

The Pursuit of Health, Wealth, and Well-being Through Minimalist Consumption

by

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Business Administration
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Business Administration
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Material consumption has increased exponentially in recent decades, establishing most American consumers today as the most materially wealthy humans in history. But what is all of our stuff really buying us? Despite our material wealth, Americans suffer from many poverties and illnesses that seem to be exacerbated rather than alleviated by our culture of consumerism. Even more clear is the threat that our consumption behavior poses to the environment. In seeking solutions to overconsumption, interest in minimalism as a lifestyle has rapidly expanded over the past decade. Given a lack of academic research on this topic, the current work relies on four datasets using quantitative surveys (total $N = 1,117$) and in-depth qualitative interviews ($N = 30$ minimalists) to explore the following questions: what does it mean to practice minimalism, what motivates people to adopt minimalism, and what impacts do people report experiencing as a result of practicing minimalism? I find that minimalism is a practice of centering one's values and intentionally allocating and cultivating one's resources across a variety of domains. By investing one's time, money, attention, energy, and space into that which is most valued and divesting from that which is not, minimalists seek to maximize value and minimize costs. As a result, I suggest that minimalism is a consumption orientation and practice that is value-driven and resource-building. I find that minimalist consumers often adopt minimalism during periods of

significant change and transition and are primarily motivated by a desire to reduce stress and increase their psychological well-being. Minimalists report a high number of benefits from practicing minimalism, including increased financial security, improved psychological well-being, less stress, more free time, fewer distractions, and a greater sense of control. In conceptualizing minimalism more broadly, I adapt and extend Antonovsky's theory of salutogenesis (1979, 1987) to argue that minimalism can be viewed as a case of a salutogenic (vs. pathogenic) consumption orientation – that is, consumption that is focused on building well-being through the active cultivation of valued resources (as compared to consumption that threatens well-being and depletes valued resources). I conclude that minimalism is a promising pathway to greater individual well-being with positive second-order environmental effects.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to Rick W. Watson, my 7th grade life sciences teacher and mentor, who never gave up on trying to convince me that I was smart, capable, and worthy of everything I could hope for and more.

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1. Introduction

A calm and modest life brings more happiness than the pursuit of success combined with constant restlessness.

–Albert Einstein, German physicist, 1922

Across a number of metrics, American consumption has grown at a rapid pace in recent decades. As globalization and advances in technology have revolutionized both production and distribution, the costs of goods such as electronics, household appliances, and clothing have sharply declined (e.g., see United Nations, 2010; Hamilton, 2004; Schor, 1999; Schumacher, 1999). As a result of lowered costs and increasingly frictionless access to a practically infinite number of goods, the amount of possessions that consumers own has quickly ballooned to such a degree that modern Americans are very likely the most materially wealthy human beings to have ever existed (Schor, 1999; Schumacher, 1999). For example, as of 2010, the average American home had more televisions than people (2.93 television sets and 2.5 people per home; Nielsen, 2010). In 2013, each American purchased an average of 64 new articles of clothing and nearly 8 pairs of shoes (American Apparel and Footwear Association, 2014). And while home to 3% of the world's children, the U.S. consumes 40% of the world's toys (Arnold, Graesch, Ragazzini, and Ochs, 2012).

To make room for our growing store of things, the median size of new homes in the U.S. has increased by almost 1,000 square feet over the last several decades (from 1,525 square feet in 1973 to 2,467 in 2015; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015). This is

all while household size has been declining, meaning that living space per person has nearly doubled (from 507 square feet in 1973 to 971 square feet in 2015; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015). Even with increasing home sizes and square footage per person, Americans are increasingly relying on off-site storage facilities to store even *more* possessions. Self storage properties have remained the fastest growing segment of the commercial real estate industry for the last four decades, with the number of such facilities doubling in the last two decades (Self Storage Association, 2015). There are currently around 50,000 self storage properties in the U.S., outnumbering both Starbucks and McDonalds combined (Rafter, 2015; Self Storage Association, 2015). And the problem is not that consumers are holding on to more than ever before: according to the EPA Office of Solid Waste, Americans throw away nearly 70 pounds of clothing and textiles per person per year (Claudio, 2007).

While growing economic inequality has meant that much of the increases have been concentrated in the upper classes, there are many metrics to suggest that absolute if not relative material wealth has steadily increased across nearly all classes of American consumers¹. For example, from 2011 to 2018, smartphone ownership doubled from 35%

¹ It is important to note, however, that even as luxuries have become more attainable across a wide spectrum of consumers, many basic living expenses have become more difficult to cover – namely, housing and medical care (e.g., see Mutikani, 2016). Given the relatively higher costs of these categories, consumers may be indulging more in relatively affordable luxuries as a kind of compensatory consumption even in the face of difficulties to afford more basic needs.

of American adult consumers to 77% in 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Approximately 96% of American homes have at least one working television set that can receive programming, and of the 4% of households who do not, less than a quarter cite affordability as the reason why (Nielsen, 2018). In addition, 90% of American households had air conditioning in 2017 (American Housing Survey, 2018), a rate that has doubled in the last 30 years. Access to the internet at home has also risen dramatically from 1% in 2000 to 85% in 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2018).

As social critic Clive Hamilton put it, “most Westerners today are prosperous beyond the dreams of their grandparents” (2004). Despite a measurable rise in material wealth across the spectrum of American consumers, this has not brought the lasting happiness or satisfaction we might have expected. Between 1972-2014, respondents to the General Social Survey have reported declines in general happiness, marital happiness, and financial satisfaction (NORC, 2015). Using data from the last 80 years, researchers have documented a steady increase in rates of anxiety and depression symptoms in the United States, especially among younger people (Twenge, Gentile, DeWall, Ma, Lacefield, and Schurtz, 2010). And between 1985 and 2004, Americans report having fewer people that they can talk to about important things: in 1985, the modal respondent had three confidantes, whereas in 2004, the modal response dropped to zero confidantes (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, Brashears, 2006). The chronic effects of

this social isolation have led several social scientists to announce an “epidemic of loneliness” in the United States (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2014).

What might explain this negative correlation between material wealth and well-being? In considering such a question, Samuel Alexander wonders, “is it possible that the majority of people living in the most affluent societies today have reached a stage in their economic development where the process of getting richer is now causing the very problems that they seem to think getting richer will solve?” (Alexander, 2011, p.3). High consumption lifestyles, often depicted as the peak of human experience, have instead been observed to create or at least be associated with an unexpected discontent and uneasiness among those living them (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Lane, 2000; McCormack and Field, 2016; Putnam, 2007). Instead of making life easier the more one owns, some consumers come to find that the more one owns, the more complicated life can become by requiring more expenses, more debt, more time spent cleaning, more maintenance activities, and/or more storage space. And while people often believe that making more money and consuming more of what they desire will increase happiness, the boost experienced from such increases turns out to be short lived as we quickly adapt to the increase, leaving us again wanting for more (e.g., see Aknin, Norton, and Dunn, 2009; Clark, 1999; Di Tella et al., 2007; Easterlin, 1995). Rather than proffering satisfaction and happiness, some scholars have argued that lives oriented around achieving high levels of consumption, even among those who are successful in their

pursuit, often engender time poverty, stress, physical and mental illness, loss of community, a sense of meaninglessness, and general unhappiness with life (e.g., see Kasser, 2002).

1.1 The Rise of Minimalism

In the face of rapidly accelerating access and excess, countercultural philosophies of living life with a decreased focus on possessions have struck a chord with a significant subset of consumers. The most popular such movement today is referred to as “minimalism” (see Figure 1) and typically calls for a shift towards owning less and being more thoughtful and intentional about only owning and acquiring that which adds intrinsic value to one’s life, rather than that which only seeks status or adheres to norms or expectations regardless of one’s own values. Below are definitions of minimalism from several popular voices of the current movement:

Minimalism is a lifestyle that helps people question what things add value to their lives. By clearing the clutter from life’s path, we can all make room for the most important aspects of life: health, relationships, passion, growth, and contribution. (Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, bloggers at theminimalists.com, authors of *Everything That Remains*, and producers of *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things*)

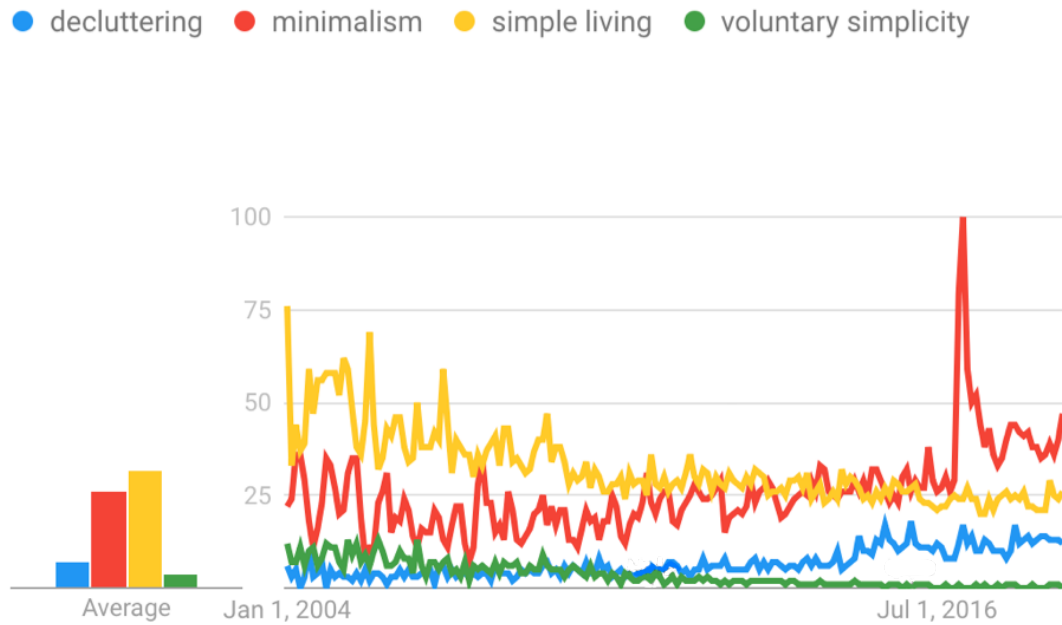
At its core, minimalism is the intentional promotion of the things we most value and the removal of everything that distracts us from it. It is a life that forces intentionality. And as a result, it forces improvements in almost all aspects of your life. (Joshua Becker, the author of *The More of Less* and blogger at becomingminimalist.com)

Being a minimalist is...about eliminating the distractions that keep us from fully appreciating life. The less stuff we have cluttering our homes (and the less “to-do’s” cluttering our time), the more energy we can devote to the things that are

truly important to us. My goal is to find that elusive point of “just enough,” whereby I own nothing more than that which meets my needs. I believe that minimalism isn’t about emptiness for the sake of emptiness – but rather making room to move freely, think clearly, and open ourselves to the beauty and wonder of life. (Francine Jay, author of *The Joy of Less* and blogger at missminimalist.com)

What minimalism is really all about is reassessment of your priorities so that you can strip away the excess stuff – the possessions and ideas and relationships and activities – that don’t bring value to your life. (Colin Wright, blogger at exilelifestyle.com)

Examples of popular minimalist messengers include the book *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo (which spent 27 weeks at #1 on the New York Times Best Seller List), the documentary, *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things*, and a plethora of minimalism-focused blogs such as “Be More with Less” and “Becoming Minimalist.” Increasingly, consumers are designing and publicly sharing via social media their own experiments in living more minimally, such as Project 333, a fashion challenge which requires one to dress with only 33 items (to include clothing, shoes, and jewelry) for three months and “shopping bans,” in which the participant commits to buying nothing except essentials (e.g., food, toiletries) for up to a year at a time (e.g., see Flanders, 2018). Proponents of minimalism claim that this lifestyle can provide relief from the increased financial strain, overflowing storage spaces, increased social isolation, and environmental havoc attributed to modern consumerist lifestyles.



United States. 1/1/04 - 12/16/18. Web Search.

Figure 1: Google Search Interest Over Time. Over the last decade, “minimalism” as a Google search term has increased in popularity, surpassing interest in similar concepts such as voluntary simplicity, simple living, and decluttering.

While the label “minimalism” suggests the possession of very few material items, many advocates push back against this perception as the defining characteristic of the lifestyle, arguing that having fewer items is not the point of minimalism but is a common consequence of primarily devoting resources to that which truly adds value to one’s life. While some minimalistic approaches focus on the number of possessions and sometimes aim for aberrantly few items (e.g., author Dave Bruno’s challenge to own less than 100 things; Bruno, 2010; blogger Colin Wright’s inventory of the 51 items he owns; Wright, 2010a), many proponents of this movement advocate for a self-definition of

what it means to be minimalist based on one's own most deeply held values (including Wright, who more recently announced that he has stopped counting and publicizing the number of things he owns so as not to reinforce the idea that minimalism is synonymous with owning as few things as possible; Wright, 2016). If someone finds the most value in pursuits such as spirituality, running, writing (i.e., activities that require few possessions) or perpetual travel (an activity made easier with fewer possessions), they may find more value in having far fewer possessions than someone devoted to more materially-intensive pursuits such as woodworking, music production, golfing, or cooking (i.e., activities that can require many specialized possessions). Additionally, situational factors such as whether or not one has children will necessarily impact the number of possessions one requires to live comfortably. While having fewer items is a common consequence of adopting a minimalistic mindset – in which one takes care to only hold onto and accumulate that which adds value to their life and is worth the space and cost it requires in one's life – it is not in itself the definition of minimalism.

