a qualitative approach has been recommended studies on this topic (Bekin *et al.*, 2005). This study adopted such an approach and used three methods for increased flexibility (Saunders *et al.*, 2012): secondary data collection and analysis, a community questionnaire and a reflective diary. These methods were selected as the most suitable for collecting data as the study is exploratory and based on subjective data, mostly interpretations of respondents' motives for and against participation and diary authors' experiences, and this kind of data cannot be collected through observational methods (see Appendix 1 containing the diary templates and follow-up email and question). Before empirical data were collected from consumers, descriptive secondary data about the No Impact Project were collected from available sources.

### *Pre-week email inquiry*

To obtain background information on potential NIW participants, a pre-week inquiry was emailed to the business school community to which the event was primarily marketed. The email with an attached link was sent to the entire community of approximately 2,200 people,

consisting of 2,000 students and 200 faculty and staff, of which 46 people completed it – a response rate of approximately two per cent. The inquiry itself consisted of both quantitative- and qualitative-type questions and was cross-sectional in nature, collected at a single point in time. A separate registration form was designed via a website to customize the collected data and ask those signing up whether they would be willing to keep a diary. Contact via email occurred after a more direct form of introduction was made or to obtain a phone number for the direct introduction. Of the 46 respondents, 31 people who indicated interest were selected as the critical sample: a majority were women, half were business school students and half were faculty or staff. Year of birth ranged from 1947 to 1993, averaging around 1979. The median and mode were 1986 and 1991, respectively. Household sizes varied from one to five persons, with the median and mode of the sample being two for both, with an average of 2.5 members per household. Thus, the sample covered many consumer types.

### *Diary method*

Volunteer participants kept a reflective diary throughout the experiment week to help determine why people participate in NIW and to analyse their experiences. All 31 volunteers were contacted first by email to set up a phone call to explain the study and the required commitment level. The gender ratio was 21 women to nine men and one person who preferred not to disclose. Of these, the sample was again narrowed by self-selection. The commitment of keeping a weeklong diary was likely too taxing for some (Reid, Hunter and Sutton, 2006). In the end, the sample consisted of 16 people (11 women and five men), who filled in the pre-week inquiry and kept diaries for at least part of the week. Of these, 12 completed a diary entry for every theme day and answered pre-, post- and follow-up questions, and the remaining four people completed the pre-week questions and a minimum of four diary entries.

Although the individuals volunteered to keep a diary, and thus their answers may have been more opinionated or emotionally attached to the research topic than others would be, there is little evidence that they are unrepresentative of the research population. Participants were asked to email their themed entries each evening or the following morning. In cases of non-responses, they were asked whether everything was going OK, whether they had any questions and why they were unable to email their diary entry. The purpose of speaking on the phone initially was to build a relationship so that respondents would hopefully feel comfortable writing honestly about the week.

### *Analysing the data*

First, the data for each respondent were compiled into one file; then, the categorization process was initiated as the data were transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet. The data were sorted first by respondent, then by theme. Potential models were used in the analysis but they did not succeed in conveying the data accurately but instead seemed to overlook potential links. Finally, the social cognitive framework (Phipps *et al.*, 2013) was reasoned to be the most useful lens through which to view the data. For example, if a diary-keeper several times mentioned the same story, these were treated as one entry. Remaining stories were sorted based on their most relevant factor: behavioural, personal or contextual; or perception of outcome. As the distinctions between these factors were often blurred, the easiest way of sorting them was to think of the stories as a whirl of events and to determine which factors were instrumental to their outcome. This involved a back-and-forth comparison between the diary and the model. Then the reverse was done, and the data were reviewed from the point of view of the model compared with the diary to describe the findings from a more succinct and structured perspective.

### *Quality of the study*

The quality of this study is based on Wallendorf and Belk's (1989) criteria. The diary and other data collection methods allowed participants to express their thoughts in their own words. In terms of triangulation across methods and sources, this study made use of multiple methods and built its findings alongside various concepts and models from prior research. The diary method also contained built-in triangulation, as many respondents discussed their experiences several times in one entry from multiple points of view. This allowed for a more credible interpretation of the experience. The data analysis portion of the research, across methods, was largely conducted without preconceived categories or according to pre-existing models deemed appropriate and justifiable. To prolong engagement and build trust, two things were done: first, one researcher committed herself to organizing NIW at the business school, thus showing her involvement in environmental issues and being someone who had also undertaken NIW at an earlier point in time; second, the researchers contacted all NIW diary-keepers by phone to tell them about the research, the researchers and the week ahead. Each participant was assigned a letter, F or M, based on gender and randomly assigned a number to keep his or her identity private.

