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Challenges of Sustainable Consumption: Voluntary Simplicity as a Social Movement

Summary

The main purpose of this paper is to characterise Voluntary Simplicity Movement (VSM) and to describe chosen initiatives that can be perceived as its manifestation. To attain these goals we use secondary sources of information: literature and web sites. As the research methods we apply critical analysis of gathered materials and case studies that reflect the practical manifestations of VSM both abroad and in Poland. Our analyses show that initially voluntary simplicity (VS) was associated mainly with religious extremism of small communities living in isolation from the rest of the society, but over the years it gained also ecological, social and economic dimensions. Although the adoption of simple lifestyle still remains a considerable challenge (since it requires the voluntary limitation of one's consumption and a far-reaching self-restraint), and this fact is a significant limitation of VSM development, according to our findings there are certain initiatives that can be seen as its manifestations. The main practical as well as social implication of our paper is the conclusion that the Internet seems to be a convenient tool of disseminating simplicity rules and reinforcing VSM.

Key words: sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity, consumer behaviour.

JEL codes: D11, D12, Q01, Q56

Introduction

Dynamic development of industrialized countries was the reason why already in 60's of the XXth century their societies came to be called consumerist ones. It was connected with the fact that consumers have adopted a materialistic lifestyle based on subordination individual's life to satisfying economic needs and on recognizing possessing as a fundamental life value. The popularization of such a way of living led to overconsumption i.e. the set of behaviors aimed in such a consuming which is justified neither by biological nor by social-economic considerations (Dąbrowska, Janoś-Kresło 2007, p. 52).

Soon after the overconsumption occurred, its negative outcomes became more and more visible. It encouraged consumers to search for alternative way of living but it also turned to be a noticeable challenge. Moving away from the world of overconsumption and adopting more sustainable lifestyle requires gradual shifts in one's value system and causes a decrease in consumption. Taking up this challenge resulted in adopting simple living principles and was called voluntary simplicity (VS). Such a behavior, if it is consequent and refers to differ-

ent spheres of humans' existence, in broader scale occurs as a social trend called Voluntary Simplicity Movement (VSM).

An evolution of VS as well as a growing number of its supporters couldn't have been missed by academic researchers. Values, motivations and certain behaviors of voluntary simplifiers (VSS) became a point of interest in 70's and then later in 90's of the XXth century mainly in these countries where negative consequences of hyperconsumption were the most visible. Accordingly, in-depth studies concerning VS have been conducted in the USA (papers of D. Elgin, A. Etzioni, S. Zavestosky, M. E. Huneke, D. Leonard-Barton), Great Britain (articles of D. Shaw, T. Newholm, C. Moraes), Australia (research conducted by S. Alexander), and Japan (papers of O. Iwata). Simultaneously it has to be stressed that the phenomenon of VS gained little if any interest in Polish literature. No field research has been conducted yet although there are some initiatives that reflect Polish consumers' support to VS rules.

The focus of this paper is to characterize VSM and to describe certain initiatives that can be perceived as its manifestation. Achieving such the objectives requires in particular: presenting the roots of VS and defining this concept, describing VSS – their types, their motivations to adopt simple living rules and finally they behaviors, describing different formal and informal VS initiatives.

Roots and definitions of VS

The idea of simple lifestyle is nothing new for consumers. The majority of pre-industrial societies used to live in a very simple way, but it was the kind of involuntary simplicity caused mainly by the poor economic and social conditions and, sometimes, by strict religious norms and beliefs. It changed radically when a technical progress and a mass production occurred in XIXth century. Since it brought a possibility to meet aspirations of a greater number of individuals one shouldn't be surprised that contemporaries didn't pay too much attention to social experiment undertaken by the XIXth century American transcendentalist philosopher H.D. Thoreau who spent two years living alone in a forest cabin built near Walden Pond. Trying to be self-sufficient and making his life as simple as possible Thoreau hoped to acquire more objective understanding of society. He described his thoughts in a book titled "Walden or Life in the Woods", which was a kind of a diary containing coherent economic and social concept, as well as an admiration of conscious and simple life in consistent with the nature (Thoreau 2010).