Importantly, minimalism is an ideology, not a circumstance. One can hold a minimalistic mindset with many possessions – in the case of someone who truly finds value from all that they do possess – or can have few possessions without a minimalistic mindset, in the case of someone who is impoverished or imprisoned while yearning for a number of material possessions. Given this nuance, some take issue with the label “minimalism” (e.g., see Fields Millburn and Nicodemus, n.d.), which suggests to many a

necessary austerity. More apt labels have been proposed, such as “enoughism,” “essentialism,” and “intentionalism.” However, since “minimalism” is easily the most used referent for this lifestyle by today’s consumers, I will rely upon it for the present work.

1.2 Conceptual Precursors to Minimalism

“Minimalism,” despite offering a new name and methods of application, is not a new philosophy. Indeed, ideas of minimalism can be traced back to such luminaries as Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, Socrates, Seneca, St. Francis, Jesus, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Vladimir Lenin, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and the Dalai Lama (Elgin, 1981; Belk, 1983). Preceding minimalism, a modern consumer movement termed “voluntary simplicity” was sparked by the publication of Duane Elgin’s 1981 book, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*. Elgin’s book is often credited as the flashpoint for the upswelling of modern simplicity movements, particularly those of the 1980s and 1990s, and for bringing the anti-consumerist and environmental sentiments of the 1960s and 1970s into more mainstream practice (e.g., see Alexander, 2011; Etzioni, 1998; Shi, 2007). As captured in the title, Elgin defined voluntary simplicity as “living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich” (1981). More specifically, he suggested that this way of life “embraces frugality of consumption, a strong environmental urgency, a desire to return to living and working environments which are of a more human scale,

and an intention to realize our higher human potential—both psychological and spiritual—in community with others” (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977, p. 2). To pursue a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity, Elgin suggested a commitment to five basic values: (1) material simplicity (buying and owning only what is necessary and focusing on “being and becoming” rather than “having” as discussed by Fromm, 1976), (2) self-determination (asserting greater control over one’s life rather than being tied by “installment payments, maintenance costs, and the expectations of others” (p.6)), (3) ecological awareness (understanding the impact that our consumption behavior has on the environment and on the lives of others, particularly those who are disadvantaged), (4) human scale (choosing smaller living and working environments that provide a sufficient but not an excessive amount of space for the purpose they serve), and (5) personal growth (focusing more on one’s inner life and growth, both psychological and spiritual, rather than on external appearances and accumulation).

Etzioni (1998), in a seminal academic paper on voluntary simplicity, defines voluntary simplicity as “the choice out of free will rather than 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” (p. 620). He argues that voluntary simplicity is the pursuit of a greater “quality of life,” through what Inglehart (1977) refers to as “post-materialist values.” These include a desire for more freedom, a stronger sense of community, and more say

in government. He proposes that voluntary simplicity allows one to achieve a greater quality of life because “once one’s basic creature-comfort needs are taken care of, [consuming less] is not a source of deprivation, so long as one is freed from the culture of consumerism” (Etzioni, 1998, p. 630). He argues that there is declining marginal satisfaction in the pursuit of increasing levels of consumption, and that such a pursuit becomes increasingly unsatisfying. Despite this declining satisfaction, he contends that many who seek to curb their consumeristic tendencies find it difficult to do so and experience the desires and habit to consume as obsessive and even addictive. Etzioni (1998) argues that the way to loosen the intense and seemingly ever-expanding desires of consumeristic pursuits is not to feed them in an attempt to reach satiation but to reject them in favor of a focus on cultivating more deeply satisfying pursuits such as a healthy family life, close friendships, and meaningful or enjoyable work.

In response to the popularity of the voluntary simplicity movement, several papers have sought to document the motivations and practices of those consumers. A study by Alexander and Ussher (2012) conducted a survey with over two thousand individuals who practiced simple living around the developed world, primarily in the U.S. and Australia. They defined “simple living” as those who are living a “simpler life;” i.e., a lifestyle of “reduced or restrained income, consumption, and/or working hours.” It was specified that this should be a long-term way of life and that it was not intended for people who were involuntarily living simply, such as due to poverty or some other

structural constraint. While 10% of participants reported that they had always lived this way, those who had changed their lifestyle overwhelmingly reported that they were happier since having done so (87%), with almost no respondents (0.3%) reporting that they were less happy since having done so. The strongest source of motivation among voluntary simplifiers was environmental concern (also found by Miller and Gregan-Paxton, 2006), with 80% of participants reporting this as their primary motivation. Alexander and Ussher (2012) found that most respondents had reduced their incomes from what they had been in the past, usually either through changing jobs or careers or through reducing their working hours, and about half of individuals reported that minimizing expenditures played a large part in their practice of simple living. Most respondents acknowledged that decluttering was important to their practice, primarily in order to free up energy to focus on what's important. They reported that the type of possessions and the attitude that one has toward them were more important than the actual number of possessions they owned, suggesting a fundamentally more qualitative than quantitative difference in the relationship to one's possessions between simplifiers and non-simplifiers.

Additional studies done on voluntary simplifiers have largely relied on qualitative methods such as in-depth interviewing. In perhaps the most extensive investigation of voluntary simplicity, sociologist Grigsby (2004) found that voluntary simplifiers were engaged in efforts to define themselves as "worthwhile and good

people” through their simplified consumption. Grigsby (2004) found that many voluntary simplifiers viewed work as a major source of dissatisfaction in life and pursued a life of simplicity as means to reduce the amount of control that waged work had over one’s life and identity by deprioritizing earning and consumption. Those who forewent earnings often did so as a political statement against capitalism and to decrease their involvement in waged work or consumerist activities that they felt furthered a capitalist agenda. Those in the lower economic classes who adopted voluntary simplicity seemed to do so as a way to keep their poverty from defining them or controlling them. In recounting a conversation with a temporary employment agency worker about the participant’s impending homelessness, the voluntary simplifier was asked, “Don’t you feel insecure?” to which the simplifier responded, “No, the security is not in my wallet, it’s in my head. I know that I will be all right no matter what I do” (p. 127). By eschewing an identity and lifestyle centered on “waged work and consumerist activities,” economically disadvantaged simplifiers were able to preserve a sense of agency and empowerment even in the face of resource insecurity.

1.3 The Current Work

While voluntary simplicity bears similarities to the modern minimalism movement, there is good reason to believe that the philosophy and practice of minimalism has evolved in significant ways since the 1980s to the early aughts in which voluntary simplicity was most popular. Even before the ubiquity of the internet,

internet-connected devices, and internet-enabled consumption possibilities, Etzioni (1998) detailed significant changes in modern consumption: “Unlike the consumer objects that dominated the manufacturing age – cars, washers, bikes, televisions, houses (and computers) – many knowledge ‘objects’ can be consumed, possessed, and still be had by numerous others, that is, shared at minimal cost or loss. Hence, in this basic sense, knowledge defies scarcity, reducing scarcity” (p. 635). This observation has only become more accurate since the time of his publishing in 1998. As he discusses, a Porsche can only be owned and confer status to a single individual or household, whereas a recording of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony can be accessed by billions of people around the world – at essentially no cost to the consumer – an unlimited number of times and without degradation of the “object.” Thus, technology has not only solved many issues of material scarcity but has infinitely expanded and democratized the availability of seemingly unlimited cultural and knowledge-based goods. It is conceivable today that one could emulate the exercise of Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond (1854), living in a small shack at a remote pond with the most minimal of material necessities for survival, and yet concurrently have available to them (via an internet-connected device) a virtually endless trove of literature, historical texts, music, art, video footage, lectures from intellectuals both living and dead, just-released scientific reports, and even direct communication with loved ones and strangers alike. Even without internet access or electricity at Walden Pond, more content than one could

consume in a lifetime could be toted on an affordable device of only a few ounces and kept alive with a portable solar charger, something that only became possible within the last decade. This type of wealth could never have been imagined by those living only a half-century ago, a span of time that accounts for only .00017% of human history.

While the internet and technological innovations have proliferated seemingly infinite possibilities to consume with ever-increasing ease, it has also enabled consumers to own fewer material goods if they so choose, by digitizing and/or shrinking many cultural and knowledge-based goods (e.g., music, art, books, news) and providing access to the “sharing economy” and newly growing rental economy, which allow consumers greater access to material goods without ownership. Through the sharing economy, one can find a place to stay in the form of an apartment, house, boat, yurt, or even a castle (Airbnb), borrow a car from a neighbor (RelayRides, Getaround), get an immediate ride to any location within 100 miles (Lyft, Uber), get help with a variety of tasks such as shopping for groceries, assembling a bookshelf, completing clerical work, or even standing in line (TaskRabbit), or borrow a physical item, such as a ladder or tennis racket, from someone nearby (Neighborgoods), to name just a few of such platforms. Also growing are rental services (see Maheshwari, 2019), offering special event and everyday outfits (Rent the Runway, Express Style Trial, American Eagle Style Drop), furniture (West Elm, Crate & Barrel), outdoor gear (REI), or everything you need to host a backyard movie night, Super Mario party, or “silent disco” (Joymode). While such

services can make certain goods and services affordable to a new segment of consumers that otherwise could not have afforded access, a lack of ownership can also newly become a higher status position – for example, in the case of using ridesharing services exclusively instead of driving oneself anywhere and needing to maintain one’s own vehicle.

Given significant changes in the consumer landscape in recent decades, we might expect that minimalist consumers differ in significant ways from voluntary simplifiers. But how? Little work has been done on minimalism as it relates to consumption and exceptions have largely been conceptual or theoretical rather than empirical (see Dopierała, 2017, Meissner, 2019; Hausen, 2019; Uggla, 2019). Therefore, the current work seeks to lay the groundwork for understanding minimalist consumers and practices. The key research questions of this work are as follows:

Research Question 1: What does it mean to practice minimalism? For example, what domains do practitioners seek to minimize? How does consumption behavior shift as a result of adopting minimalism?

Research Question 2: What motivates consumers to adopt minimalism? That is, what are the reasons, experiences, or events that serve to prompt the pursuit of a minimalist lifestyle?

Research Question 3: What impacts do minimalist consumers experience as a result of adopting minimalism?

To address these questions, I use a mixed-method approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods with a focus on minimalists as a group and also as part of a broader spectrum of consumers. Given limited research on this population, I rely on a ground-up, inductive, data-driven approach rather than a top-down, deductive, hypothesis-driven approach. I will first explore the basics of minimalism as a practice using survey data from a large group of minimalist consumers before going deeper into the practices, experiences, motivations, and perceived impacts of practicing minimalism using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I further supplement the findings from these data sets with two follow-up surveys that lend additional support to the research questions and the proposed theory. Based on the findings of these studies, I adapt and extend Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) theory of salutogenesis to propose a framework of minimalist consumption as a case of salutogenic (vs. pathogenic) consumption; that is, consumption behavior that intentionally cultivates (rather than threatens) well-being.

1.4 Summary of Studies

This work reports findings from four datasets using varying methods. Because these datasets speak to similar questions in varying ways, many of the results will be reported by research question or topic rather than as separate studies for readability. Here, I briefly summarize these datasets and how they will be explored in this essay.

The first and largest dataset is a quantitative survey ($N = 808$ minimalists) that seeks to capture the basics of minimalist consumption as a practice and the relative frequency of reported practices and motivations within this population. The methods and results from this initial study are reported in the next section.

The second dataset reported is from a qualitative investigation involving 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with practicing minimalists that seeks to more deeply investigate what it means to practice minimalism, why people practice it, and how this practice impacts them. This dataset provides the bulk of the substance from which the theoretical framework is derived, while the quantitative datasets provide foundational and supporting evidence. The findings from this dataset are reported in depth in Chapter 3.

The third dataset is a follow-up quantitative survey with a subset of U.S.-based minimalists from the initial survey. These were participants who had expressed interest in being a part of further follow-up studies on the topic of minimalism. As a result, their demographic make-up is similar to those reported for the first dataset. This follow-up survey focused on the perceived impacts (positive and negative) of having adopted minimalism, a topic investigated in greater depth in the qualitative interviews. The results from this dataset add support to the findings of the qualitative investigation and are reported in the Chapter 3 sections on Benefits (see subsection 3.3.1.5) and Drawbacks (see subsection 3.3.2.2).

The last dataset is an additional quantitative survey that seeks to provide additional evidence in support of the theory derived from the qualitative investigation and the supporting quantitative findings by looking at the relationship between minimalist practice, worldview, tangible and non-tangible resources, and stress levels. This is the only dataset which includes both minimalist and non-minimalist consumers and allows for direct investigation of differences along the spectrum of minimalist vs. non-minimalist consumption rather than focusing on characterizing minimalists as a group. Rather than comparing minimalists and non-minimalists dichotomously, all participants were asked to report the degree to which they practiced minimalism as a lifestyle on a scale from 0-100 in order to characterize minimalism along a broader spectrum of consumer behavior. The results from this dataset are used to lend further support to the proposed theory and are reported in Chapter 4 (see subsection 4.3).

2. Initial Quantitative Survey

Outside of popular depictions of minimalist practitioners, little is known about who is drawn to minimalism as a lifestyle and for what reasons. This study relies on survey data collected through online convenience sampling to provide insight about the practice of minimalism, what domains are most commonly minimized, and the motivations for adopting such a lifestyle.