## **Empirical Findings**

NIW is an American concept and, though the experiment has been organized in communities throughout the world, the campaign has not earned an international reputation. The NIW at the business school was the first instance of the experiment being organized in Finland.

People reacting to the concept and engaging in the week's challenge were as varied as would be possible at another university. One key assumption of the study is that valuable findings can be drawn from any sample since the variety of experiences and circumstances that occur is countless.

Five more people than those who filled out the email inquiry, 51 in all, initially signed up to participate in NIW at the business school. They were self-selected, as no participation incentives were offered beyond intangible claims of potentially improved well-being. When respondents were asked how they had heard about NIW taking place, a slight majority, 30 people, had heard about it from the email, five had seen the posters, two had heard about it from faculty/staff/strangers/other, two had seen it on Facebook or on the business school website, one had heard about the concept prior but did not know it was happening at the business school, and one had heard about it in class.

Diary-keepers took on the challenge to reduce their consumption and learn new ways of doing so, regardless of their current level of experience in this area. Preparation consisted mostly of reading the NIW guide; a few people did some side research. Some participants set goals; others chose to focus on awareness. Everyone faced challenges but also reported some successes. Some people's social interactions differed due to the experiment in either positive or negative ways. Every diary-keeper voiced opinions on how the current situation could be improved and barriers lessened to reducing consumption on the focused themes. These opinions were phrased in the passive or active voice, with the latter including a responsible actor who would be the catalyst for this change. Furthermore, all participants stated NIW was a positive experience in hindsight, except for one who said it was neither positive nor negative.

Some had already made changes to their lifestyles leading up to NIW:

As I believe I have been conscious about my living for the past two years, I believe this week is more of an analysis for what I could improve, although at this point I believe it will be difficult to cut down further. (M1 – Pre-week)

As I have already tried to live 'greener' for a couple of years, I don't expect this to be a life-changing experience, but as I do know it is difficult to change habits, I hope to get tips and inspiration for continuing on this path. [...] I am interested in these issues and I think it is nice to get to connect to other people with the same interests.  
(F3 – Pre-week)

Others admitted to not being so eco-friendly prior to NIW:

I consider that I am doing my small part to preserve nature on reasonable level. I am definitely not a green man but have some fixed ideas about recycling and transportation. (M2 – Pre-week)

*Seeking awareness and tips and for the challenge incited participating in NIW*

Most people stated multiple reasons for choosing to take part in NIW. Each reason was categorized separately and is visually illustrated in Figure 1. This Figure was compiled using an online keyword map (word cloud that gives greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the data) into which category labels were input once for each time they were listed, with the more important reasons being cited more often, and the lesser being cited less often. Of the sixteen individual replies, the desire for awareness was among those more cited expressed as "a chance for me to observe my life since I never thought it before" and "to illustrate my habits when it comes to environmental issues and possibly show me ways to change how I act." Equally important were people's desire to learn easy tips or tricks to make a difference without making restrictive or radical changes in their lives or putting in a lot of effort. This motive was illustrated for example with "this would be a way to learn how I could do at least some small changes in the way I live" and "I'm hoping to learn something new about consumption and see if I could make an even bigger change by little effort." A third motive was the excitement of the challenge of living 'no impact' and seeing whether it were possible – the same as one of Beavan's (2009) initial motives for starting No Impact Man. In this context, the challenge was not always linked to a strong interest or passion for environmental issues, but rather, a sense of curiosity to experiment with something new. A few example quotes are "This is more of a test for me personally than effort to heal the world, but what the heck if they coincide why not" and "I want to go outside of my comfort zone and try something eco-friendly and new."

--- Insert Figure 1 about here ----

From a social cognitive theory perspective (Phipps *et al.*, 2012), the top three motivators for participating were all personal in nature: seeking awareness, and tips and tricks (skills), and for the challenge. This is consistent with NIW's notion to be an exercise in individual challenges related to sustainable consumption, which moulds the expectations of participants accordingly.

When clear information is communicated, this increases the chances of more people getting excited and signing up right away and telling their friends about it. Hearing the message from others also gives the event a context, in this example a social one, as opposed potentially seeing the event as an extra thing to do if people remember, are free, and time to spare. When speaking of 'living ecologically,' the actions people perceive as being ecological may highly depend on their experiences, opinions and the general context of the actions.

