

## Simplifying the Complex: Voluntary Simplicity and Its Antecedents, Consequences, and Theoretical Explanations

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### Abstract

Voluntary simplicity refers to a lifestyle in which individuals, by relinquishing the possession and satisfaction of tangible material resources, obtain inner richness and fulfillment through the process of simplifying their external lives. Voluntary simplicity has positive effects on individual subjective well-being and objective environmental sustainability. Individuals' choice of voluntary simplicity is influenced by macro-environmental factors such as social environment, cultural factors, and temporal background, while also being driven by personal factors including need satisfaction and personal values. Future research needs to expand the investigation of the formation mechanisms of voluntary simplicity from multiple perspectives, further explore its functional mechanisms, and deeply investigate the multiple effects it generates.

### Full Text

## Cutting Through Complexity: Voluntary Simplicity and Its Antecedents, Consequences, and Theoretical Explanations

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### Abstract

Voluntary simplicity refers to a lifestyle in which individuals attain inner abundance and fulfillment by relinquishing the possession and satisfaction of tangible material resources while simplifying their external lives. Individuals' choice to

adopt voluntary simplicity is driven by both internal factors—such as personal values, materialism, and religious beliefs—and external factors. Voluntary simplicity exerts positive effects on both subjective well-being and objective environmental sustainability. Current research primarily explains the psychological mechanisms of voluntary simplicity through needs theory, self-determination theory, and the theory of planned behavior. Future research should expand the investigation of voluntary simplicity's formation mechanisms from multiple perspectives, further explore its relationship with well-being, and examine its multifaceted impacts in greater depth.

**Keywords:** voluntary simplicity, minimalism, needs theory, self-determination theory, theory of planned behavior, subjective well-being

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## 1. Related Concepts of Voluntary Simplicity

The video influencer Li Ziqi has amassed tens of millions of followers both domestically and internationally through her simple yet poetic pastoral lifestyle, fulfilling many people's "utopian dreams." She claims her ideal life is exactly what her videos convey: carefree and self-sufficient. Her popularity demonstrates that this back-to-nature lifestyle has gained widespread public recognition and aspiration, reflecting that in today's consumer society, an increasing number of consumers recognize that wealth and material possessions cannot help them overcome stress, fatigue, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction (Cengiz & Torlak, 2021; Chang, 2021). Voluntary simplicity represents a simple lifestyle that opposes consumerism and voluntarily reduces consumption, maintaining intricate connections with consumer behavior. It helps consumers focus on what they truly need, reduces unnecessary purchases, and avoids resource waste (Alexander, 2011). Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, special defensive measures such as stay-at-home orders and quarantine forced many consumption activities to cease, fundamentally shifting consumers' lifestyles and consumption habits (Sheth, 2020). Domestic scholars have noted that the post-pandemic era signals the arrival of an age of frugal consumption, where psychological simplicity will become the dominant lifestyle (许燕, 2020). However, voluntary simplicity remains an under-researched topic in China that has not attracted sufficient attention. Therefore, a comprehensive and in-depth analysis and introduction of relevant research on voluntary simplicity is necessary. Building upon a clarification of voluntary simplicity's basic definition, this paper focuses on its influencing factors, effects, and theoretical explanations, concluding with proposals for future research directions.

### 1.1 Definition of Voluntary Simplicity

Scholars have primarily defined voluntary simplicity from two perspectives: behavioral patterns and values. Specific definitions are summarized in Table 1. Etzioni (1999) proposes that the standard of voluntary simplicity involves

trading lower income and consumption levels for more leisure time, satisfying material needs as simply and directly as possible, reducing expenditures on consumer goods and services, and dedicating more time and energy to pursuing non-material resources such as satisfaction and meaning. Multiple scholars (McDonald et al., 2006; Cherrier, 2009; Alexander, 2011; Rich, Hanna, Wright, & Bennett, 2017; Kuanr et al., 2020) characterize voluntary simplicity as a practice opposing conspicuous consumer culture, where voluntary simplifiers are individuals who voluntarily choose frugal, anti-consumption lifestyles centered on reducing material consumption, featuring low resource consumption and minimal environmental impact. Boujbel and d' Astous (2012) emphasize ecological uncertainty, defining voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle that avoids consumption at the expense of meaningful living. Chatterjee (2020) describes it as an anti-consumerist lifestyle that voluntarily accepts reduced consumption for a "simpler life." Other researchers highlight that voluntary simplicity aims to improve, reduce, or reject overall consumption to seek simplification and greater happiness, with personal growth and ecologically responsible behavior as indispensable components. The core of voluntary simplicity lies in managing materialistic desires, requiring consumers to successfully control their purchasing urges while seeking alternative, non-material ways to enrich their lives. Some scholars argue that voluntary simplicity represents a strong behavioral tendency to reduce consumption directly related to personal values, including material simplicity, self-determination, ecological awareness, population scale, and personal growth. They contend that voluntary simplicity is value-driven, motivating individuals to adopt certain behaviors that constitute their lifestyle.