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

Participants were drawn from two online populations: the first sample ($n = 83$) was recruited via a Twitter social media post from popular minimalist blogger and author Joshua Becker. On Twitter, users can “follow” or subscribe to tweets of people they know, organizations, and public figures. Joshua Becker (author of *becomingminimalist.com* and *The More of Less*, among others) tweets nearly exclusively about minimalism, and thus his following is assumed to primarily consist of individuals interested in the practice of lifestyle minimalism. The second sample ($n = 725$) was recruited from a post on *reddit.com* on the subreddit “*r/minimalism*,” an online community which operates like a forum in which anyone with an account can make a post and users of the site typically engage in conversation with one another via comments on the posts. Reddit users who practice or are interested in minimalism can subscribe to the subreddit *r/minimalism* and will see new and popular posts when they

log onto reddit.com. On each post, participants were provided a link to participate in the survey. No incentive was offered for completing the survey. For brevity of presentation and increased statistical power, the samples were pooled into one dataset for the present analyses. See Appendix A for details of significant differences between the two samples.

The sample ($N = 808$) skewed female (57.8%), with a median age of 27 ($M = 29.38$). About a third (33.9%) were single and never married, while just under a third (30.3%) were married. One-fifth (19.7%) reported being parents, with a median of 2 children ($M = 1.75$). About two thirds (66.8%) of the sample came from the U.S., with the next largest representation (6.0%) coming from Canada. Most (65.3%) had completed at least a bachelor's degree, with 18.1% also having completed a master's degree and 5.3% having completed a doctoral-level degree. Median household income was between \$50,001-70,000; adjusting for household size, median income was approximately \$30,001-50,000². The racial/ethnic makeup of the sample (with the possibility to select multiple categories) was 76% White, 13% Asian, 6% Hispanic or Latinx, and 2% Black or African. Despite relatively low levels of religiosity and spirituality, participants reported placing significantly greater importance on spirituality than religiosity on a five-point scale ($M_{\text{spirituality}} = 2.51$ vs. $M_{\text{religion}} = 1.67$, $t(691) = 18.49$, $p < .0001$. With the possibility to select multiple categories, the most common religious/spiritual identities were as follows:

² Adjusted income was calculated by dividing total household income by the square root of the total number of people in the household, a commonly used equivalence-scale adjustment that accounts for economies of scale in consumer expenditures (see Buhmann, Rainwater, Schmaus, and Smeeding, 1988).

atheist (35.9%), agnostic (28.3%), and Christian (18.2%). The median participant's political view was "somewhat liberal."

2.1.1 Materials and Procedures

After providing informed consent, participants completed the survey online via Qualtrics.com. See Appendix B for the full set of measures.

2.1.1.1 Practice of Minimalism

Participants were asked whether they currently live a minimalist lifestyle, how long they have been practicing minimalism, how different minimalism is from how they were raised as a child and how they previously lived as an adult, and whether those they live with also practiced minimalism. Participants were asked what they intentionally minimize, declutter, or simplify in their life from the following domains: physical clutter and belongings, demands on my time, friendships or relationships with others, digital content (such as emails or photos), exposure to media (such as social media, news media, TV, or advertising), meals or eating behavior, experiences (such as travel, restaurants), and/or other domains, which participants were asked to describe.

To further capture what it means to be a minimalist in the current movement, participants were asked to report the degree to which (1) minimalism as a design style and (2) minimalism as a lifestyle were important or desirable to them on a scale of 0 ("Not at all desirable") to 100 ("Extremely desirable") after reviewing definitions of each (see Appendix B for further detail).

2.1.1.2 Motivations

Participants were first asked about their motivations for pursuing minimalism, with the instruction to check all sources of motivation that felt true for them from the following possible sources: reduce environmental impact, reduce stress, reduce financial burdens, improve psychological well-being, free up time, reduce housework burdens, social or relationship reasons, spiritual or religious reasons, visual appeal of an uncluttered space, and/or other reasons, which participants were asked to describe. Next, participants were asked which source of motivation for pursuing minimalism was most important to them from the preceding list.

2.1.1.3 Well-being

Participants from Reddit received the Flourishing Scale, an 8-item measure of psychological and social well-being that measures participants' self-perceived success in important areas of life such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism (Diener, Wirtz, Tov, Kim-Prieto, Choi, Oishi, Biswas-Diener, 2010). This measure is scored using a possible range from 8 (lowest possible) to 56 (highest possible) such that higher scores indicate a person with greater psychological resources and strengths. This measure has good psychometric properties and is strongly associated with other psychological well-being scales (see Diener et al., 2010). No measure of well-being was included for those who took the survey from Twitter. This measure was included for

Reddit participants as a later update to the survey and not intentionally administered differently across the two populations for any theoretical reason.

With the exception of the Flourishing Scale, the survey was identical for each sample except that on Twitter, participants were asked, “How important is religion or spirituality in your life?” whereas participants on Reddit were asked two separate questions, “How important is religion in your life?” and “How important is spirituality in your life?” As before, this was added for Reddit participants as a later addition to the survey and not intentionally administered differently across the two populations for any theoretical reason.

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Practice of Minimalism

Over the half of the sample (55.2%) reported that they currently live a minimalist lifestyle and have done so for some time, with a significant proportion (37.6%) reporting that they have only just begun living a minimalist lifestyle. A small segment (7.2%) reported that they do not currently live a minimalist lifestyle but would like to do so in the future. Those practicing minimalism reported that they have done so for a median of 2 years and mean of 3.66 years. Most minimalists did not live with others who also practice minimalism (46.7% said those they live with do not practice minimalism and 15.6% live alone; 34.4% lived with others who practice minimalism and 3.2% were unsure). The average participant reported that minimalism was different from how they

were raised as a child ($M = 1.66$ on 4-point scale, landing somewhere between “Very different” and “Somewhat different”) and also different from how they had previously lived during their adult lives ($M = 1.93$ on 4-point scale, nearer to “Somewhat different” than “Very different”). The domains that participants report intentionally minimizing, decluttering, or simplifying are summarized in Figure 2. The most common domains were physical clutter and belongings (97.7%), digital content (70.3%), exposure to media (69.9%), demands on time (58.7%), and friendships or relationships with others (51.0%).

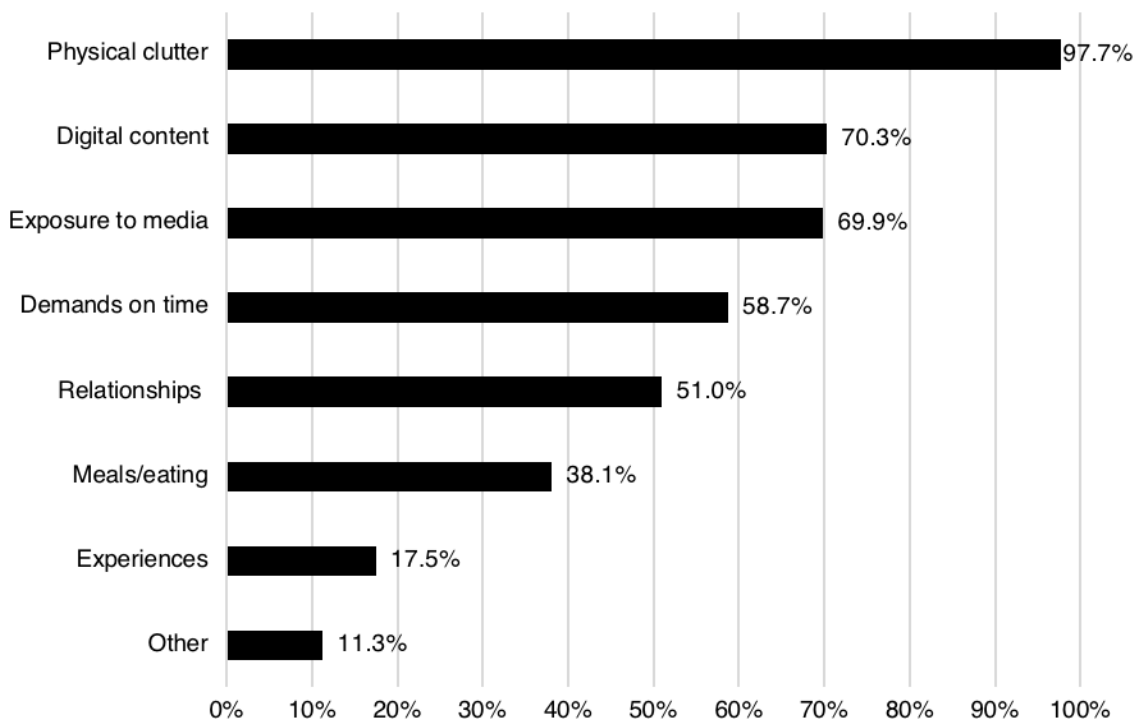


Figure 2: Domains Minimized by Participants. Participants were asked to report all domains that they intentionally minimize, declutter, or simplify.

In a matched pairs t-test comparing the desirability of minimalism as a lifestyle and minimalism as a design style, participants reported that minimalism as a lifestyle

was significantly more desirable, $M_{\text{lifestyle}} = 87.83$ vs. $M_{\text{design}} = 61.76$, $t(793) = 23.31$, $p < .0001$. These items were weakly negatively correlated, $r(792) = -.07$, $p = .04$, such that the more weight one placed on minimalism as a lifestyle, the less weight one placed on minimalism as a design style. While most participants in this sample highly valued minimalism as a lifestyle, the scatterplots reveal that self-identified minimalists include those who highly value the lifestyle but not the aesthetic, those who highly value the aesthetic but not the lifestyle, and those who highly value both.

2.2.2 Motivations

The reported motivations for pursuing minimalism are summarized in Figures 3 and 4. Most participants selected most of the possible motivations, with the most common motivations being to reduce stress (93.2%), to improve psychological well-being (88.6%), the visual appeal of an uncluttered space (87.0%), to reduce financial burdens (78.3%), to reduce environmental impact (69.6%), to reduce housework burdens (66.7%), and to free up time (66.1%). In selecting the single most important source of motivation, participants most commonly selected improved psychological well-being (37.1%) and reduction of stress (25.7%).

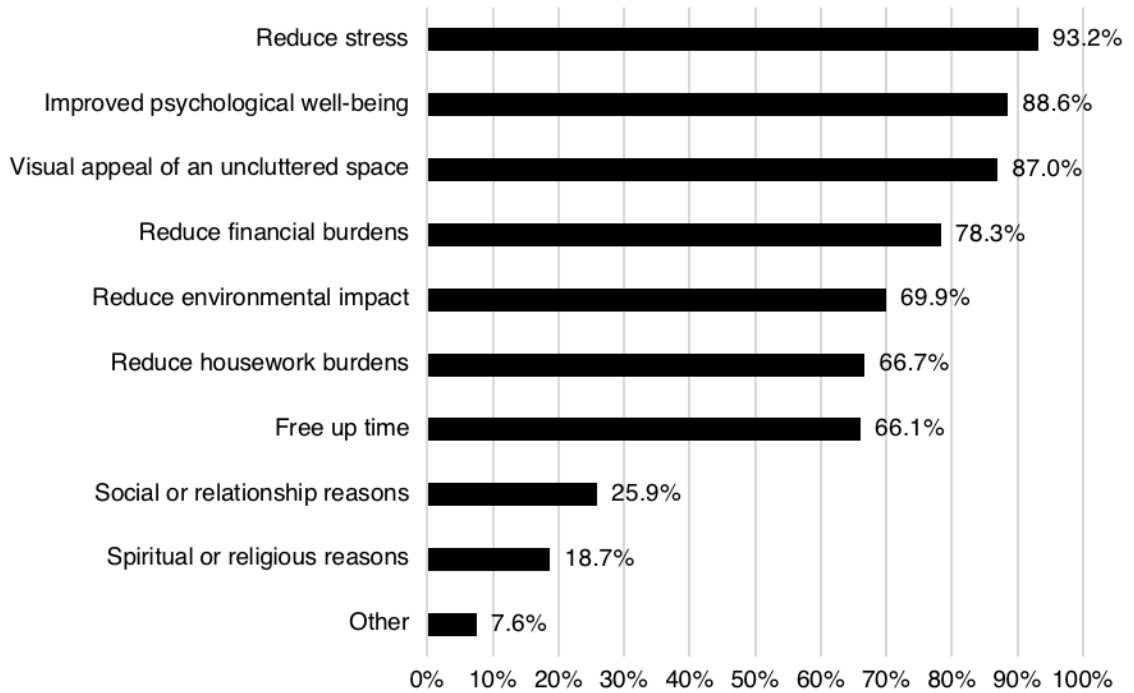


Figure 3: Sources of Motivation for Pursuing Minimalism. Participants were asked to report all sources of motivation that were true for them.