Thoreau's vision found its formal legitimation in 1936 when the social philosopher R. Gregg described the concept of simple living and introduced the name "voluntary simplicity" (Zavestoski 2002, pp. 149-165). He was stressing religious and spiritual bases of VS and stated that simplicity was postulated and practiced by Buddha, Lao Tse, Moses, Mohammed, St. Francis, John Woolman, Hindu Rishi, the prophets of the Hebrew or Muslim Sufi as well as by his contemporary political leaders like Ghandi and Lenin. Simultaneously R. Gregg noticed that enormous number of merchandised delivered by mass production, constantly de-

veloping trade, scientific progress and, as a consequence, growing complexity of consumers' life worked against both a practice and a concept of simplicity. It seems to be significant that while describing his reality at the beginning of XXth century Gregg perceived unfavorable "mental climate" and noticed the fact that simplifying was treated as a weakness of saints and geniuses rather than commonly accepted lifestyle (Gregg 1936).

The next surge of interest in this topic wasn't associated with its religious dimension anymore. It emerged in 70's along with the conviction that there was an urgent need to find a cure for the rising overconsumption problem (Leonard-Barton 1981, p. 244). Such a necessity was indicated in report "The Limits to Growth" published in 1972 by The Club of Rome. Experts and academics affiliated in this international organization provided the most possible scenarios of growth which clearly indicated an evident conflict between unrestricted and unrestrained growth of material consumption and reduced environmental resources¹.

The idea of simple living also became an interesting topic of academic research. At the end of 70's D. Elgin and A. Mitchell published the article which has received much interest in the business world. They listed five basic values that, in their opinion, constitute a core of simplicity lifestyle: material simplicity, self-determination, ecological awareness, human scale and personal growth (Leonard-Barton 1981, p. 244). The same authors were also the first ones who described a specific segment of consumers who for whatever reasons choose to live with less and whom Elgin and Mitchell labeled "voluntary simplifiers" (Craig-Lees, Hill 2002, p. 188).

The real revival of VS concept took place in 90's when an anticonsumption movement occurred in the developed countries (Craig-Lees, Hill 2002, p. 187). Furthermore, VSM was noted to fit well the concept of sustainable development coined in 1987 in report of World Commission on Environment and Development (broadly known as Brundtland Commission)² (Kronenberg, Iida 2011).

At present the idea of VS is still investigated by researchers, but since the decision of simplifying is undertaken by consumer individually, may have different premises and may be an answer for a general desire of more sustainable and more complete life there are a lot of synonymous terms used in literature. As the alternative names of VS D. Elgin (2010, pp. 12-13) listed: green life-ways, Earth-friendly living, soulful living, simple living, sustainable lifestyles, living lightly, compassionate life-ways, conscious simplicity, Earth-conscious living and simple prosperity. In a general way the essence of VS D. Elgin (2010) described in a subtitle of his book "Voluntary Simplicity. Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich". More precisely A. Etzioni (2004, p. 379) defined VS as a choice of free will rather than 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.

¹ <http://www.clubofrome.org/?p=375> [access: 29.12.2014].

² <http://www.unesco.pl/edukacja/dekada-edukacji-nt-zrownowazonego-rozwoju/unesco-a-zrownowazony-rozwoj/> [access: 31.12.2014].

Motives of simplifying

Both the evolution of voluntary simplicity concept and its definitions show that there is no single, dominant reason of simplifying. Voluntary simplifiers are guided by different motives which may change over time. These motives also vary in terms of their importance and, since the potential importance of given factor is tied to individuals' values, beliefs and aspirations, there may be significant differences between certain consumers. Thus introducing a universal classification of VS motives seems to be particularly difficult.

S. Alexander (2011) divided motives of simply lifestyle into four interrelated groups: personal, social (or common), humanitarian and ecological. In the first group one can find motives connected with a desire to release from "addictive" material consumption and to achieve better quality of life thanks to focusing on a sense of happiness and fulfillment resulting from achieving non-material goals (even if it causes a decrease in living standard). Social motives are connected with a desire of increasing one's engagement into family life, local community or civic actions. Consumers who perceive simplifying mainly as a way of diminishing the inequalities between the First and the Third World are driven by humanitarian motives. In turn ecological premises encourage to adopt simple lifestyle these individuals, who can sharply see the relationship between satisfying consumers' needs and the state of natural environment.

More complex classification of VS motives was introduced by D. E. Wu et al. (2013). They were researching voluntary simplicity on the example of The Great American Apparel Diet (TGAAD) – the initiative of American consumers that relied on reducing personal spending for clothes³. Based on the analysis of blogs of 140 TGAAD participants the authors characterized six general motivational themes. The most popular were personal premises (44,03% of citations), then lifestyle (22,1%), financial (15,21%) and environmental (10,43%) ones. The least popular turned out economic (4,95%) and social (3,27%) motives.