Motives for taking part in NIW were interpreted and categorized according to Max-Neef's (1991) classification of needs and satisfiers. 'Understanding' ranked at the top because it was defined as people being curious, critically conscience, disciplined and open to experiments. The method of teaching understanding in the NIW context is by providing ('having') every participant the how-to guide and useful links, in addition to their 'interacting' within the school and No Impact community. 'Participating' ranked second to the top because it involved people being adaptable, receptive, willing, dedicated and determined to try the experiment. Moreover, there were feelings of responsibility and of being able to do more for the environment ('having'), and interacting (also 'doing') with other people from the community (friends, family and community) to find new ways of accomplishing things. The desired behaviour of 'living ecologically' comprises multiple behaviours. 'Identity' was mentioned in relation to being green or not; belonging to a specific group of people who share the same interests, values or experiences; and doing something to get to know yourself, or putting the values into practice. Max-Neef's categorization (1991) defines the need for 'freedom' in terms of being autonomous, determined, open-minded, bold and assertive, in addition to developing awareness ('doing'). In the context of NIW, a need for freedom can be interpreted as individuals striving towards awareness and fully understanding the consequences of their actions. People more often expressed an interest in environmental issues but were aware that they could be doing more. In a sense this suggests that participating in NIW was a way of establishing their identity as conscious and informed. It could have been a way for people to 'brand' themselves green and taking part in HIW could

be a credible way of committing to certain values and displaying them within a community or society. This was hinted at by the fact that people mentioned family and friends in relation to their influence on them, implying a perception of themselves in a leadership role regarding ecological issues.

#### *Unclear proposition and indecision to commit hindered NIW participation*

Six barriers to participation evolved. The top two reasons preventing participation were an unclear proposition (feeling that the commitment required were unclear) and indecision. Other reasons mentioned were scheduling conflict/time, uninterested and pre-contemplating (newness of information). The main barrier to participation appears to have been unclear proposition, “I’m not sure what I would have to do” and “I have not decided yet because I do not really know what it is about”, “I did not get THAT much information about neither the event itself nor what signing in would in practice mean.” NIW differs from traditionally conceived social marketing campaigns in its ambiguous proposition of ‘living ecologically’, which requires participants to interpret the meaning and behaviour encompassing this proposition. An ambiguous proposition can be seen as both a strength and a weakness. Systematic and planned-out guidelines may seem preferable, but in practice, these may not always be the most efficient course of action even if people are looking for systematic rules to live by, in an effort to know that they are making ‘the right decisions.’ This is especially true in cases where geographical, cultural and sociological considerations would require customizations. It comes as no surprise that another top reason for not participating was indecision. The comments included that people were considering signing up but had not yet decided or needed to check their schedules.

#### *Expectations on NIW and challenges during the week*

Whether because of the diary structure or because of a natural human tendency towards storytelling, the diary data consisted mostly of stories. These were long or short stories, detailed or in bullet form, depending on the style of the participant. The week kicked-off and diary keepers reported on their daily preparation practices:

I was visiting a friend in Copenhagen, and even though one might think that shopping is related to travelling I pursued with my theme and didn’t buy anything but food. [...] So the only preparation that I had done was to change the mentality of “I must buy something because I am abroad.” (F4 – Day 1)

[...] Decided to carefully observe every little thing I wanted/had to throw away during the day (F1 – Day 2)

[Q]uestion myself on whether if I really need the “thing”. Can I live without it? It was usually yes. [N]ot keeping cash with me. (F2 – day 1)

I brought some left-overs from yesterday with me to school to eat for dinner (I bought my lunch in the cafeteria and ate my left-overs as dinner as I was in school until 8:30 pm). (F3 – Day 4)

During the NIW week many had successful moments:

I planned to walk everywhere today, and I did. Weather was nice, so I am happy I achieved everything I had planned. (F6 – Day 3)

I felt somewhat rebellious but also satisfied that I had found one way of saving energy even in public place. (M2 – Day 5)

This day [Eco-Sabbath] was dedicated to me and my friends. Had so much fun actually spending time with a friend face to face with no disturbance from cell phones, etc. (F10 – Day 8)

Other situations were deemed less successful:

It was quite difficult to remember to unplug and turn off appliances I wasn't using. I also went out for dinner, caved completely and ordered a hamburger. (F7 – Day 5)

I try to calculate my ‘water footprint’, but it is too much work for me. [...] Today every meal is in the student restaurant; I have no idea how to count it. (F5 – Day 6)

Oftentimes the day consisted of ups and downs, as people tried to make sense of their intentions and their feasibility, under the circumstances:

[...] It was hard to come up with a veggie dinner on the spot but I managed to after I compromised a bit on the waste issue. I figured I can't feel guilty about everything so I opted to feel positive about making a vegetarian dinner and not eating meat two night in a row rather than feeling negative about the waste thing. (F11 – Day 4)