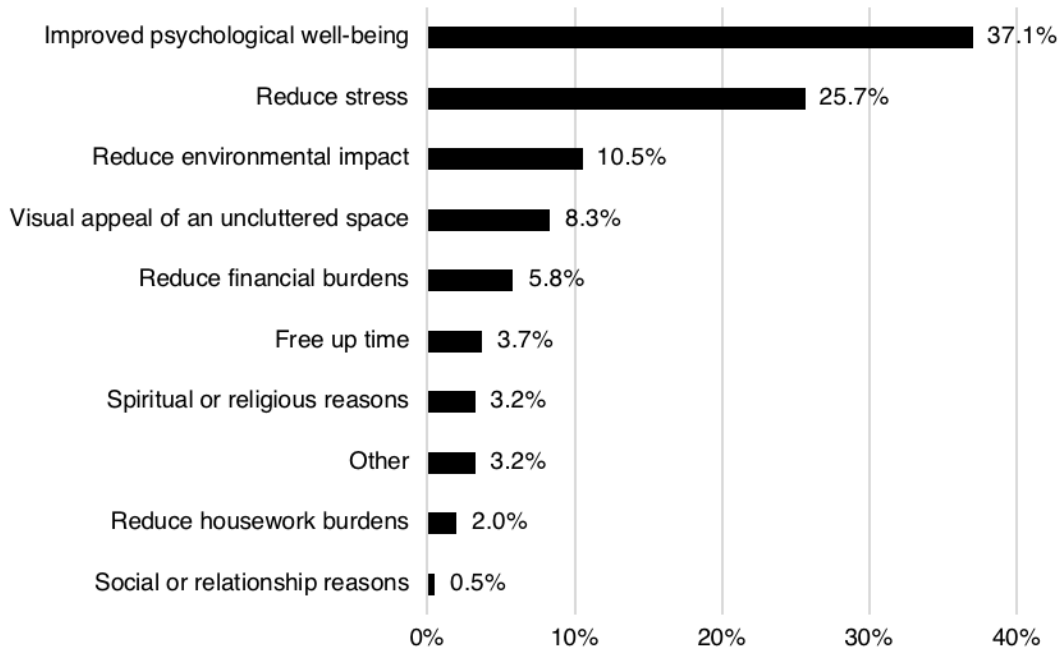


Figure 4: Primary Source of Motivation for Pursuing Minimalism. Participants were asked to report which source of motivation was most important to them.

2.2.3 Well-being

Reddit participants reported fairly average psychological well-being as measured by the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) with a mean score of 44.48 (possible scores range from 8 to 56; observed scores ranged from 16 to 56). As an exploratory analysis, Flourishing Scale scores were modeled as a function of several possibly related aspects of one’s approach to minimalism (domains that one minimizes, length of minimalism practice, importance of minimalism as a lifestyle, importance of minimalism as an aesthetic) while controlling for variables related to current life situation (adjusted income, subjective financial strain, relationship status, whether or not one has children, education level) and basic demographics (gender, age). Given the exploratory nature of

the analysis, the large number of potentially predictive variables, and possibility of multicollinearity, adaptive Elastic Net regularization was used to identify a parsimonious model that isolates the most predictive variables while striving for prediction accuracy (see Zou and Hastie, 2005; Zou and Zhang, 2009). Using the AICc validation method, coefficients for the retained predictors are reported below. The following variables were removed through regularization due to lack of predictive ability: age, gender, whether or not one has children, and the importance of minimalism as an aesthetic. In addition, five levels of the variable capturing the domains one minimizes were removed as were four levels of the education variable.

Table 1: Predictors of Flourishing as Determined by Adaptive Elastic Net

Term	B	SE B	β
Relationship status [not partnered vs. partnered]	-1.64**	0.53	-20.04**
Importance of minimalism as lifestyle	0.04**	0.02	16.10**
Length of minimalism practice	0.10*	0.04	13.74*
Minimized domains [demands on time]	1.09*	0.54	13.43*
Education level [bachelors vs. associates degree]	1.08	0.59	13.02
Subjective financial strain	-0.63	0.40	-10.78
Adjusted income	0.20	0.19	6.93
Education level [high school vs. <high school]	2.10	2.42	6.60
Minimized domains [other]	0.55	0.85	4.28
Minimized domains [digital content]	0.21	0.58	2.29

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; $R^2 = .10$

The significant terms (starred in Table 1) revealed that those who placed greater importance on minimalism as lifestyle, those who had been practicing minimalism as a lifestyle for a greater amount of time, and those who intentionally minimized demands

on their time also reported greater levels of psychological flourishing. Given the limitations of correlational data, it is unknown whether factors such as longer time spent and greater weight placed on practicing minimalism lead to greater psychological flourishing, whether those with greater psychological resources are more likely to practice minimalism, or if there is some third variable that explains the observed relationship between practicing minimalism and well-being. In addition, those without a romantic partner reported significantly lower levels of psychological flourishing as compared to participants who were romantically partnered. Given that this sample only included minimalists, it is unclear whether and how this pattern might differ from what would be observed in typical consumers. It is possible that non-partnered minimalists significantly differ from partnered minimalists in important ways that are associated with psychological well-being, such as what motivates them to pursue minimalism and/or what impacts they experience as a result of pursuing minimalism.

2.3 Discussion

The demographic data suggest that minimalism is practiced by a wide range of people who are highly educated, more likely to be spiritual than religious, and with average levels of income. The most common domain in which participants applied minimalism was physical clutter, with nearly all participants reporting doing so, though the majority of participants also reported minimizing digital content, exposure to media, demands on time, and interpersonal relationships. Most participants placed a much

greater importance on minimalism as a lifestyle than as an aesthetic with little relationship observed between the preference for each. The strongest reported sources of motivation for pursuing minimalism were psychological well-being and stress reduction, with over 90% of the sample identifying these as a source of motivation, and a majority of the sample (>60%) selecting them as their primary source of motivation for pursuing minimalism. Without being able to determine the causal direction of the relationship, exploratory modeling of psychological and social well-being as measured by the Flourishing Scale found that more time spent practicing minimalism, a greater importance placed on minimalism as a lifestyle, and applying minimalist philosophies to intentionally reduce demands on one's time were all positively associated with greater psychological and social well-being.

3. Qualitative Investigation

The initial quantitative survey provided initial insights on who minimalists are, how minimalism is practiced, and what motivates people to adopt a minimalist lifestyle. Given that little is known about this segment of consumers or how their behavior might be explained by existing theories, I will rely on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1994), in-depth qualitative interviews, and follow-up quantitative surveys to better understand the experiences and perspectives of those who practice minimalism and to capture important insights that might not be predicted a priori. The guiding questions remain: what does it mean to practice minimalism, why do consumers adopt minimalism and what prompts them to do so, and in what ways do they see minimalism impacting their lives?

3.1 Method for Qualitative Data Collection

3.1.1 Participants

At the end of the initial quantitative survey, participants who met eligibility criteria (lived in the U.S., at least 18 years of age, and had been practicing minimalism for at least six months) were invited to provide their email address if they were interested in completing a follow-up phone interview about their experience pursuing minimalism in exchange for their choice of a \$20 Amazon gift card or a \$20 donation to the charitable organization of their choice. The survey and the recruitment post also listed a website which provided more information about the interview study and

allowed participants to self-schedule an interview if they met all eligibility criteria. Thus, the interview sample is primarily composed of Twitter and Reddit users who were invited by email after completing the posted survey detailed in the initial quantitative survey and participants who self-scheduled an interview after seeing the survey posting and visiting the study's website. All participants received an informed consent form by email after scheduling their interview. The important points of the consent form were reiterated by the interviewer before the start of the interview and participants were explicitly asked for their permission to record the interview.

Of the 30 interviews completed, two were previously known by the author to practice minimalism, 10 were recruited from Twitter, and 18 were recruited from Reddit. The sample was composed of 16 men and 14 women with a mean age of 36.6 (median = 36; range 21-61). The majority of participants identified as White or Caucasian ($n = 24$) including one participant who also identified as Native American, three participants who identified as Asian, and two participants who identified as Hispanic including one who also identified as Black. Most participants (26 of 30) had completed a bachelor's degree, with 14 of those participants also completing advanced degrees. Participants reported a median household income of \$70,001-100,000 and most frequently identified as upper middle class ($n = 16$, of which one also identified as being upper class and one as being lower middle class). An additional eight participants identified as lower middle class (total lower middle class $n = 9$) including one who also identified as working class.

An additional five participants identified as working class (total working class $n = 6$) including one who also identified as poor. One did not report social class information. The median political position, on a 5-point scale, was “somewhat liberal,” and the modal political view was “centrist” ($n = 11$ of 29 who reported political views). The median respondent reported that religion or spirituality was “slightly important” (4 on a 5-point scale), with the average trending towards less importance ($M = 3.53$). See Table 2 for a summary of interview participants.

Table 2: Summary of Interview Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Self-Reported Social Class
Andrew	35	Neuroscientist	Upper middle class
Annie	27	Museum science educator	Upper middle class
Arlo	21	Security guard and musician	Working class, Poor
Ben	40	Institutional researcher	Working class
Brenda	47	Administrative assistant, Air Force Reservist	Upper middle class
Brian	26	PhD student	Lower middle class
Catherine	32	Mortgage professional	Lower middle class
Christopher	53	Not working, previously in higher ed and banking	Working class
Daniela	28	Print associate, entrepreneur	Lower middle class
Emma	55	Not working; previously in advertising	Upper middle class
Gianna	49	Professional organizer, life coach	Lower middle class
Grant	29	Account manager	Lower middle class
Hannah	32	Academic librarian	Lower middle class, Working class
Heather	29	High school teacher	Lower middle class

Jason	34	Executive assistant	Lower middle class
Jill	61	Pharmaceutical research	
Julie	49	Sales manager	Upper middle class
Kevin	40	Professional musician	Upper middle class
Levi	30	Student	Working class
Linda	43	Stay-at-home mom	Upper middle class
Mark	38	Tech start-up CEO	Upper class, Upper middle class
Naima	36	Stay-at-home mom, previously worked as an attorney	Working class
Noah	36	Graphic designer	Upper middle class
Samantha	23	Chemist	Upper middle class
Sarah	45	Professional organizer, previously in corporate HR	Upper middle class
Sarthak	22	Software engineer	Upper middle class
Scott	37	Software developer	Upper middle class, Lower middle class
Toby	28	High school teacher	Upper middle class
Tommy	40	Air Force retiree, psychotherapist	Upper middle class
William	24	Software	Upper middle class

3.1.2 Materials and Procedures

Qualitative data collection consisted of a phone interview that typically lasted around 90 minutes (though occasionally some lasted around an hour and somewhat more frequently some lasted around two hours) and a short post-interview survey that included several demographic questions and a question eliciting the participant's preference for incentive payment.

3.1.2.1 In-depth Interview

The interview was semi-structured by an interview guide to ensure important questions and topics were covered while allowing for digressions and probing that may uncover relevant insights (see Appendix C for full interview guide). Questions were mostly open-ended and allowed participants to respond in a narrative style. Participants were first asked to share generally about themselves and what their life is like right now, including their living and work situation. They were then asked a series of questions to understand how they practice minimalism and why. Participants were asked to describe how they approach life in terms of minimalism, what made them want to live this way, what was going on in their lives when they decided to adopt minimalism, and how big of a change their minimalist lifestyle is compared to how they had lived previously. Participants were also asked to explain what changes they had to make in terms of what they own and how they consume. This includes questions about how they decide what to keep and what to get rid of and what that experience was/is like for them. They were also asked about how they shop for things and how their consumption decisions have been influenced by practicing minimalism. Next, participants were asked a series of questions about the perceived impacts minimalism has had on their life, including both benefits and drawbacks if applicable. As part of the closing, participants were asked if there was anything that felt important to them to share on the topic that hadn't yet been covered and how they felt about how the interview had gone.

3.1.2.2 Post-interview Survey

After the interview, participants were sent a brief online survey by email that included the demographic questions reported above. Lastly, the participant was asked to indicate their preference for the \$20 gift card or the \$20 donation to the charitable organization of their choice.

3.2 Qualitative Findings

3.2.1 What Does It Mean to Practice Minimalism?

As suggested by the demographic data reported above, those who participated in interviews included a wide spectrum of individuals – ranging from early 20s to early 60s; single to married with children; renters and home owners; spanning a wide range of occupations, socioeconomic statuses, races and ethnicities, and coming from a variety of backgrounds: from impoverished to wealthy, from more minimalist families of origin to those which struggled with clinical hoarding, and those born in the U.S. and outside of it. Some had practiced minimalism for a relatively short period of time – sometimes in stark contrast to their previous ways of living – while others had lived some version of a minimalist lifestyle for most of their lives. Interviewees came into minimalism for a wide variety of reasons and in a wide variety of situations, while all described practicing minimalism as a lifestyle in order to intentionally prioritize that which they most valued, to maximize a variety of resources, and to reduce undue burdens.

What does it mean to practice minimalism as a lifestyle? In defining minimalism, interview participants spoke about concepts of intentional allocation and cultivation of one's resources. For example, Sarah defines minimalism as "being intentional about your time, your space, and your money...and how you spend any of your resources because they're all limited." Emma describes minimalism, in part, as "a process to refine your environment – your physical, emotional, professional, and personal environments - with intention." As suggested in these remarks, intentionality is a critical component of minimalist consumption. The intention that minimalists bring to their consumption decisions is most notably about values – that is, intentionally aligning consumption behavior with one's values and elevating that which is most valuable in one's life while eliminating that which does not add value. As Tommy put it, minimalism is about "reducing the things in my life that are burdensome and overwhelming, and surrounding myself with people and things that help me achieve the life I want." Many interviewees explicitly pushed back against the concept that minimalism is about owning as little as possible, but instead advocated for an approach of raising the bar with respect to what they expend their resources on (including money, time, energy, attention, and space). The practice of reduction is not applied uniformly but only to that which is excessive, unnecessary, or burdensome. "The core of it is not to give up everything you have; it's to give up the things that don't bring value to your life," says Arlo. In this way, minimalism is a practice of intentionally investing in those values that

are most important by divesting from less valued pursuits. As David explains, “you don’t pursue minimalism just for the sake of minimalism. You pursue it to do other things. Maybe you want to save money. Maybe you want to help out with the environment. Maybe you don’t want to be stressed out with all of this stuff that you don’t need, doing all this frivolous spending.” This section will explore in further detail what it means to practice minimalism as expressed by interview participants.