It should be stressed that also findings of the earliest research in this topic indicate that broadly understood personal motivations are the most important group of factors influencing an adoption of voluntary simplicity. As D. Elgin and A. Mitchell indicated in 1977 the most frequently declared premise of simplifying was the desire to find a balance between the inner self and the outward expression of that self in various aspects of living. In turn, research conducted by Pierce between 1996 and 1998 shows that a significant reason of choosing living in more simple way is mindfulness, which contributes deeper experiences of daily life and greater appreciation of joy (Huneke 2005, pp. 532-533).

Voluntary simplifiers – their behaviors and characteristics

Although in developed countries one can notice a constant increase of consumer interest in simple lifestyle, simplifying is a slow, evolutionary process (Huneke 2005, p. 533). It

³ TGAAD initiative will be described in details further in this article.

requires learning new behaviors and adhering to the values that are different in several ways from those of the consumerist society. The primary changes rely on assigning less importance to material concerns and reducing work time to a reasonable number of hours in order to focus on those aspects of life that are intangible and for this reason are deemed as more essential (Boujbel, D'astous 2012, p. 491). Not everyone and not at once is able to make such a changes, thus depending on motives and on the level of development of simplifying process, different types of VSS are identified by researchers.

The most popular classification of voluntary simplifiers was introduced by A. Etzioni (2004). He distinguished three types of VSS: downshifters (DS), strong simplifiers (SS) and holistic simplifiers (HS). The first group includes economically well off consumers who voluntarily give up buying some consumer goods (often considered as luxuries). Such a behavior is motivated by a feeling of being trapped in the vicious circle of work and spending, by a lack of time for oneself and for celebrating family life as well as by a desire to avoid stress and by an intent to search for the deeper meaning of life (Kennedy et al. 2013, pp. 767-768). Thus there seems to be a kind of "compensation rule" according to which lower income and lower life standard is a price of working less and having more time for non-professional activities (Penn 2010). Such a way of thinking is often the first step to more advanced limitation which is typical for SS. Etzioni included in this group people who may give up well-paid, stressful jobs in exchange for having more peaceful life or voluntarily choose early retirement. The most committed to the idea of simplifying are HS who focus on simplicity in its most ethical and spiritual form subordinating to it their whole life. e.g. they move from big cities to the rural areas (Jackson 2008, p. 52). Since they are socially engaged and usually seek to create communities based on simplicity rules this group is the most often identified with VSM.

Taking into account different levels of VSS involvement the list of their behaviors is in fact endless. The most common micro-strategies undertaken by voluntary simplifiers refer to changes in food/diet and transportation habits, lengthened products life span, recycling and avoidance of waste, as well as buying sustainable products (Bekin et al. 2005; Shaw, Moraes 2007). Ballantine and Creery (2010) noticed that generally speaking the process of adopting VS lifestyle begins from activities involving disposition in material possessions. Their findings show that the initial steps of beginner voluntary simplifiers on their way to undertake simple lifestyle are usually connected with throwing out, recycling or giving away to others possessions which were not used for a long time. In turn the everyday life of more advanced VSS focuses around environmental concerns, product quality instead of quantity, shared ownership (common consumption), buying second-hand or used items instead of new ones, looking for ethical products and expanding one's self-sufficiency.

VS researchers commonly combine this phenomenon with behaviors of well-educated and comparatively wealthy consumers from developed countries (Shaw, Moraes 2007). A. Etzioni explains this fact using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Etzioni 2004). He states that the prerequisite of simplifying one's life is satisfying the lower-end needs along with being convinced that they will be fulfilled also in the future. The core VS values concern, however,

higher-end needs (first of all self-actualization one) and are directly related with the high level of consumers' consciousness (Huneke 2005, p. 530).

Above-mentioned concept was deepened by Zavestoski (2002) who stated that Maslow's Theory enables to explain the linkage between an occurrence of consumers' anticonsumption attitudes and a sense of happiness and fulfillment derived from perceiving of the self. Assuming that the "self" concept consist of three elements: self-esteem, self-efficacy and authenticity, consumption may satisfy the first two of them, but fails to satisfy the third one. It means that consumption is effective at meeting all lower-order needs and two of Maslow's higher-order needs: belongingness and love needs, and esteem needs, but it can't be successful in fully meeting self-actualization needs which Zavestoski split into needs for efficacy and authenticity. The fact that consumption is insufficient to feel oneself authentic is just the factor that motivate consumers to seek for nonmaterial ways of fulfilling this need and consequently to adopt simple lifestyle.