I feel comfortable but not accomplished. I could have done more, like not using my computer at all. [...] My long term choices are OK and somewhat effective, but daily activity is more comfort oriented. This is definitely the area where I could change behaviour. (M2 – Day 5)

Notable social interactions presented themselves when participants either brought up the subject of NIW with friends or family or acted according to the challenges they had set for themselves:

[W]e discussed [NIW] with my spouse, especially when I tried to convince her that we should walk to the shop. She thinks I'm crazy for participating in this [...] we had a long discussion about how 'green' we feel ourselves and how differently it appears. I think we came to the conclusion that we both feel the need to be on same level of green, but our actions are somewhat different[.] (M2 – Day 1)

When I told my best friend about my adventure with the [toilet] tank cover, he told me that I've gone totally crazy and that probably the experiment has already brainwashed me. I was [...] a bit disappointed by such an attitude, but what can I do; I just have to continue working on my own and hope some people will someday change their minds. (F6 – Day 6)

### *Behavioural change effects of NIW*

The Transformational Model of Living with Less (Schreurs *et al.*, 2012) has the ability to distinguish individuals by stages defined by a general approach to downshifting and living ecologically, as opposed to a single behaviour. Carrying out a detailed assessment would require additional information about participants' lives and, consequently, is outside the scope of this study. However, what could be gathered from the data was that people are looking for ways to motivate or challenge themselves or to learn new skills to change their behaviour. Their expectations, and thus intentions, are oriented towards behavioural change. NIW provides an experiment that allows individuals likely in the prelude stage (experiencing accumulating problems in life) to experiment with actions in the restyling stage (characterized by lifestyle changes).

The data revealed early on that there were no clean slates with NIW: participants incorporated the experiment into their lives but the outcomes remained very dependent on existing structures, in this case environmental and personal factors. Of the different models used to perceive the data, the SCT framework (Phipps *et al.*, 2013) was the most useful as it allowed for complex interplay between the trade-offs people were forced to make. NIW's stated goal is to effect behavioural change, which is seen through the lens of SCT framework as the behavioural facet.

### *NIW increased awareness*

A significant personal factor affecting all participants was self-described awareness. Increased awareness led people to be more cognisant of their overall impact, whether measurable or not. As a result, the eco-behaviour they adopted could seem small in relation to all the factors that could be changed individually or societally. This could potentially lead

them to underestimate the result of one outcome among other factors and outcomes. For example, one respondent took a much shorter shower on the water themed day, but then baked, using a lot of water. She considered that she had not reduced her water consumption because the baking outdid the shower. However, if it had not been for NIW, she would have taken a longer shower and baked. In this case, it appears her increased awareness caused her to overestimate her day's impact. On the other hand, when looking at behaviour over the course of a day, the outcome is restricted to that specific day. Consequently, the impact of that day can be underestimated because either a behaviour and outcome were performed on a different day or each day was perceived to be a clean slate. The overestimation of impact, and thus outcome, may partially be due to the daily diary design, which asked questions pertaining to each specific day. However, it is interesting that the opposite is true for underestimation.

One of the consequences that emerged over the week went was that, despite accomplishing their goals, people also began to question the significance of the goals and thus of the outcome.

Personal factors emerged in different forms. Awareness was one aspect that arose repeatedly with different respondents:

[...] I apparently am thinking about [trash] more than I had realized earlier. (F1 – Day 2)

I realised that, even though I do love meat, I eat less of it than I think. (F1 – Day 4)

I learned that I sometimes do things without thinking. (F2 – Day 2)

Yes, when I first visited the toilet and noticed that I was throwing the towel in the trash bin. I had not given a thought for it before; literally seeing the towel fly into the basket, initiated my understanding. (M2 – Day 2)

Awareness was especially interesting, as even respondents who claimed to be aware or enlightened concerning eco-alternatives reported increases in it. Though awareness was not the only link to changing behaviour, it is well described in the following quote:

I do try to think about maintaining a reduced impact, but it is scary how quickly I have fallen back into old habits. I still recycle a lot, try to buy ecological products and use as little energy as possible at home. What I do try to do more is cook more vegetarian food. All in all, I would say that my awareness has definitely increased. (F9 – One-month follow-up)

In addition to awareness, people's personalities and general levels of motivation towards a goal can either be encouraged or remain the same during NIW. However, these personal factors are not entirely within their control. As they explain in the quotes below, caffeine addictions and time and energy constraints can also affect their behaviour:

[...] I can walk up the five floors with winter gear and grocery bags. Sometimes I'm too lazy and I promise myself that I can use the elevator if I'm carrying something. I just think of it as a workout. (F4 – Day 5)

Thought about not watching TV in the evening but was too tired to try to think of other things to do. (F9 – Day 5)

I need coffee, BUT cutting down my consumption has been possible (slowly but surely). (M1 – Day 4)

People were asked to list what they did each day to reduce their consumption on the day's theme. This question was largely understood as either a to-do list or a set of goals. Some individuals set measurable and achievable goals, while others had inestimable ('cut down on...') and sometimes unachievable goals for their schedules ('busy', 'no time') or used sentence structures such as 'I'll try to...'. Whether this was because of their motivational levels or self-efficacy perceptions, a better understanding of this tendency would require additional research.