3.2.1.1 Questioning One’s Narratives

For most interviewees, the adoption of minimalism is preceded by an inquiry into the narratives by which they have been living. Toby, a 28-year-old from the Midwest, describes being the first person in his family to have gotten a college degree, after which he got a “professional job in the white-collar world of education” and a Masters degree. During this period, he also got married, moved to a new city, and bought a house with his wife. In the early days of his marriage, he found himself thinking, “wow, I finally got everything that I thought I wanted – the house, the job, I got married,” and yet, Toby reports feeling a sense of “real emptiness that none of those things really fulfilled me in the way that I was hoping they would.” This realization leads him to question what he has been taught about how to achieve happiness and a life worth living. “I was definitely buying into all this stuff society said I had to have and believe and buy into,” he realizes, but now, “I feel like the curtain has been pulled back and I can kind of see how, for a long time, I was kind of getting punked by what I felt

was broader society." Upon his discovery of minimalism, he reports realizing that "life can be about a whole lot more than just achievement and getting the next thing" and that he no longer wanted to feel stuck in a "vicious cycle of just always striving for something that really isn't going to bring any kind of lasting happiness." As Toby begins to question the narrative he has been living by, he starts to declutter the possessions in his home, a process which he describes as "almost therapeutic," and changing his consumption habits by cutting back on shopping and unnecessary purchases. "When I'm not so focused on what I'm bringing into my life and how I'm consuming, it really opens me up to thinking through what it is I actually find important in life. What is it that I actually care about?" He cites this process of inquiry and clarification as a key benefit to the practice of minimalism – identifying and eschewing the excess in his life pushes him to "reflect and think about, what is actually meaningful for me right now in life?" Through this process of introspection and refinement of his own values and priorities, Toby is able to "not be so concerned with the façade of having it all together" and rearrange his allocation of resources in order to spend more time with his wife and on his hobbies, opt to stay home for a year when his daughter is born, and work towards a new goal of financial independence and early retirement so that he will have more options about how to spend his future.

Emma, a 55-year old former corporate professional in New York city, also begins questioning the narratives she is living by upon realizing her consumption habits were

out of sync with the life she was living. While working as a professional and climbing the corporate ladder, she had a lot of discretionary income as a single person with no children. "I was living in a nice apartment and I was just filling it up with stuff that I thought that I should have and sort of setting this stage with props. And then it dawned on me that the actors weren't going to show up. I was setting this stage for who, you know? It just wasn't playing out in the way that I guess I thought it would or that I thought it was supposed to and so I had to get honest about that...I really had to question...what am I really pursuing here?" In questioning the underlying drivers of her consumption, she realized she was acting out what she imagined the life of a "New York professional" should look like rather than consuming based on "what I really use and what I really value." In surveying her possessions, she describes a process of asking herself whether an object is "part of some story that I continue to tell myself about what my life is like, and is that story a false one?" In so doing, she shifts her consumption habits away from accumulating possessions that are largely performative to those that play an instrumental role in her life – illustrating how minimalist consumption shifts one's focus from performing for an imagined audience to instead focus on getting honest about – and consuming in support of – one's own internal experience. Updating these narratives is not always easy: "I have these dumbbells that sort of feed this idea that I am fit and could pick them up at any moment and do those curls. But I would have to dust them off first because that never happens." She admits, "that story I tell

myself about how I'm fit and disciplined in that way hasn't been true for a long time but I like to have them around because I like the idea that I could pick them up – it's a story that I tell myself which I'm not ready to let go of yet." Emma, who has been practicing minimalism for several years, illustrates that this rewriting of narratives that one lives by is not a circumscribed point of transition but an ongoing process of uncovering truths about oneself and one's life and continuing to revise and renegotiate one's identity and values.

Some interviewees begin questioning these narratives early in life, avoiding ever adopting a highly consumerist lifestyle. Sarthak, a 22-year old software engineer in D.C., describes challenging societal narratives from a young age: "I thought, is life just going to school so that you can go to college so that you can get a job? So that you can buy a house and get married and have two and a half kids and just raise them and then just retire at 65?" Sarthak concludes that this is not how he wants to spend his life. In constructing a narrative to inform an alternative life path, Sarthak pursued Buddhist beliefs and practices, read books on minimalism and conscious spending, and began questioning what he owned, how he spent his time and money, and what long-term goals he wanted to prioritize. Like the other interview participants, Sarthak's questioning of the narratives he lives by has been a multi-year process that continues as his life changes, he adopts new goals, and applies such inquiry to new domains of his

life, moving beyond physical possessions to how he is spending his time and what type of media he consumes.

3.2.1.2 Constructing New Value Systems

Evident in many interviewees' characterizations of this questioning process is the question of why? Why do I own what I own, why do I buy what I buy, why do I spend my time the way I do, why am I striving for what I'm striving for? What purpose is my consumption serving? This line of questioning often leads minimalists to questions such as: What do I really value? Are the ways I'm spending my time and money and space adding value to my life? As these questions are examined, the focus is generally less about *what* a person expends their resources on than *why*. Focusing on this question of *why* seemed to prompt a shift towards prioritizing consumption behavior that is driven by intrinsic and/or internally-defined value systems (rather than extrinsic and/or externally-defined value systems).

Levi, a 30-year old who has recently returned to school to make a career change from hydrology to firefighting, describes an adventurous life lived mostly outdoors with friends, exploring new places and new experiences. In reflecting on his consumption behavior, he explains: "I talk about my gear, climbing gear, as these really important things. And it's not really because those things are that important, but that being active outside with people that I enjoy and identify with is really important...It's not really about the things you own, it's about what kind of experiences it connects you with or

gives you access to.” Here we see the other side of Emma’s previously discussed shift from valuing possessions with performative value (chosen with the audience in mind) to those with instrumental value, offering access to experiences that are internally rather than externally defined as valuable. Prioritizing these values has led him to minimize his expenses and possessions – everything he owns can fit in his vehicle – so that he is able to travel more freely and invest in quality outdoor gear so that he can engage in activities like rock climbing, backpacking, and snowboarding. Like many interviewees, Levi aligns his consumption behavior with his values by regularly asking himself the question, “does this add value to my life?” This shifts the consideration of his consumption decision inwards, to be evaluated against his own personal value system, rather than looking outwards at what others are doing or passively accepting external messages about what is important, and to prioritize consumption that is instrumental in centering what he most values – spending time outdoors and connecting with others.

Sarah, a mid-40s former corporate consultant turned professional organizer and mother, explains that “minimalism is about how I spend all my resources – time, space, and money.” Sarah describes one “epiphany moment” that led her to question whether she was prioritizing that which was truly valuable to her: “I would pick [my son] up from daycare and then we needed to run errands, we needed to stop at Target, we needed to stop at the grocery store.” She describes the feeling that she was watching the quality time she could have with her son slip away and “I really started to resent

shopping. I resented anything that took my time away from this little boy.” A need to reevaluate and reprioritize what was most valuable to her became even more apparent as she began to suffer severe health problems caused by stress and overwork. She opted to take a pay cut to step into a part-time role in order to prioritize time with her son and restoring her health, which she considers more important than her work and the income it provided. She and her family were able to reduce expenses by eliminating the outsourcing of housework such as landscaping and cleaning and becoming more conscious of impulse buys, even altering which stores she shopped at to reduce temptations (e.g., avoiding stores like Target that she describes as being especially “good at advertising to me”). She identifies five values as being most important to her: “faith, family, friends, health, and generosity.” She is hesitant to spend time, money, or space on anything that is not in service of those five values, going so far as to color-code her calendar based on these categories in order to ensure she is prioritizing them. “If there's something on my calendar that is in a different block or isn't directly in one of those five, then I'm going to think really long and hard about if that's something I'm going to say yes to, and it's the same with my money and the same with how I fill my space.” While Levi and Sarah live very different lives centered around very different values, they both have explicitly clarified what is most important to them and center these values in their consumption decisions.

As illustrated in Sarah's practice, prioritizing one's values necessarily requires cutting out that which is less important, unnecessary, or even burdensome. William, a 24-year old who grew up upper middle class and currently works for a software company in the Northeast, departs from the consumption priorities he observes around him, deciding that "I don't want to be dealing with three different cars. One car breaks down. You've got to bring it to the mechanic. You have to deal with that. It's a whole big thing. You have a big yard. You have to have all these tools, landscaping, things of that nature...Some of my parents' friends have these large houses, these huge yards, and the amount of time that is spent just maintaining them or paying someone else to do it is just something that I don't want to be doing with my life, dealing with all of that." Focusing on the costs associated with status-signaling cars, houses, and yards, William sees these pursuits as burdens that would drain his resources rather than as worthwhile priorities. Like many other interviewees, William speaks in depth about centering experiences and relationships in his consumption decisions instead and avoiding anything that adds unnecessary stress or resource strain. He opts to walk and take public transportation everywhere to "keep it simple," explaining that having a car or even a bike would introduce "a lot of added headache that I'd rather not deal with."

Across these examples, we see interviewees identifying and prioritizing those areas of their lives that are most valuable to them while minimizing obligations that impose ongoing costs with little to no perceived benefit and that may even threaten that

which they most value. By re-centering their lives around these self-defined values, minimalist consumers are able to cultivate tangible, intangible (e.g., social connections, new experiences, time, psychological well-being) and liquid resources (e.g., financial security) while minimizing that which depletes these resources.

3.2.1.3 Values Inform Practice as Practice Informs Values

For most interviewees, minimalism is a significant deviation from how they previously consumed, a finding also reflected in the initial quantitative survey. Practically speaking, these changes typically arise through two foundational processes of minimalism: (1) decluttering and (2) changing consumption habits.

The process of decluttering, or ridding oneself of excess possessions, can be pursued concurrently with the process of self-inquiry, as one surveys their possessions and asks themselves questions like: “Do I use this? Why do I own this? Does this add value to my life? Does owning this benefit me more than it costs me?” The process of decluttering thereby feeds a greater understanding of oneself and one’s own values and behavior, while this greater understanding also further informs subsequent decluttering and consumption decisions. For example, in the process of surveying one’s possessions and decluttering the excessive, unnecessary, or unvalued, one might be forced to face that fact that they do not host the regular (or even occasional) dinner parties that they have imagined themselves hosting. This realization can lead to an entire Diderot unity (that is, a group of objects that are culturally complementary, in this case, all of the

accoutrements that go along with hosting a dinner party, from cookware, serveware, glassware, dinnerware, flatware, linens, and décor; McCracken, 1988) being relinquished in favor of having a streamlined kitchen optimized for everyday meals. This decision could also lead to a resolution to save the time and money that might typically be spent shopping for high-end table settings or décor on going out to a restaurant with friends instead.

Decluttering is at once a practical project of shedding excess belongings, a practice of shaping one's external environment in accordance with internal values, and an exercise that prompts further inquiry, construction, and clarification of one's values. Grant, a millennial who currently works for one of the world's largest tech companies after spending much of his working life as an entrepreneur, shares that getting rid of things was "surprisingly not" difficult, and that he had imagined the process would be "much harder" before he began decluttering. In describing the experience of asking himself why he had bought so many of his possessions, he explains, "that alone was a mind and eye-opening mental process to go through because I really couldn't find a good answer for it." In paring down the excess, he found that "it felt like I was getting rid of baggage immediately. The emotional attachment I thought I had quickly went away when I realized it was consuming so much of my time and so much of my mental capacity and that it hasn't added anything into my life to make my life better in any sort of way. Once I could come to my own conclusion of that, it was a relief to get rid of it.

Every time I did it, I just felt better and better almost immediately. It was very euphoric." Other respondents similarly describe the decluttering process as providing an immediate source of relief and gratification; Julie shares that she does not find it difficult to let go of things, even things that might be considered sentimental, but that "it has always felt enlightening and empowering to get rid of something that I felt was of no purpose or no use. Almost like a weight was lifted, it always felt like a space opened up." Others described the process as "therapeutic," "so cathartic," and "like losing weight or taking a breath of fresh air." When Gianna began her process of decluttering, she describes it as a process of "let[ting] go of stuff that was really weighing me down. Physical stuff, mental stuff," and "when I really started to weed things out is when I started to think, 'I feel better, I feel more in control.'" After completing a cycle of decluttering, many describe a sustained appreciation for the newfound space and emptiness and the increased ease and calm they experience as a result of having less clutter.