More recently the issue of VSS affluence was investigated by L. Boujbel and A. D'astous (2012). Their research conducted among 611 Canadian consumers (344 have been identified as voluntary simplifiers) indicates that only in case of comparatively wealthy consumers the process of simplification results in both an increase of one's satisfaction and a rise of life quality. Poorer consumers who have adopted simple lifestyle can experience a growth of their satisfaction only if they are able to control their consumption needs. It means that simplifying is much easier task for more affluent individuals even if it is not impossible in case of less affluent ones.

An immanent feature of all the VSS (regardless of their financial situation) is relatively high resistance to marketing actions. While researching consumers' use of information sources when making purchases of sustainable technological products and services (e.g. energy efficient washing machines) C. Oats et al (2008) came to the conclusion that the behaviors of voluntary simplifiers differ essentially in comparison to the behaviors of materialistic focused consumers. The role of information seeking was present to some extent for all consumers but the sources consulted, trusted and used in their decision making process were diverse. In case of VSS this process was more complex than in case of the other respondents and they displayed additional ecological concerns when searching for products. VSS were also using a wide range of information sources and evaluated them more critically than other consumers.

Voluntary Simplicity Movement in practice

Although not all voluntary simplifiers view themselves as a part of broader and structured community (Craig-Lees, Hill 2002, p. 207), VS should be perceived as a new social movement derived from the social change made in non-hierarchic way close to the direct democracy (Penn 2010, p. 9).

The earliest VSM initiatives have attracted first of all these individuals whom one can describe as HS. Guided mostly by religious and spiritual grounds, they created communities

that were trying to live in the most sustainable way. In literature such a communities are considered to be the most radical manifestations of simple lifestyle and have been called New Consumption Communities (NCCS) (Bekin et al. 2005; Moraes et al. 2012). As an example one can point Findhorn community which was established in northern Scotland in 80's of XXth century. Over the time Findhorn has changed and gained a character of eco-village built on principles of justice and respect for nature. In the same time Plum Village was established by an exiled Vietnamese Buddhist monk – ThichNhat Hahn, in the Dordogne area of France. Known as the “mindfulness” community it currently associates at least 2000 people (Jackson 2008, p. 52).

While researching VSM in the USA Huneke (2005) concluded that it had three levels of formality and structure. There were: organization called The Simplicity Forum, the websites devoted to simple living and self-help books as well as Internet services on how to simplify one's life. The good example of the latter may be also the magazine titled “RealSimple”⁴. While analyzing American VSM one shouldn't also omit initiatives which are undertaken by individual consumers and gain a wide social support thanks to disseminating them in Internet. The good example of such an effort is, mentioned already in this paper, GAAD (Wu et al. 2013). This initiative was introduced in 2009 by Sally Bjornsen – a typical American consumer who, influenced and inspired by recession in 2008, decided to decrease her spending on clothing. The process of changing shopping patterns was reminding her placing herself on a diet so, based on the idea similar to those of a weight loss community support group, she established on-line support group and called it The Great American Apparel Diet. The “diet” began on September 1, 2009 and initially had to last for one year. This period was later extended into two years because of enormous interest of consumers all around the States⁵. The community members were restricting their spending on clothing and were sharing their experiences as well as discussing their progress with the diet on the GAAD web site in the form of blogs and autobiographies.

Few initiatives reflecting VSM can be also found in Poland. Basic VS principles are popularized by established in 1998 organization called Wiejskie Alternatywne Społeczności (WAS)⁶ (Kostecka 2013). Its aim is to bring together individuals who consciously moved to rural areas to develop local sustainable initiatives and, in a long run, to create eco-villages patterned on Scottish Findhorn. In similar way one can perceive initiatives undertaken by Centre of Personal Development „BabiŁad” located in Poznań⁷. It organizes an event called “BabiTarg” which enables consumers to exchange used clothing and shoes which may be recognized as a good example of common consumption.

Not all the initiatives stood the test of time. For example, already mentioned in this paper Simplicity Forum was established by D. Elgin in 2001. As an expert forum affiliating academics, authors, activists, artists, educators and entrepreneurs it set itself the goal to promote simple and sustainable living. In 2011, since its members believed that this purpose has been

⁴ <http://www.realsimple.com>

⁵ <http://www.blogger.com/great-american-apparel-diet-ends-tomorrow> [access: 03.01.2015].

⁶ <http://dobraidea.pl/2011/01/glokalizacja-po-polsku-wiejskie-alternatywne-spolecznosci-przypadek-wolimierza/> [access: 02.01.2015].