In summary, despite these variations, scholars increasingly support voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle maintaining balance between individuals' internal and external growth (e.g., Elgin, 2010). However, no unified standard exists for distinguishing voluntary simplicity from involuntary consumption restrictions caused by poverty. For instance, voluntary simplicity overlaps considerably with poverty-induced consumption reduction in external behaviors—consumers actively reduce material consumption in both cases. The underlying reasons may stem from either external economic constraints or internal motivations pursuing higher quality of life (Miller & Gregan-Paxton, 2006).

## 1.2 Distinguishing Voluntary Simplicity from Green Consumption

Green consumption represents a way for individuals to participate in environmental protection, typically striving to minimize environmental consequences as an ideal consumption goal (Kim et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2019). In terms of environmental protection and sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity overlaps with green consumption to some extent, but the two concepts are not identical. Specifically, voluntary simplifiers control their material desires and minimize overall consumption quantity. However, research indicates that engaging in green consumption can subsequently increase individuals' tendency toward overconsumption, unconsciously rationalizing excessive consumption be-

havior and causing consumers to fall into the “green consumption trap” (施卓敏, 张彩云, 2021). Therefore, the primary difference lies in consumption quantity: avoiding overconsumption is not a core concern of green consumption but represents one of the goals of voluntary simplicity.

### 1.3 Distinguishing Voluntary Simplicity from Minimalism

Voluntary simplicity and minimalism are highly similar concepts, both representing anti-consumerist lifestyles, with many studies treating them as equivalent (Alexander, 2011; Dopierala, 2017). However, certain differences remain, concentrated in the nature of consumption. Minimalists primarily select well-designed, multi-purpose, high-quality durable goods to control the number of possessions, typically expensive products from well-known brands (Dopierala, 2017). Although extending product lifespan benefits environmental sustainability and reduces resource waste to some extent, minimalists’ core purpose is controlling product quantity. In contrast, voluntary simplifiers highly value nature, possess stronger ecological consciousness, and demonstrate greater environmental and economic sustainability awareness during consumption (Alexander, 2011; McDonald et al., 2006; Peyer et al., 2017). Therefore, voluntary simplicity carries more extensive significance compared to minimalism.

## 2. Influencing Factors of Voluntary Simplicity

An increasing number of consumers now embrace life philosophies that move away from consumption-centric values and voluntarily adopt non-material, simple lifestyles. However, transitioning to voluntary simplicity is a lengthy, trial-and-error, profound, and complex process (Huneke, 2005). Throughout this process, voluntary simplifiers must exert considerably more conscious effort than other consumers. Given this higher cost, why are consumers willing to choose such a lifestyle? We can analyze its influencing factors from both internal and external perspectives.

### 2.1 Internal Factors

**2.1.1 Personal Values** Values represent the principles, priorities, and value systems that individuals consider important, serving as crucial drivers for transforming toward sustainable living (Horlings, 2015). Consumers with high altruistic values place greater emphasis on collective and societal interests and exhibit higher levels of material simplicity and self-sufficiency (Chang, 2021). Additionally, research demonstrates that voluntary simplicity is more prevalent among ethical consumers because they are more concerned about the extent and nature of consumption (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Green consumption values refer to individuals’ tendency to achieve environmental protection through purchasing and consumption behaviors, playing an important role in pro-environmental behavior (Kim & Moon, 2012; Varshneya et al., 2017) and positively predicting green consumption behavior (Bailey et al., 2016; Haws et al., 2014). Furthermore,

compared to consumers with individualistic values, those holding collectivist values exhibit higher green consumption values and more pro-environmental behaviors (Halder et al., 2020; Nair & Little, 2016). Thus, we can infer that voluntary simplicity may be driven by personal values—a choice made from altruistic considerations and concern for others' interests.