The decluttering process often serves as an important beginning to the adoption of minimalism as it encourages further clarity and refinement of a person's values and lived experience, prompts honesty about the roles their possessions play (or don't play) in their lives, and can generate immediate and long-term positive affect, which can promote further engagement with minimalist practices and the process of introspection and change. In addition to decluttering what one already owns, new minimalists must

also survey and update their consumption habits in order to consume in a way that is value-driven and resource-building rather than resource-depleting. Practically speaking, this often means reducing impulse buys, avoiding temptations, restoring friction in the shopping experience, and taking opportunities for access without ownership (e.g., through borrowing or renting, making use of sharing economy platforms, or relying on public or digital goods). More broadly speaking, it means prioritizing the investment of one's resources into that which one has determined most valuable, such as experiences and relationships over things or quality over quantity. Tommy notes that for "most of the things that I purchase, I really spend a lot of time thinking about how it's going to enrich my life, and if it's going to last, if it's quality." This can require consumers to be slower in their decision-making processes, to be more conscious and mindful of the long-term costs and benefits of their decisions, and to keep up an ongoing process of evaluating one's consumption. In questioning her consumption behavior, Sarah recognized that even when her intentions were aligned with her values, her forecasts were not always accurate: "My reasons for buying a lot of the things were that I thought it would make life easier. I've learned, as most people do in minimalism, is that the stuff does not make it easier. Less stuff makes it easier." Like many minimalists, Sarah has embraced the maxim that less is more.

Many interviewees described a shift in their consumption that involved raising the bar for what they opt to consume. This can mean only keeping and buying items that

are loved, frequently used, or otherwise necessary and opting for quality over quantity. Samantha, an early 20's chemist in Utah, says that, "people come into our home and see very high-quality items, and go, 'No, you guys aren't minimalists. Look at all this nice stuff.' But it's that we don't buy all the extra stuff, so we can afford to get stuff that lasts, get stuff that's high quality." She also describes the changes she has made to her wardrobe since becoming a minimalist. "I used to have 30 dresses. I had just so many clothes that there was no chance of me wearing," she says. She has since significantly reduced the amount of clothing she owns (and the storage it requires), sharing that she now only owns clothes that are "comfortable, that I love. That's probably the best part of it is that there isn't anything that I'm holding onto that I wouldn't wear." With respect to clothes shopping, she only goes to clothing sections of stores if she has decided to add something specific to her wardrobe. When clothes shopping, she will only move ahead with a purchase if she can't find a flaw with the item. "I have to like the color, I have to like the design, all of those things. If I like everything about it except for the color, I don't get it. There's so many things in this world, I'm going to be able to find something that I like everything about." By raising the bar, Samantha cultivates a wardrobe consisting only of loved, comfortable items. Daniela refers to this approach of raising her standards for consumption as a process of "curating," describing minimalism as "curating my life instead of doing it on an impulse."

Because this approach focuses not on reducing consumption but on elevating it, all interviewees reported that practicing minimalism did not make them feel deprived, but often had the opposite effect – instead, they feel more appreciation and gratitude for what they have and expressed a greater sense of abundance and recognition that they have everything they need and that what is most important to them is accessible to them. From this perspective, the decision to opt out of certain consumption behaviors in order to stick to one’s goal of minimalism could be characterized as an empowered refusal (Patrick and Hagtvedt, 2012), wherein minimalists are not opting out of excess consumption through the lens of deprivation or scarcity (e.g., “I can’t afford this,” “I don’t have time for this”) but through one of empowerment and abundance (e.g., “I don’t need this,” “That isn’t valuable to me”). Such a perspective has been shown to engender feelings of empowerment and increased adherence to actions in accordance with one’s values (Patrick and Hagtvedt, 2012).

To further the goal of raising the bar for consumption and ensuring a practice that is resource-building rather than resource-depleting, many minimalists describe evaluating possible consumption decisions over a longer time horizon and include both costs and benefits over this horizon. This includes the consideration of both present and future monetary costs and non-monetary costs, such as the potential for buyer’s remorse, opportunity cost, and the costs of storage, cleaning, maintenance, moving, and

disposal. Minimalists are not just asking themselves the question, “do I want this now?” but “will this be valuable to me in the long-run?”

For consumption decisions big and small, William says that he tries to consider the “cost benefit analysis” of each individual purchase and question the “actual benefit and value you get out of it.” Whether it is a \$6 coffee at Starbucks (which he deems not worth it) or a \$3,000 vacation (which he deems worth it), William finds that questioning the long-term value is worth applying to each purchase decision, recognizing that even small costs (monetary and otherwise) add up over the long term. With respect to often neglected costs, William talks in detail about the various costs that influence his decisions – to include the unnecessary expense of a car when he can walk to work, the environmental and ethical impacts of updating his clothing or electronics when they are still in good condition, or the “headache” of having to worry about a bike being stolen, where he is going to park his car, when he needs to move it for street cleaning, and what he’ll need to do if it breaks down. Freedom from having to deal with these things provides its own value to William, and ultimately, he often decides that maintaining the typical consumption practices he observes others engaging in is not worth the costs to him over the long-term. This is not to say that he does not partake in any consumption that is immediately enjoyable or is always foregoing the short-term for the long-term. William says that spending money on experiences and relationships is worth it to him, and that he will spend money going out with friends, finding a “happy middle ground”

between the costs of a meal out and the value of spending time with others, seeing this as an expense that provides both short- and long-term value.

In addition to William's, many interviews reflected shifts in consumption decisions towards a greater focus on the long-term, with an increased awareness of the costs associated with their decisions. Jill, an early 60s woman who drastically simplified her previously high-consumption lifestyle, shares that adopting minimalism has made her "more aware that when I spend money on something, that it's not just that initial purchase," but the subsequent costs of upkeep and maintenance. Previously, she had lived in a 4,500 square foot home with her husband, which included a movie theatre, closets full of clothes, and a garage for their three cars. They had "all of the electronic toys that you could ever want" and frequently threw themed parties for which she would buy hundreds of dollars worth of decorations. Since then, they have downsized to a house less than half the size and "got rid of all the rooms full of knickknacks and furniture and dishes." Now, in their smaller house that she describes as "quiet and simple and open," Jill has become much more aware when making purchase decisions that "anything that I buy, there is a bigger cost to it. Particularly if it's an electronic or something that requires maintenance...Even if I purchase something, how am I going to get rid of it in a responsible way?" Jill's question of responsibility, one also shared by several other interviewees, highlights that minimalists are not only thinking about the long-term costs that they personally incur via their consumption behavior, but that they

often weigh the broader environmental, economic, and ethical impacts of their consumption decisions as well.

The intentional inquiry into what one most values and whether one's consumption behavior is in line with those values seems to encourage such a shift towards a long-term focus. Many interviewees share long-term goals that are only made accessible to them through their practice of minimalism, such as reducing participation in the traditional workforce, pursuing self-employment or entrepreneurial ventures, eliminating debt, and/or retiring significantly earlier than would otherwise be possible. Many of these goals are not seen as ends in themselves, but as means for being able to spend more time focused on important relationships, pursuing new experiences such as travel, or as a means of attaining greater material and psychological freedom and security. In discussing his goal of achieving financial independence and retiring early, Toby explains that he and his wife "save about half of our income and it's all because of minimalism, frugal living, and automating all of our savings...I don't think I even would've been open to the idea of that had it not been for minimalism." He says that "maybe in 10 or 15 years I might not even have to be a teacher to actually pay the bills" and hopes at that point to "move to a warmer climate where we can be outside more."

The long-term perspective of minimalist consumers was not only focused on creating alternative futures, but on how they are going to feel about the choices they've made when looking back on their lives. Sarah, in talking about how working less and

buying less has allowed her to invest her time and resources in “the things that really matter,” shares her motivation to avoid “waking up one day regretting that you never took that camping trip or took that big vacation with your kids when they were little and now they’re growing up.” Others consider the view from their deathbed, with Tommy pointing out that “when we die, none of this stuff is coming with us” and explaining that he doesn’t want to die wishing that he had spent more time with loved ones or pursuing experiences rather than spending his money on a newer car.

3.2.1.4 Summary

Practicing minimalism involves an ongoing and iterative process of actively refining one’s values and consumption practices. The processing of refining values drives subsequent shifts in consumption behavior (as seen in the processes of decluttering and changing one’s consumption habits), while ongoing analysis of one’s consumption practices can further inform one’s values. By actively shifting consumption towards those practices that maximize value and minimize burdens, consumers are able to cultivate tangible and intangible resources rather than obligations that impose ongoing costs with little to no benefit. As a result, minimalism can be conceptualized as a mode of consumption that is value-driven and resource-building. By investing one’s time, money, attention, energy, and space into that which one most values and withdrawing it from that which is not valued, a person is able to build up important resources such as psychological well-being, strong social connections, financial security,

and a clear sense of identity while being relieved of consumption practices that deplete resources, such as owning excessive or burdensome possessions, living in high-maintenance or overly expensive housing, or using busyness to signal social status (e.g., see Bellezza, Paharia, and Keinan, 2017). Cultivating a practice of minimalism involves not only a circumscribed period of transition but an ongoing process of revising and negotiating one's identity, values, and personal narratives and thus an ongoing process of revising one's consumption practices and habits. As such, each individual's practice of minimalism is unique and is expected to evolve across the lifespan as values and priorities shift (e.g., differing when single vs. married with children vs. retired with an empty nest).

In their assessments of value, minimalists recognize that both costs and benefits – monetary and non-monetary – are inherent in every consumption decision across both the short- and long-term. These costs and benefits can include financial, social, emotional, cognitive, time, energy, storage, and opportunity impacts, among others. However, these costs and benefits are often neglected or misestimated (e.g., see Frederick, Novemsky, Wang, and Dhar, 2009; Spiller, 2011) and are often only considered over a brief time horizon (e.g., the immediate future). Rather than perceiving consumption possibilities as having some range of positive value from 0 to X , minimalists recognize that the value of a given consumption decision ranges from $-X$ to X ; that is, that something can not only fail to add sufficient value to one's life, but can

actually subtract from it. Considering the cost vs. benefit tradeoff of one's consumption investments in accordance with one's values and doing so over longer time horizons facilitates the conservation of resource slack and the prioritization of consumption decisions that provide positive rather than negative returns. This facilitates higher returns on the investment of resources across a variety of domains or, said differently, allows minimalists to do more with less.

3.2.2 What Motivates Consumers to Adopt Minimalism?

While some minimalists adopt such a consumption orientation early in life, most minimalists previously lived more consumerist lifestyles. Why, and when, do consumers choose to adopt minimalism?

3.2.2.1 Adoption at Significant Life Transitions

As previously discussed (see section 3.2.1.1-2), movement towards the adoption of a minimalist lifestyle often starts with the questioning of the narratives one is living by and the values one is prioritizing. This may be particularly common during life transitions, as many minimalists interviewed described their adoption of minimalism as taking place in the midst of some larger life transition that prompted practical questions of resource management and/or existential and introspective questions around value, purpose, and identity. Whether practical, existential, or both, such points of transition may be the easiest points for consumers to adopt minimalism as their lives, values, and identities are actively undergoing significant change and/or clarification. A wide range

of life transitions – from the exciting to the traumatic and the expanding to the limiting – were described by interviewees as the flash points for intentional and sweeping reform of their consumption practices. Moving was a common impetus for big shifts in lifestyle (cited by 7 interviewees), likely because it materially incentivizes the shedding of excess possessions perhaps more than any other event and often introduces significant changes in lifestyle or daily routines. This seems particularly true when moving long distance, when the makeup of a household shifts significantly (e.g., when combining households with a partner, welcoming new additions to the family, following a breakup or divorce, or adult children have left home), or when significantly downsizing one’s living space. For example, when Andrew and his wife moved several states away from a 1600 square foot house with a basement to one with 800 square feet with no basement, they significantly pared down their belongings by only taking with them “the best stuff that we absolutely need.” For Lauren, she describes her move as “the line in the sand” that motivated her to finally adopt a minimalist lifestyle that she had felt drawn to for several years. Other examples of the life transitions discussed by interviewees included: becoming a parent (3), divorce (3), marriage (2), breakup (1), bereavement (1), experiencing significant health issues (5), job or career change (5), loss of job or income(1), graduating college (1), and incarceration and subsequent release (1).

As documented by Holmes and Rahe (1967), the impact of a given life event is a function of the degree to which it generates change in one’s life, regardless of whether

that change is positive or negative. Therefore, whether it is the result of having a baby, moving, or developing significant medical conditions, these changes can impose great burdens on social, emotional, and financial resources and may demand or inspire significant reallocations of how such resources are being used. In addition to practical concerns of resource allocation, many find that experiencing such changes either spontaneously clarified their values or motivated them to give greater priority to newly adopted values. For example, Grant shares that some of his minimalist practices were motivated by a desire to be more present for his then-6-month-old daughter and “experience all the things that she's experiencing.” Beyond more traditional transitions, others cited experiences that significantly altered their lives and worldviews as the impetus for their adoption of minimalism, such as a months-long hiking trip or experiencing a traumatic event.

Jason, who hiked the Appalachian Trail before moving cross country for his wife's career, describes the impact of carrying everything he needed for his four-and-a-half month trip on his back, which required a highly accurate assessment of what was necessary and what wasn't and a thoughtfully optimized system of organization. He found that this experience “changed me as a person” and inspired him to continue living with a goal to streamline his lifestyle and drop the weight of whatever was not adding value to his life. He describes how his cross-country move that followed shortly thereafter put him in the position of having to physically handle and “confront” each

one of his possessions, which gave him the opportunity, as he put it, to “aggressively survey” everything that he owned and make decisions about what was actually worth keeping in his life and what was not, ultimately allowing for a “fresh start.”