Upbringing issues arose with several diary-keepers in different contexts. Although upbringing can impact individuals through learned routines or values, the social environment can also impact upbringing choices. Here is an example:

[I]t is hard not to flush the toilet when for many years you are told NEVER not to flush it. (M1 – Day 6)

Finally, some interesting distinctions were found when individuals were presented with the exact same situation but perceived different daily-life choices, as shown by these three examples:

When I found myself drying my hands with a paper towel at work and realized I didn't need to do that – I could have walked out of the bathroom and into the kitchen to use a towel. Thus, I had not prepared enough mentally to pay attention to not making any trash[.] (F11 – Day 2)

Going to school toilets required me to wash my hands and that meant I needed to take towels from automats. These go to trash bin, as their material seems to be unsuitable for composting. At home this is not an issue as there I have actual hand towels. (M2 – Day 2)

Did not want buy any food products in packing (ended up buying a lot of fruit and vegetables without plastic bags [...]). (F10 – Day 2)

It is not entirely clear why this was. It could be related to individual perceptions, beliefs or self-efficacy, but it may also be related to perceptions of the outcome of such choices. Consequently, it was found that NIW can affect some, though not all, personal factors. Awareness was among the changes cited by participants, while other factors, such as motivation or organization, values and upbringing can be either conducive to or inhibitive of sustainable behaviour.

### *NIW affected actions and habits*

Some existing behaviours, such as actions and habits, were reinforced or developed during NIW, and some behavioural experiments with alternative satisfiers occurred, such as in using handkerchiefs and adopting veganism. The behaviour depended on the specific habit and its associated effort, as well as available alternatives. The theme best illustrating this finding was transportation and choice of housing location. The idea of switching from driving to public transit was, for some participants, deemed unfeasible. ‘Small’, ‘easy’ and ‘little’ are adjectives participants’ used to describe the kinds of ‘tips and tricks’ they hoped to discover. The diminutive size may indicate that none of the participants were looking to make radical life changes during NIW or that some had already made changes and did not expect additional changes to their lives as a result. It could also be that these answers reflect some doubt about there being a substantial impact on their lives after the experiment.

People experimented with new actions, but oftentimes existing habits prevailed:

I froze cheese, bell peppers and tomatoes before we left, as they probably wouldn’t survive two weeks in the fridge. Very proud of this one, first time I froze tomatoes and bell peppers ever! ☺ (F3 – Day 5)

I followed a completely vegan diet [...] What is keeping me from continuously being vegan is my weakness for cheese. Cheese has a large ecological impact. But, I like cheese. I can’t help it. (M3 – Day 4)

Nevertheless, the one-month follow-up indicated small long-run differences in behaviour:

[M]ore aware of the choices I make [...] Was going to throw away some shoes that looked beyond horrid but decided to first buy some softening and polishing cream and, lo and behold, they will survive at least one more season. (F1)

I think we might have been pickier with recycling since the NIW, and I feel worse about driving, so I try to avoid it even more than before. (F3)

I continued switching off the main plug in our living room. It's right next to my room, so it's easy when I go to bed. Also, I try to buy food without packaging. (F4)

The intention of NIW is to bring the community together and there were small changes in individuals' social spheres. At the business school, this community spirit did not manifest in the same way as it has among other communities or university campuses. It cannot be stated that NIW has no effect on community, but that it did not in this specific instance. Examples of it arising as a contextual factor were mostly social, but also physical, in nature:

I had to explain to my colleagues why I'm suddenly taking the stairs instead of the lift with them. In the end we were all taking the stairs ☺ (F7 – Day 5)

My 55km distance between home and school makes other means than motorized kind of challenging. (M2 – Day 3)

It was found that, when the environment is not conducive to sustainable behavioural change, self-efficacy is directly impacted by either carrying out the desired behaviour – reinforcing self-efficacy despite the hurdles and thus causing (personal) affective symptoms of contentment, satisfaction, happiness (etc.) to reinforce repeated behaviour – or being unable to carry out the desired behaviour – reducing self-efficacy and causing (personal) affective symptoms of frustration, irritation, disappointment, discouragement (etc.) to impede attempts to repeat the behaviour.