**2.1.2 Materialism** Materialism refers to the belief that individuals value material wealth, center their lives on acquiring wealth, pursue happiness through wealth acquisition, and define success by wealth possession (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Research indicates that materialism positively correlates with high consumption, especially when individuals believe consumption helps establish praiseworthy status and image (Gatersleben et al., 2014; Kasser, 2016). Compared to other individuals, those with high materialism scores demand higher income levels, attach less importance to interpersonal relationships, and exhibit lower voluntary simplicity tendencies (Richins & Dawson, 1992). They are less likely to believe humans need to change their behavior to protect the environment, resulting in negative correlations between materialism and both environmental attitudes and behaviors (Hurst et al., 2013). Interestingly, however, when environmental degradation directly affects materialists' health, wealth, and well-being, their supportive attitudes toward voluntary simplicity increase significantly (Kuanr et al., 2020).

**2.1.3 Religious Beliefs** As personal characteristics and cultural factors, religion significantly influences consumers' ethical judgments and purchasing decisions (Hunt & Vitell, 2006). For example, Buddhist ethics generally associate materially simple lifestyles with the path to happiness (Daoud, 2011), and scholars have empirically verified that Buddhist ethics can effectively reduce individuals' materialism (Pace, 2013), thereby promoting voluntary simplicity behavior. Huneke (2005) found that 14% of voluntary simplifiers in his sample chose this lifestyle due to religious beliefs. Chowdhury (2018) further noted that extrinsic religious beliefs serve self-centered utilitarian purposes, and therefore only intrinsic religious beliefs can guide individuals to focus more on society and others, generating more voluntary simplicity behaviors.

## 2.2 External Factors

First, external pressure may drive consumers toward voluntary simplicity (Huneke, 2005; Iyer & Muncy, 2009), particularly when high consumption causes them stress and anxiety (Zavestoski, 2002). Through voluntary simplicity, consumers can reduce material needs, purify living spaces, and focus more on satisfying spiritual needs such as interpersonal relationships and self-actualization, helping them re-examine their lives (Alexander, 2011) and effectively alleviating pressure caused by the consumer world and information bombardment. Second, social culture also promotes voluntary simplicity. For instance, consumers in collectivist cultures exhibit more altruistic behavior (Evanschitzky et al., 2014), environmental behavior (Bedard & Tolmie, 2018),

and preference for green products (Nair & Little, 2016), suggesting that collectivist cultures may produce higher proportions of voluntary simplifiers. Additionally, changes in living environments exert certain influences. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, consumers have increasingly favored simple living and self-sufficiency (Çinar, 2021; 许燕, 2020). The pandemic's persistent spread temporarily isolated individuals from the consumer world, forcing consumers to reduce material needs and focus on what truly matters—precisely the important external behavioral manifestations of voluntary simplicity.

### 3. Effects of Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary simplicity differs considerably from materialistic lifestyles in values and behavioral practices, and forming new consumption habits is not achieved overnight. Therefore, maintaining voluntary simplicity is a lengthy process. During this lifestyle transformation, consumers experience extensive changes in living and consumption habits. Current research has focused primarily on these changes' impacts on environmental sustainability and personal subjective well-being.

#### 3.1 Objective Environmental Sustainability

Voluntary simplicity positively influences objective environmental sustainability, mainly manifested in reducing resource consumption, protecting the environment, and achieving sustainable development (e.g., Chatterjee, 2020; Kraisorn-suthasinee & Swierczek, 2018; Kropfeld et al., 2018). Compared to other consumer types, voluntary simplifiers possess stronger ecological urgency, higher environmental consciousness, and greater environmental responsibility (Kaynak & Ekşi, 2011), and are thus more likely to hold intrinsic value orientations toward ecologically responsible behavior (Brown & Kasser, 2005). In actual purchasing, voluntary simplifiers prefer buying green products, demonstrate greater environmental and economic sustainability awareness, and exhibit lower impulse purchase levels (Peyer et al., 2017). Voluntary simplifiers also prefer second-hand markets in daily life, choosing to donate or give away unwanted materials (Demirel, 2022), behaviors that maximize product and resource value and utility to reduce waste. Furthermore, voluntary simplifiers emphasize self-sufficiency, so in modern cities where arable land is increasingly “concretized,” consumers' attempts to grow their own vegetables contribute to environmental green development to some extent. In summary, voluntary simplicity negatively correlates with ecological impact—the higher an individual's voluntary simplicity level, the smaller the ecological impact of their consumption behavior, and the more environmentally sustainable it becomes.