In a more shattering experience, Catherine, a single professional in her early 30s, describes how a violent home burglary ultimately led her to pursue minimalism as a way to support the post-traumatic recovery process that followed and restructure her life to be more aligned with her values. She shares that “the biggest lesson from that home invasion was that every minute that I have on this earth is nonrenewable. I only have one shot at everything.” In light of this realization, she has become more intentional about how she spends her time and seeks to prioritize that which is most important to her, like experiences “with people that I like in places that I enjoy” and other less tangible things, such as mindfulness, meditation, and cultivating a calm mind. She is now more reluctant to “waste” her time and money on things that did not support these more valuable pursuits.

Other interviewees who shared about how minimalism has helped them cope with difficult or traumatic experiences report that shedding those possessions that remind them of those painful experiences or periods of their life helps them to move forward and experience fewer symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Even if it is just a basic shirt that she remembers buying or wearing during a traumatic period of her life, Naima reports that “getting rid of the things tied to those bad years helped me get rid of

all the shame.” Discarding possessions that are etched with negative memories may serve not only as a powerful symbolic ritual but should reduce implicit and explicit memory activation of traumatic experiences, which may reduce symptom severity for those who suffer from post-traumatic stress (e.g., see Elzinga, et al., 2003; Gola et al., 2012; Scrimin, et al., 2011). This practice was shared not only by those who had experienced trauma, but also those who were moving on from other painful or stressful experiences. Scott, a software developer from Australia currently living in California, says that he got rid of everything related to his former relationship after getting divorced. Getting rid of those things a couple of months after the divorce was finalized helped him to internalize the fact that “it’s over,” he says. He describes parting with those possessions as difficult, but good for him, “like ripping off a band-aid,” and that doing so was a “big step” in moving forward emotionally and practically.

3.2.2.2 Seeking Stress Reduction

Transitions, whether welcome or otherwise, are typically stressful (see Holmes and Rahe, 1967), while unsustainable levels of stress may drive or require significant life changes. Reflected in both the initial quantitative survey and in-depth interviews, most minimalists are motivated by a desire to reduce their stress and increase their psychological well-being. In describing this reasoning more in-depth, they often report lives in which they find themselves feeling overwhelmed and unable to keep up with the demands imposed by their bills, possessions, homes, relationships, jobs, schedules,

and electronic devices. They may feel constantly pulled by notifications, advertising, and internet content algorithms; running behind schedule and over budget; and feeling perpetually on the brink of burn out with little time, energy, or attention span for that which ostensibly matters the most to them. Sarah recognizes that, despite her best efforts, her consumption strategies were only adding to the demands she experienced. “My reasons for buying a lot of the things were that I thought it would make life easier,” she explains, but “I’ve learned, as most people do in minimalism, is that the stuff does not make it easier. Less stuff makes it easier.”

Others sought material success as a means of tempering the challenges of their lives, but even when successful, found that they were still experiencing a sense of emptiness, dissatisfaction, or meaninglessness, wondering if this is all there is to life and why they don’t feel fulfilled. Emma describes feeling “a big emptiness, hollowness, void...and it became clear to me that everything that I had been pursuing to get myself to this point was not helping.” Others report feeling remorse or regret that they don’t spend time on the hobbies they used to value or have little time for their families. The building stress or ennui of such a lifestyle can lead people to begin questioning how they’re living and to seek alternative life architectures, as discussed in section 3.2.1. Others continue to carry this unease until some breaking point or life transition is reached and they are able or even forced to rethink the ways they’re living.

Noah, a mid-30s graphic designer and father of two, describes his consumption before adopting minimalism as “a very typical American household – we bought a house, had a mortgage, bought two new cars, had car payments, and had a good amount of credit card debt. I was just thinking that’s normal and that’s what everyone does and that’s what you do.” He says that he viewed credit as something that would allow him to buy new things and that, in turn, he would just work more and earn more to pay off the debt they took on. When he and his wife both encountered health issues and amassed large medical bills, this way of living became increasingly unsustainable. “We got to a point with the consumer debt and the medical bills and car payments and everything where it was just a big strain on our relationship, a big strain financially. I felt shackled to work – I had to work not only my full-time job, but I had to do a lot of freelance work to pay for everything.” Having two children further served to inspire Noah to alter his consumption behavior in order to get out from under their growing debts, reduce time spent at work in favor of time with his family, and manage the stress that compounded the challenges he and his wife were facing. Ultimately, his adoption of minimalism led him to move from Silicon Valley to a more affordable city in the southwest that would allow for greater financial security and a more manageable work schedule. As a result, he says his stress levels have decreased from a “10 or 11 out of 10” to a “2 or a 1.”

3.2.2.3 Escaping the Cycle of Status-Driven Consumption

For many minimalists, the deliberate questioning of what one truly values leads them to eschew status-driven consumption and consumerist behavior, coming to view such pursuits as resource-depleting rather than resource-building. Mark, a late 30's digital nomad and CEO of two technology startups, describes attempts to purchase status through material goods as a "treadmill" which requires ever larger cars, houses, and more expensive apparel. "Even if you buy enough to be seen as in the next strata, okay, you're upgraded, well you can just start comparing yourself to new people that have even greater consumption habits. So, the idea that you're going to appear richer and be happier I think is a total fallacy." Mark perceives the pursuit of chasing a better life through status-driven consumption as not only costly but futile, and echoes earlier sentiments that "life satisfaction is going to come more out of experiences you have and the things you pay attention to than out of the things you buy and own." Sharing similar attitudes, many interviewees describe a preference for clothing without logos or visible brand names and goods that are valued primarily for their ability to fulfill their purpose rather than to signal status.

In investigating the drivers of his consumption decisions before he adopted minimalism, Noah describes a strong desire to fit in. Living and working with highly successful people in Silicon Valley, he says that he "wanted to wear the shoes they wore, I wanted to wear the jackets they wore, I wanted to have the same tech gadgets they

bought” so he could fit in. Much of his consumption was focused on “what does everyone else have, what’s cool right now, what are my friends doing or watching or wearing.” He describes many of the things he purchased as “completely useless” and not having added value to his life beyond brief novelty and service as a status symbol. Noah’s previous mindset highlights what are perhaps the most common and fundamental drivers of consumer behavior – a desire to fit in and a desire to signal one’s status to others (e.g., see Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Mead et al., 2011). As humans are social and affiliative by nature (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), it is adaptive and valuable to consume in such a way that will facilitate social belonging and even status. However, while these inherent drives can be adaptive, that does not guarantee that they lead us to make optimal decisions with respect to our well-being. Many interviewees found themselves coming to the realization that they were trying to fit in with people they didn’t care to fit in with or trying to achieve some kind of status that was not actually valuable or meaningful to them and instead threatened more valued resources. For Noah, his attempts to keep up with the consumption of his peers in Silicon Valley came at the cost of his health and financial well-being, with no evidence to suggest that they strengthened his social relationships. Instead, they put strain on the most important relationships in his life. Upon realizing this, Noah shifted his consumption habits to more intentionally align with his values and well-being, social and otherwise.

While both Mark and Noah's examples illustrate more implicit social pressures of how one should consume to fit in, Naima presents a case of someone who has eschewed more explicit expectations of consumption within her community so that she can prioritize values that are more important to her. Naima is a late 30s attorney in D.C., taking time away from work to focus on her young children. In sharing how her experiences immigrating from South Asia have shaped her views on consumption, she explains that her family was wealthy in Pakistan, but when they came to the U.S. while Naima was in elementary school, her mother had to retrain as a physician and her father managed a convenience store. As a result, they lived near the poverty line until Naima was in college. She describes how, when they moved from Pakistan to the U.S., her parents brought nearly a dozen suitcase of traditional dresses, wedding wear, and dinner party wear, which Naima describes as "very frivolous things." Today, her mother still owns an expansive Pakistani wardrobe, custom-made from beautiful fabric, which she has collected over several decades. In referring to her mother's wardrobe, she says that a lot of money was spent on it "that could have been better spent on books or experiences." But, "there's a social element to being a Pakistani or an Indian in America where you grow up going to big dinner parties and it's pretty common you want to get invited. You have to wear certain clothes." She describes the level of food and dress as what you might expect at a wedding, explaining that "there's a lot of effort and a lot of time spent just for a Saturday evening dinner." Despite this common practice in her

family and diaspora, Naima finds the idea of adhering to such conventions “emotionally exhausting” and such events as having “an element of insincerity and lots of competition.” The elaborate food and dress expected at these events “don’t really add anything of value when it comes to socializing,” she concludes. If she opted to participate in these events, it would mean less time to take her daughter to the pool and explains that she couldn’t spend her Saturdays “just reading a book or enjoying the trees in our yard in the house that we pay a lot of money for.” Fitting into these dinner parties – as valuable a source of community, belonging, and cultural significance they might be to some – are not worth the effort and social and emotional cost to her. Like Mark and Noah, she also opts out of many trends she sees adopted by her peers in D.C., such as Louis Vuitton bags or shoes that “everybody’s wearing all of the sudden.” For her, “being in the mainstream” by owning these things is not worth as much to her as a “mortgage payment or my kid’s preschool payment for three months,” nor the effort and financial insecurity it would introduce.

For those interviewed, the pursuit of consumption driven by one’s own values necessitated a shift away from consumption driven by status or social competition. While consumption can be used to foster affiliation, when it is driven by status-seeking rather than value-seeking behavior, it can threaten rather than build valued resources, as most status-driven consumption, even if dictated by social values, is often based more on exclusion and establishing superiority than on affiliation or authentic connection.

Instead of cooperative, this approach to consumption can become competitive, by seeking to establish oneself as higher status within the social landscape. As Garcia, Weaver, and Chen (2018) have found, attempts to signal status can backfire as a means for establishing social connections. In addition, even when used for arguably more affiliative purposes, the costs of affiliative consumption may not outweigh the benefits, as Naima found. Thus, when certain types of consumption are required for acceptance in certain social circles, consumers must decide what is more valuable to them – consuming to fit in or consuming in accordance with one’s values, even at the cost of fitting in? By prioritizing consumption behaviors that are driven by internal rather than external values – whether that means going along with the crowd or not – and resource building rather than resource depleting, minimalists are able to maximize that which is most valuable to them.

3.2.2.4 Anti-Consumerism

Recognizing the emptiness of status and displays of status comes part and parcel with being critical of consumerism, with nearly all interviewees expressing some degree of anti-consumerist sentiment. (Note that anti-consumerism is not the same as anti-consumption.) Many blame businesses for fueling rampant consumerism and engaging in manipulative, destructive, and exploitative practices that push us to “consume, consume, consume,” as William put it. Interviewees also used words like “predatory” or “scam” to describe certain mainstays of American consumerism, such as diamond

engagement rings, the wedding industry, branded clothing, and Black Friday sales.

“We’re getting so completely duped,” Gianna says, and “it’s all about money.” Those interviewed are resistant to and vigilant about falling prey to the powerful and effective lures of sales, advertising, and branding, expressing regrets, as Sarah put it, that she didn’t figure out sooner “how susceptible I was.” She believes that we have “become victims of our own success,” taking our desires to have more and more things “cheaper and faster” too far and at the expense of our personal and environmental well-being.

Hannah describes her practice of minimalism, and what she sees as rising popularity of minimalism among younger generations, as an “act of rebellion” against what’s expected and against what other people “say that you should need and want.” She says that practicing minimalism is a way of saying to society, “I’ll show you, I don’t need all these things...I have everything I need right here.” She explains that consumerism only increases pollution, landfill mass, and consumer debt, while making people miserable, but that minimalism offers her a better and happier path. To reduce the pull of consumerist influences, many report avoiding advertising altogether (which they describe feeling constantly “bombarded” by) or taking an analytical perspective towards the ads they see, seeking to understand the psychology at work behind it (e.g., trying to identify “all of the tricks they’re trying to use,” says Annie). Even worse is targeted advertising, which several people described as “invasive,” “off-putting,” or “unsettling.” However, while consciously resistant, many interviewed expressed awareness that

despite being informed, they continue to be vulnerable to the influences of marketing, whether through explicit advertisements or more covert channels such as product placement.

3.2.2.5 Expanding Sources of Motivation

While nearly all minimalists interviewed (and the vast majority of those surveyed) reported that they primarily adopted minimalism for self-interested reasons (most commonly, to reduce stress and increase psychological well-being), many also reported that as they built up greater resources to support their own well-being and security, their motivations expanded to include more outwardly-focused sources of motivation as well. These outwardly-focused sources of motivation included a desire to reduce environmental impacts (e.g., by reducing the use of environmentally-unfriendly transportation, products, and companies, and buying used, renting, or borrowing when possible) and to restrict consumption of goods and services that do not meet their ethical standards (e.g., by seeking out options that are fair trade, free range, organic, cruelty free, and/or that ensure humane labor practices).