After a perceived failure, participants often claimed they did not have control over the situation and thus continued with non-sustainable behaviour. Otherwise, their goals indicated a willingness to carry out the desired behaviour but were framed as 'I'll try to...', implying little confidence in success (lowered self-efficacy).

Alternatively, when the environment is conducive to change, people adapt accordingly. Less is stated in terms of self-efficacy and more focus is placed on personal rather than environmental factors. Positive emotions are expressed, though not to the same degree as those of improved self-efficacy in a non-conducive environment. If participants did not manage to engage in the sustainable behaviour despite a conducive environment, they tended to blame themselves and report feelings of guilt, saying 'I could've done more'.

Although no clear link between actions and perceived results was established, one potential reason for this discrepancy is an inability to quantify one's impact objectively and thus a

tendency to attribute successes and failures subjectively and seemingly arbitrarily. A lack of flexibility and change within contextual factors was a significant barrier to achieving desired behaviour despite motivation and intentions towards change. One of the bigger influences on behavioural change, and consequently outcome, appeared to be something Jackson (2005) refers to as 'lock in'. Being locked into a behaviour or a set of behaviours consists of long-term choices that impact behaviour and limit choices after the initial decision is made.

Many diary-keepers mentioned the need for large-scale shifts in consumer attitudes and behaviour, and corporations and governments leading by example, and the difficulty of achieving these. Despite the mention of leadership and long lists of things the government and other organizations should do, only one diary-keeper spoke of lobbying the government for change. This missing link suggests there was insufficient evidence in this case study to support a relationship between individual behaviour change and cultural change and political involvement, within the timespan of the experiment and the following month. One possible reason which may explain this disconnect could be found in the difference between anti-consumption and consumer-resistant behaviour. The former, anti-consumption, is an individual project of self-identity, and the latter, consumption-resistance, involves perceptions of actions in a greater context.

## **Discussion**

The study simultaneously examines values and behaviour and considers the interdependency between personal and behavioural factors in consumption-reduction research. No published research seems to exist that links voluntary simplicity to a social marketing campaign encouraging and supporting consumption reduction. The study's empirical insights contribute primarily to the field of voluntary simplicity and advance the discussion of anti-consumption and social marketing campaigns in general. Although voluntary simplicity is a drastic form of consumption reduction that appeals only to a small but growing niche of people, the motives for and consequences of engaging in it highlight pressing issues of consumer behaviour and consumption.

## *Implications*

The study contributes to current knowledge by offering new insights and empirical confirmation. First, the findings highlight curiosity in voluntary simplicity — to engage in the

phenomenon, people need not be driven only by knowledge or an environmental attitude but also by a desire to experiment which stems from curiosity. This finding supplements other studies which highlight information seeking or emotions and other personal features as influencing factors. *Curiosity* in the reduced consumption context refers to people's appetite for new experiences outside their ordinary consumption patterns that they desire and believe that a change can offer. It seems in the study that this drive was common and strong enough to attract people to partake in the experiment. In addition to explicating what participation implies for the target group and surveying its 'eco-attitudes', stimulating such curiosity could therefore be an obvious implication from the findings for communication endeavours.

Second, in line with previous studies (Phipps *et al.*, 2012) the findings indicate that environmental attitudes need not precede environmental behaviours but that attitudes can change while and after the behaviours have changed. Awareness increased not only during the experiment but also after it. This finding supports the need to approach consumption reduction by recognising that its beginning circumstances may differ and the roles of attitudes and behaviours are intertwined and changeable over time. The findings confirmed that awareness is fundamental to consumption reduction since it was among the top cited changes, while other factors can be either conducive or inhibitive. Awareness may be the key to understanding how each decision will impact the individual and others in the short term and the long term. Questioning the impact of one's changed behaviour is part of this awareness. This would suggest that creating awareness in hindsight may potentially encourage people to be more mindful of their actions in future instances in which the behaviour would be repeated. Despite alarming media reports of ice caps melting, increasing extreme weather phenomena and other comparable events, awareness of these issues has generally not led to the sufficient adoption of significantly less environmentally harmful behaviour (Jackson 2005a; McKenzie-Mohr 2000; Verplanken and Wood 200). It has been suggested that this may be due to feelings of helplessness with the complexity of the issues at hand (Jackson 2005b). After all, the connection between one's weekly choices while grocery shopping and their impact on the habitat of polar bears is not immediately obvious. Nor is the shopper the first to be affected by the consequences of said purchasing decisions.