#### 3.2 Individual Subjective Well-Being

Voluntary simplicity is significant for enhancing personal happiness and life satisfaction, with numerous studies finding that voluntary simplifiers experi-

ence lower anxiety, higher life satisfaction, and stronger happiness levels (e.g., Balderjahn et al., 2020; Lee & Ahn, 2016; Rich, Hanna, & Wright, 2017; Rich et al., 2020). Boujbel and d' Astous (2012) discovered through email online questionnaires that voluntary simplicity significantly positively correlates with life satisfaction, with this positive effect resulting from voluntary simplifiers' ability to control their consumption desires. This aligns with Osikominu and Bocken's (2020) conclusion that individuals adopting voluntary simplicity have higher life satisfaction, greater sense of control and freedom, and experience less anxiety compared to non-simplifiers. Voluntary simplicity is generally considered a lifestyle that enriches the self and facilitates personal growth by directing individuals toward non-material goals (Boujbel & d' Astous, 2012). Voluntary simplifiers liberate themselves from escalating commitments to overconsumption, reallocating freed time and energy to non-material activities such as spending time with family and friends, participating in community activities, connecting with nature, and volunteering—activities that enable individuals to enjoy more life pleasures in the long run (Read et al., 2018).

## 4. Theoretical Explanations of Voluntary Simplicity

### 4.1 Needs Theory

Maslow's needs theory indicates that higher-level needs—including love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization—only emerge when lower-level physiological and safety needs are met or relatively satisfied (Huneke, 2005). For most people, consumption is an identity formation process (Wong, 1997) that can effectively satisfy lower-level needs and two higher-level needs: love and belonging, and esteem (Zavestoski, 2002). Zavestoski (2002) further divides Maslow's self-actualization need into the need for efficacy and the need for authenticity, arguing that consumption can satisfy all needs except the need for authenticity. When individuals realize that consumption cannot meet their authenticity needs, they seek alternative satisfaction methods, such as voluntary simplicity (Etzioni, 1999; Zavestoski, 2002). Voluntary simplicity helps consumers dedicate time and money to pursuing spiritual life, such as spending time with friends and family and participating in volunteer and community activities (Read et al., 2018). These non-material enjoyments and the sense of life control they generate can effectively reduce consumption to promote self-actualization (Alexander, 2011; Zavestoski, 2002).

### 4.2 Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory posits that individuals possess three basic, innate psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and that intrinsic motivation strengthens only when these needs are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Scholars propose that attempting to satisfy autonomy and competence needs represents the underlying motivation for consumers pursuing simple lifestyles (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020). First, voluntary simplicity is an active, voluntary lifestyle transformation chosen by consumers rather than one forced by

external factors such as poverty (Iyer & Muncy, 2009; McDonald et al., 2006). That is, they live according to their own values rather than being driven by media or social expectations, thereby satisfying their autonomy. Second, voluntary simplifiers hope to control their lives through reduced consumption (Peifer et al., 2019), often solving many non-essential material needs through do-it-yourself practices such as recycling and reusing products, which enhance their self-efficacy and sense of competence. Meanwhile, the competence and control individuals experience while practicing voluntary simplicity trigger positive reinforcement, strengthening their intrinsic motivation and thus promoting continued maintenance of this lifestyle.

### 4.3 Theory of Planned Behavior

According to the theory of planned behavior, individuals' behaviors and behavioral intentions depend on their attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 2005; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). For consumers, choosing voluntary simplicity depends on their evaluation of voluntary simplicity (attitude toward behavior), social influences that can promote voluntary simplicity (subjective norms), and their ability to engage in voluntary simplicity (perceived behavioral control) (Chowdhury, 2018). Research shows that voluntary simplicity can make individuals freer and positively affect subjective well-being (Hüttel et al., 2020), and that reducing product purchases can also produce positive ecological consequences (Read et al., 2018). These positive behavioral outcomes can improve consumers' evaluation of voluntary simplicity. Additionally, individuals' subjective norms, such as religious beliefs, significantly influence consumers (Chowdhury, 2018; Pace, 2013). When religious ethics or authoritative individuals advocate voluntary simplicity, individuals gradually internalize it as their behavioral norm. As individuals' behavioral and normative beliefs about voluntary simplicity increase, their subsequent positive attitudes toward voluntary simplicity also increase, thereby promoting corresponding behavioral intentions and actual behaviors.