⁷ http://babilad.pl/?page_id=641 [access: 02.01.2015].

fulfilled, The Simplicity Forum finished its activities⁸. A similar fate befell an Australian organization called Downshifting Down under which was established following an international conference on downshifting in Sydney in 2005 (Jackson 2008, p. 53). In Poland Stowarzyszenie Grupa EFTE Warszawa suspended its activities after a few years of organizing the Warsaw Festival of Conscious Consumption named “Dekonsumpcja”⁹.

Conclusions

It has to be concluded that although VSM has faced crucial changes over time and gained popularity along with proliferation of sustainability concept, simplifying still remains a challenge for consumers. It is especially seen if one takes into account the failures of different VS initiatives. Even if these collapses had different sources two general explanations may be found. On the one hand in consumerist society simple living is commonly associated with poverty, economic stagnation as well as with poor living conditions of rural areas (Elgin 2010, p. 13-16). On the other hand, individuals willing to simplify their lives often encounter the crucial structural obstacles. Among these objective limitations S. Alexander listed: lack of access to sustainable transport options, lack of suitable employment options that enable individual to work less for comparatively less income, insufficient market information concerning ecological and social impact of products or even misleading information that limits the possibility of making conscious choices, intrusive promotion and marketing manipulation that encourages consumers to behave in unsustainable way, spreading of consumer culture and a lack of sustainable social infrastructure, low availability of energy efficient and passive housing (Alexander 2012). Despite this, as the example of GAAD shows, the simplicity rules can be easily disseminated via Internet and gain popularity among a wide range of consumers in this way.

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Wyzwania zrównoważonej konsumpcji: *voluntary simplicity* jako ruch społeczny

Streszczenie

Głównym celem rozważań jest scharakteryzowanie Ruchu Dobrowolnej Prostoty (VSM) i opisanie wybranych inicjatyw, które mogą być postrzegane jako jego przejawy. W artykule wykorzystano wtórne źródła informacji – literaturę oraz strony internetowe. Zastosowanymi metodami badawczymi są krytyczna analiza zebranych materiałów i studia przypadku ilustrujące praktyczne przejawy VSM zarówno na świecie, jak i w Polsce. Przeprowadzone analizy dowodzą, że początkowo dobrowolna prostota (VS) kojarzona była przede wszystkim z ekstremizmem religijnym niewielkich grup żyjących w oderwaniu od reszty społeczeństwa, ale w miarę upływu czasu koncepcja VS zyskała też wymiary – ekologiczny, społeczny i ekonomiczny. Chociaż przyjęcie prostego stylu życia nadal pozostaje sporym wyzwaniem (wymaga dobrowolnego ograniczenia konsumpcji i daleko idącej samokontroli), a fakt ten stanowi istotne ograniczenie w rozwoju VSM, to wyniki badań wskazują na istnienie konkretnych inicjatyw, które mogą być postrzegane jako przejawy ruchu społecznego. Główną praktyczną i społeczną implikacją artykułu jest wniosek, że Internet wydaje się być wygodnym narzędziem do propagowania zasad dobrowolnej prostoty i wzmacniania VSM.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważona konsumpcja, dobrowolna prostota, zachowania konsumentów.

Kody JEL: D11, D12, Q01, Q56

Вызовы устойчивого потребления: добровольная простота как общественное движение

Резюме

Основная цель рассуждений – дать характеристику «движения добровольной простоты» (VSM) и описать избранные инициативы, которые могут восприниматься как его проявления. В статье использовали вторичные источ-

ники информации, литературу и вебсайты. Примененные методы изучения: критический анализ собранного материала и изучение конкретных случаев, иллюстрирующие практические проявления VSM как в мире, так и в Польше. Проведенные анализы доказывают, что сначала добровольная простота (VS) ассоциировалась прежде всего с религиозным экстремизмом небольших групп, проживающих в отрыве от остальных членов общества, но по мере истечения времени концепция VS получила также экологическое, общественное и экономическое измерения. Хотя принятие простого образа жизни по-прежнему остается довольно большим вызовом (оно требует добровольного ограничения потребления и далеко идущего самоконтроля), а этот факт представляет собой существенное ограничение в развитии VSM, то результаты исследований указывают существование конкретных инициатив, которые могут восприниматься как проявление общественного движения. Основной практической и социальной импликацией статьи является вывод, что интернет представляется удобным инструментом пропаганды принципов добровольной простоты и укрепления VSM.

Ключевые слова: устойчивое потребление, добровольная простота, поведение потребителей.

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