Third, the findings support the existence of a value–action gap (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000; Verplanken and Wood, 2006; Thieme *et al.*, 2015) and further suggest an awareness–behaviour gap and a behaviour–outcome (perception) gap unfavourable to sustained

behavioural change. These gaps could be found in the data for three reasons: first, arbitrary perceptions of one's own impact and the outcome based on subjective measures of consumption and heightened awareness of actions, as well as the significance of the outcome (behaviour change); second, contextual factors as significant barriers to changing outcomes so that, even if individual behavioural change occurs, individuals began to wonder about wide-scale changes; third, 'lock-in', as coined by Jackson (2005), involving personal, behavioural and contextual factors, usually from the past, that influence decisions and dictate or pre-determine present actions.

### *Conclusions*

Consumers face significant challenges in adopting pro-environmental behaviours. Since these attitudes cannot be seen in behaviours and their associated lock-ins, decision makers should stop relying so heavily on statistical data for decision making. Instead, there should be increased community engagement and the sparking of discussions, as described by Jackson's collaborative problem-solving approach (Jackson, 2005b). The same can be said of consumers understanding company behaviour. For example, food packaging and the difficulty of avoiding it arose often in diaries. Despite hygienic concerns, people perceived most of it as unnecessary. While this may not be the case for all items, companies need to increase the transparency of their processes and the motives behind their decisions. If there is the risk of food being crushed and food is packaged to protect it, tell people. The more people understand the challenges faced and the complexity of the systems that they see as outsiders, the more a discussion can be started and realistic solutions found, as opposed to maintaining a 'there's nothing we can do' attitude. As Peattie and Peattie (2009) suggest, the first item in the social marketing mix model for anti-consumption is the proposition through which the target recipients' desired action is communicated. The purpose of such propositions is to be adopted and maintained by campaign participants. In the NIW context, *propositions* has two slightly different meanings: the first is the heart of the campaign calling for people to spend a week living with no impact. The second is the action required of participants.

NIW seeks to encourage consumers to move beyond token green or ethical purchase substitutions and adopt different consumption patterns. The findings indicate the need to broaden academic research on sustainable consumption to include definitions based on a general outlook or lifestyle, not just on specific actions such as recycling or purchasing green energy. This is especially required in cases through a pull- rather than a push-type strategy

such as the NIW's approach of making suggestions and providing individuals with inspiration and ideas for reducing their environmental impact. A flexible approach encouraging discussion and participatory problem solving could be preferable to a rigid, systematic approach when it comes to the climate crisis, which by no means is a simple issue that can be solved with single campaigns.

### **Research avenues**

This research was conducted through two methods: a community questionnaire and a reflective diary. These methods were selected as the most suitable to collect data and address the research's aims. This research is largely exploratory and based on a mix of qualitative data, mostly interpretations of consumers' motivations for and against participation, and diary authors' experiences, as these kinds of data cannot be collected observationally. Potential future research on the theme of sustainable consumption, or even NIW, is almost infinite. The SCF could be developed further and tested for how such a model would work. Other instances of NIW, or repeated instances at the business school, could be studied and the results compared. A greater focus could be placed on issues that this study only touched on, such as upstream and downstream methods and the stages of change. Innovative method explorations are needed since observation as a sole technique has its limits since it fails to capture for example curiosity and awareness. Interviewing, as a method, may also fail to capture passing thoughts which arise in private reflection. Different population samples could be targeted to compare a variety of results between samples and sample populations. The recommendations in this study can and should be tested. If other campaigns are found, they should be studied and potentially compared to NIW. More research is needed from a social marketing perspective to advise campaign managers going forward and to broaden the definition of social marketing campaigns in the context of sustainable living, as they are unique and quite complex.

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**Figure 1** Expectations and motives for No Impact Week registration (left using Max-Neef's (1991) classification of needs and satisfiers, right using Phipps *et al.*, 2012 social cognitive theory perspective)

## **APPENDIX 1 Pre-, post-week and diary templates and One Month Follow-up Email and Questions**

The templates below were used for the diary method form of data collection in this study.