## 5. Summary and Future Directions

As increasing numbers of consumers adopt non-materialistic voluntary simplicity, it becomes necessary to conduct in-depth research on this lifestyle's definition, characteristics, and influencing factors. Simultaneously, we must strengthen the applied expansion of voluntary simplicity, such as exploring individual differences when choosing this lifestyle and examining its multiple impacts. Specifically, future research can expand in the following areas:

### 5.1 Expanding Formation Mechanisms from Multiple Perspectives

Existing domestic and international studies primarily explain why individuals choose voluntary simplicity from the perspective of personal values (Bailey et al., 2016; Chang, 2021; Haws et al., 2014), while neglecting personality traits

as more stable predictive factors. However, personality traits may play an important driving role in consumers' choice of voluntary simplicity. For example, high agreeableness correlates with more environmental protection (Milfont & Sibley, 2012) and pro-environmental behavior (Folwarczny & Otterbring, 2021), and since voluntary simplicity features pro-environmental behavior characteristics, individuals high in agreeableness are more likely to engage in voluntary simplicity behavior. Future research can deeply explore the influence of relevant personality traits. Beyond individual-level trait factors, we must further expand social-level factors such as social norms and ecological environments. Moreover, current discussions of voluntary simplicity formation mechanisms concentrate mainly on the attitudinal and behavioral levels. Future research should delve deeper into its cognitive neural mechanisms, exploring whether long-term voluntary simplicity practitioners exhibit changes in brain region structure, function, neural circuits, and network activities, and whether their whole-brain complex networks and amygdala internal network properties differ from non-simplifiers.

## 5.2 Further Exploring the Relationship Between Voluntary Simplicity and Well-Being

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between voluntary simplicity and subjective well-being, finding that voluntary simplicity can positively affect life satisfaction (e.g., Boujbel & d' Astous, 2012; Kuanr et al., 2020). However, the relationship and mechanisms remain unclear. First, the definitions of voluntary simplicity and well-being overlap to some extent—for instance, voluntary simplicity's "pursuit of meaning and satisfaction" (Etzioni, 1999) resembles well-being. Yet essential differences remain: the former emphasizes objective behavior while the latter emphasizes subjective feelings. Future research should further clarify this distinction. Second, the two may mutually influence each other: voluntary simplicity can promote well-being, and well-being experiences can reinforce voluntary simplicity. For example, voluntary simplicity can help individuals experience more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions, and this continuous positive emotional experience and sense of well-being can strengthen voluntary simplicity behavior, increasing individuals' voluntary simplicity tendencies and forming a stable lifestyle. However, the timing, stages, and characteristics of changes in this relationship require deeper exploration. Third, how voluntary simplicity affects well-being remains uncertain: does it increase well-being by increasing positive emotions and decreasing negative emotions, or through changes in other cognitive variables such as increased sense of control and satisfaction of psychological needs? Future research requires more studies for verification. Additionally, current research relies mainly on cross-sectional studies. Future research should adopt longitudinal paradigms to conduct long-term tracking surveys of voluntary simplifiers, using regular interviews and measurements, diary methods, or experience sampling methods to deeply verify and reveal the relationship between voluntary simplicity and well-being.

### 5.3 In-Depth Exploration of Voluntary Simplicity's Multiple Impacts

Most current research supports that voluntary simplicity brings positive effects such as more positive emotions and higher life satisfaction (e.g., Kasser, 2009; Peyer et al., 2017; Rich, Hanna, & Wright, 2017). However, it may also produce some negative effects, such as personal dissatisfaction and unhappiness due to reduced consumption (McGouran & Prothero, 2016), and even limit their willingness to publicly engage in sustainable behavior (Cherrier, 2009; McGouran & Prothero, 2016). The boundary conditions between voluntary simplicity's positive and negative impacts remain unclear: under what circumstances do voluntary simplifiers experience higher well-being, and under what situations do they experience displeasure and dissatisfaction? For example, when facing consumption dilemmas such as insufficient product information, do voluntary simplifiers experience lower sense of control and higher frustration compared to other consumer types? Are these effects moderated by materialism, sense of control, and intrinsic motivation? These questions require more research to clarify.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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