### **Pre-Week Questions**

#### About you

1. Name:
2. Code name (if you're feeling playful and want to invent a name for yourself which will be used in the thesis):
3. Before taking part in the week, please indicate how significant each day's theme is to you (*you can add any additional comments if you wish, for example, to specify what about the theme is significant to you*):  
(1 unimportant, 2 somewhat important, 3 neither unimportant nor important, 4 important, very important)

#### Consumption

Trash

Transport

Food

Energy

Water

Volunteering

Downshifting/Eco-Sabbath

4. No Impact Week is an experiment in lower-impact living. What are your expectations for how it will affect your life? (you may answer in point form)
5. What is your reason for wanting to take part in the No Impact Week? (you may answer in point form)

### **Diary Template – Sample: Sunday/Consumption theme**

Your actions/behavior:

1. Did you do anything in advance to prepare for today's theme: **consumption**? (read/followed instructions in the how-to guide, research, etc.) (can be in point form)
  
2. A) Make a list of all the things you did to cut down on **consumption**.  
 B) Indicate how challenging you found each task, on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 very easy, 2 easy, 3 neither too easy nor too hard, 4 hard, 5 very hard)
  - ...
  - ...
  - ...  
 C) Do you think you consumed less today than you would on a normal day? (yes or no)
  
3. Was there anything you planned on doing today that you didn't do? Please be specific about what happened. (ie. unforeseen circumstances, insufficient time/preparation/skill, too ambitious, etc.)
  
4. How do you plan to adjust behaviour on this theme during the rest of the week?

Your experiences:

*Short questions*

5. Did you learn something new (*some days you might, others maybe not*):
  - a. about yourself?
  - b. in terms of new knowledge or skills?
  
6. During this No Impact Day, did your interactions with people (friends, family, roommates, neighbours, strangers, etc.) differ compared to a normal day? Please be specific. (*some days they might, others they won't*)

*Potentially longer questions, depending on your experiences*

7. A) How do you feel about your day overall? (accomplishments, learnings, positive, negative, etc.)  
  
 B) Is there a specific moment from today which stands out in your mind? Please describe what happened, how you **felt** and be specific.

Your opinion:

8. Please give your opinion based on your experiences today: What kind of changes (societal, political, cultural, etc.), do you think could help make it easier to **reduce consumption**? (Give your brief, initial thoughts; can be in point form)

Any other comments? (Passing thoughts, etc.)

### **Post-Week Questions**

1. At the beginning of the week we asked you about your expectations for how the experiment will affect your life. Do you have any reflections that were not in the diary about the impact of NIW on your life?

2. *Yes or no questions with optional comments*

Did you continue cutting down on **consumption** after consumption day? (yes or no)

Additional comments:

Did you continue cutting down on **trash** after trash day? (yes or no)

Additional comments:

Did you continue adjusting your **transportation** habits after transportation day? (yes or no)

Additional comments:

Did you continue adjusting your **food purchasing habits** after food day? (yes or no)

Additional comments:

Did you continue cutting down on your **energy usage** after energy day? (yes or no)

Additional comments:

Did you continue cutting down on your **water usage** after water day? (yes or no)

Additional comments:

Did you continue **giving back** (directly or indirectly, however you interpret this theme) after giving back day? (yes or no)

Additional comments:

3. After a week of living no impact, please indicate how significant each day's theme is to you (*you can add any additional comments if you wish, for example, to specify what about the theme is significant to you*):

(1 unimportant, 2 somewhat important, 3 neither unimportant nor important, 4 important, very important)

Consumption

Trash

Transport

Food

Energy

Water

Volunteering

Downshifting/Eco-Sabbath

4. We had around 10 events planned over the course of No Impact Week as opportunities to learn more about the themes above and hear about what's being done. Sadly, the participation has been quite low, despite encouraging sign ups for No Impact Week overall. Please tell us why you or others you know did not attend the events (in an effort to better plan these things in the future).

That's it! Congratulations! You've reached the end of the week and the end of the diary. Give yourself a pat on the back for living No Impact for a week – it's not small feat!

You'll probably hear thank you a few more times but: thank you, thank you thank you! This study wouldn't have been possible without your contribution and willingness to participate so once again, thank you for taking the time and putting in the effort. It is my greatest hope that you have gotten something out of the experience as well.

**One Month Follow-up Email and Questions**

Hello everyone,

Today marks exactly one month since the end of your No Impact Week experiment! Once again, thank you very much for your participation!!

I am still going through all the journals and learning from them and in the meanwhile, I was hoping to pick your brains to see the 'long-term' effects of your participation in 3 short questions (no more word docs, you can just hit reply here). If you don't have time to fill this in, we can also speak on the phone and I'll do all the writing.

Thanks in advance and again and again! I'm looking forward to having a final work to be able to share with all of you.

Wishing you a great week ahead!

3 short questions:

- 1) Have you noticed any change in mentality or awareness in day-to-day decision-making since taking part in No Impact Week? Any specific themes? Please give me some examples.
- 2) Have you made any concrete changes since taking part in No Impact Week (however big or small)? If so, what are they?
- 3) In hindsight, was No Impact Week a positive or negative experience? (yes/no)