Andrew, a mid-30s neuroscientist who works in research in the Pacific Northwest, adopted minimalism when he and his wife moved cross-country to a much smaller living space and, shortly thereafter, added two new members to their family. Juggling the new responsibilities and influx of belongings that comes with having two young children, minimalism allowed him to reduce the myriad demands on his time,

attention, and finances. And as a result of adopting minimalism as a lifestyle, Andrew became much more aware of how much material waste is produced by typical consumption habits. He describes how, despite selling and donating everything they could, truckloads of possessions from his late grandmother's house had to be taken to the dump, prompting him to think of how many Americans own houses full of stuff that will end up in a landfill. Andrew points out that the easiest way to reduce your carbon footprint and your waste is to simply not consume so much. He brings up the three Rs of sustainability – reduce, reuse, recycle – noting that the first, most important step is to reduce one's consumption; that recycling cardboard packaging is not enough. "If you actually truly care about the environment, just don't buy so much stuff," he says. This reduced environmental impact, along with reduced stress and increased financial security, are among the most important benefits of practicing minimalism for Andrew.

In addition to considering environmental impacts and seeking more sustainable consumption choices, many minimalists discussed the influence of other ethical concerns on their consumption decisions, such as whether a company relies on exploitative, dangerous, or otherwise harmful practices. Heather shares that she realized she was "doing a lot of bad in the world and I didn't even realize it" after learning about the exploitation of people in impoverished regions, who work in dangerous conditions for extremely low wages, by the fashion and textile industry and the cruelty that animals endure in many animal product industries. Several interviewees mentioned being more

willing to spend money on environmentally sustainable, fair-trade, or cruelty-free options. Levi sees his choices about what he spends money on to be the most important vote he casts, stating that he considers buying something to be a form of voting and an opportunity to choose what kind of businesses to empower. He is particularly mindful of this when making a large purchase. If buying in a sustainable or ethical way is not available, many minimalists seek ways to buy used items or borrow from others. Sarah, who became much more interested in practicing sustainable and ethical consumption several years into her practice of minimalism, finds that borrowing from and lending to others not only reduces her environmental impacts but saves her money and fosters connections within her community.

This pattern of integrating additional prosocial considerations into one's practice of minimalism can be thought of as a Maslowian expansion of motivation – as one's own basic needs are met, people have greater capacity to invest in higher order goals such as having a positive impact on the world. Adopting additional sources of motivation should further bolster the continued practice of minimalism and may provide an additional mechanism for positive reinforcement (e.g., via the "warm glow" from contributing to the common good; Kahneman and Knetsch, 1992; Nunes and Schokkaert, 2003; Ritov and Kahneman, 1997).

3.2.2.6 Summary

In many cases, a significant life transition – happy, neutral, or tragic – serves as the impetus for questioning the narratives one lives by, seemingly because such transitions can be highly stressful while also prompting clarification of or a shift in values and identity. Transition also practically encourages change, by typically requiring some degree of habit interruption and/or introducing new friction or incentives around consumption decisions. While consumers most often adopt minimalism out of a desire for greater psychological well-being and reduced stress, as these personal goals are attained, minimalists often report developing additional and more outwardly focused sources of motivation, resulting in increasingly environmentally or ethically responsible consumption behavior.

3.3 Perceived Impacts of Practicing Minimalism

By shifting consumption to be value-driven and resource-building, practicing minimalism can cultivate impacts across a wide variety of domains, including psychological, financial, and social, among others. This section will cover the positive and negative impacts that minimalists report experiencing as a result of practicing minimalism.

3.3.1 Benefits

3.3.1.1 Psychological

Consistent with the commonly reported motivations for pursuing minimalism, many interviewees emphasized a variety of positive psychological impacts that they perceived to be a result of their minimalist consumption practice. Most commonly, minimalists talked about experiencing less stress and feeling a greater sense of freedom and ease. Also common were the experiences of knowing oneself more fully, having more power and control over one's life, being less distracted, and having a greater sense of clarity and equanimity. Beyond these more widespread benefits, several interviewees also discussed how minimalism helped them to manage more serious mental health conditions, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, bipolar disorder, level 1 autism, and recovery from trauma, abuse, psychosis, and grief.

Some psychological benefits seemed to be a result of changes in the cognitive demands imposed by one's consumption behavior. As Ben put it, "my mind is uncluttered, and I can think more clearly, and I can focus." Many interviewees discussed experiencing fewer distractions in their lives as a result of practicing minimalism, whether these were intrusive distractors such as cell phone notifications that they had opted to reduce and online advertisements that they had taken measures to block or passive distractions such as errands, chores, or needing to manage other tasks that could be eliminated by altering one's consumption. As a result of a shift towards more minimalist consumption, interviewees describe less cognitive load in their day-to-day

lives. As Mark put it, his practice of minimalism means that there are “a lot of things I don't have to think about and never cross my mind and don't waste any mental energy” as compared to a life of more standard consumer behavior. “The less inconveniences in my life, the better,” as Arlo puts it, describing his preference to own fewer things that he then has to manage.

Reduced cognitive load was sought in a variety of domains. One common example was the simplification of one's wardrobe (described earlier by Samantha), which simplified decision-making about what to wear each day (an approach famously adopted by a number of high-status individuals such as Barack Obama, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg). Others reduced cognitive demands by limiting the amount of unnecessary information that they consume (e.g., by reducing exposure to media or, in Mark's case, the number of emails his employees include him on) or streamlining task management (like Jason, who has standardized the policies and operations of the 12 schools he helps professionally manage).

Easier decision-making regarding consumption also reduced demands on cognition. Getting clear about values and priorities and raising the bar for consumption reduces the cognitive load imposed by consumption decisions as consideration sets become smaller and thus simpler. For example, if I have already decided that I have enough items of furniture, home décor, clothing, shoes, or electronic gadgets, this reduces or even eliminates the set of goods that I might consider purchasing, even if

they are available or marketed to me, thereby reducing cognitive demands of consideration (as well as saving time and reducing spending). Because minimalists have cultivated a mindset of abundance (vs. scarcity) and generally approach their consumption decisions with increased intentionality, they are less prone to navigating the world as if they are on a “constant quest,” as Emma put it, to find a consumable solution for their needs and desires.

Many interviewees describe feeling a greater sense of mental calmness, ease, and clarity and a reduction in stress levels as a result of practicing minimalism. Kevin describes his house as being simple, clean, and clear of clutter, which for him, “leads to peace of mind” and a sense of calm. Levi says that “when you get down to the barebones, to the stuff that actually matters and that’s all you have,” it makes life easier and more gratifying. For Julie, the mental clarity that she experiences as a result of living in an orderly home is the most important benefit she experiences from practicing minimalism. This pattern of observations is consistent with previous work showing that clutter at home is associated with higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol (Saxbe and Repetti, 2009), which can increase anxiety and irritability, impair memory and concentration, and have many negative physiological effects such as decreased immune system, sleep disruptions, digestive problems, and hypertension. Furthermore, stress as a result of clutter has been found to lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms (Vartanian, Kernan, and Wansink, 2016). This stress can be compounded when the amount of clutter interferes with activities of daily life, such as when one has regular difficulty finding the

things they need, must effortfully unpack storage spaces such as closets to retrieve a needed item, or when a garage is too full of things to use for parking one's car. Andrew describes how, after having two kids, he found that they had "too much stuff" in the house and that it was often a "chaotic" experience to get the diaper bag packed and make sure he had everything he needed to take with him to work. Minimalism allowed him to "streamline" his life more, which he reports has been "a big stress reducer." Jason describes how "having tons of clutter and stuff around your house can compound stress" and intensify anxiety stemming from other domains, such as demands at work. Having a clean and organized home instead allows him to feel more in control and on top of things, even in the face of challenges. Christopher agrees that, "when you come home and it's messy or there's junk everywhere, it's stressful."

Emotionally, interviewees described a number of changes in the way they felt after implementing minimalism. Most commonly discussed – even more than stress reduction – was a greater sense of freedom. This freedom came from a number of different sources, such as feeling relieved of pressures to match the consumption of others, having geographic mobility and financial security, and generally, having the freedom to focus on what's most important with fewer distractions and responsibilities. Linda says that practicing minimalism has allowed her to "let go of the pressure of everything, having to have the best house, best clothes, the best jewelry, living up to that and having the best of everything like your friends have." Christopher similarly

describes the freedom of not having to “keep up with the Joneses” and “not participating in the consumer culture, all that marketing and having people tell you what to do. And just having more freedom to do what I really want to do.” Levi describes a “freedom knowing that I can drop everything and pursue whatever the next thing would be that came up in my life. If something really good came along, I could just throw stuff in the back of my truck and go.” Mark, who travels the world living out of a single suitcase, says that having so few possessions “makes it easier to pursue what’s most important to me because there’s less distraction, there’s less on my mind, there’s less time that I need to deal with acquiring and maintaining possessions so I have more freedom to pursue the things that really matter to me.”

Others found that minimalism reduced negative emotions, such as guilt about one’s consumption behavior, feelings of helplessness or powerlessness, and grief, regret, or anger triggered by possessions associated with negative memories. As a result of shifting her consumption behavior, Samantha shares that “minimalism really helps me feel at ease and relieves the guilt from buying things that could be harmful to the environment or consuming things that could harmful.” Others found relief from getting rid of possessions that caused them guilt because they had spent too much money on them, such as a watch or a leather jacket, or did not use them, such as a treadmill or a guitar. Gianna describes how her practice of minimalism, especially decluttering, helped support her during an emotionally trying period of fertility treatments by providing her

a way to feel more in control when things felt overwhelming and out of her control. She says that when she feels overwhelmed by what's going on in her life, she starts asking, "what is happening, what's too much? What can go? What needs to stay and what doesn't need to stay?" Focusing on what is within her control helps her to "stay steady" and "roll with the punches" when life otherwise feels chaotic and unmanageable.

As previously discussed (see section 3.2.2.1), dispensing of possessions that reminded interviewees of periods or relationships in their life that were painful to remember helped reduce the associated negative emotions. Sometimes these were seemingly benign objects, such as a cheese board – "how ridiculous is that?" says Emma, "but I associated it with a person and it was a negative association and I couldn't make the separation so I had to get rid of it." Even if such items in one's home don't automatically consciously activate the explicit memories that may be associated with them, and even if one is not consciously attending to the memory-laden item itself, implicit emotional memory associated with such possessions is likely to be activated on a nonconscious level and should be expected to contribute to one's emotional state (see Baars and Gage, 2010; LaBar and Cabeza, 2006). Therefore, removing those items that have negative implicit memory associations should have a positive impact on well-being.

3.3.1.2 Financial

After psychological benefits, increased financial security was reported as the most important benefit that minimalists experienced (which presumably also contributed to psychological well-being). For some, this was an intentional goal, whereas others found that as they changed their consumption to better align with what was most important and fulfilling to them, they naturally spent less money that they were then able to save for later goals such as travel, home-buying, or retirement. Grant argues that “once you realize you don't need to consume as much, you find that your financial situation, if it's good, gets better, or if it's not that great, it gets to where it needs to be.” With the savings that he is now building, he plans to move his family to Finland, where his wife is from, where they will purchase a small, efficient home outright, which will allow them “more freedom to do the work that we want to do and live the life that we want to live.” As also documented by Toby's example (see section 3.2.1.1), several interviewees either had plans to retire early or had already achieved financial independence through the savings that practicing minimalism had allowed them.

Others found a strong sense of security and freedom in having money instead of things. Samantha explains, “I see people around me who have to buy everything and then when an emergency comes or something that they really like, they don't have the money to do it. But we have the money to do what we want and we can buy anything that we decide to.” In this way, Samantha uses her money to buy freedom, flexibility,

and security. Ben says that practicing minimalism has allowed him to save up an emergency fund while still being able to travel to countries all over the world instead of amassing material possessions. He explains that in times of stress, “I don’t want to be strapped down by a bunch of stuff. I want the freedom and mobility if I need it. I’d rather have the cash. Cash solves a lot of problems.” As a result, he reports experiencing less stress knowing that he has an emergency fund built up. “Having a bunch of stuff piled up in your house doesn’t solve any problems. But some people feel a bizarre security in that. I don’t.” Instead, he explains, he feels security in having cash, a good health insurance plan, and a clear, undistracted mind.

3.3.1.3 Social

Several interviewees described positive impacts on their social relationships, often as a result of having more time to spend with them, making more of an intentional effort to spend time with them, and/or experiencing less stress or other distractions that kept them from being present during the time they did have to spend with their loved ones. For most interviewees, relationships with others were among their highest priorities in life. As a result, many reported feeling that they had stronger social connections in their lives as a result of practicing minimalism, which allows them to more highly prioritize investment in their relationships. Noah says that, overall, “it’s a pretty drastic change, if I take a look at where I’d be if I had continued my same lifestyle and worldview. I would be massively in debt and trying to find meaning from

inanimate objects and I would be focused a lot less on people and my family and relationships.” Christopher says that, due to his practice of minimalism, he has more time for the people in his life. At 53, he has “more friends than I’ve ever had because I have time to go hang out with them.” And because of the financial security he has built up by practicing minimalism, he was able to take a month and a half to spend with his mom when his dad passed away and is considering taking more time to spend with her. He recognizes that it’s investments like these – quality time spent with loved ones or having new experiences – that really add value to his life rather than working more or buying a newer TV. Heather shares that practicing minimalism helps with her anxiety and leads to her being less stressed, which in turn improves all of her relationships, especially her relationship with her husband.

There are also interviewees who opt to intentionally reduce the contact they have with those people that they feel ultimately create negative value in their lives – for example, people that they do not enjoy spending time with or that make them feel badly but who they previously felt some sense of obligation to or desire to please. By recognizing that these relationships are taking up valuable resources and are not actually valued themselves, minimalists are able to shift their time, energy, attention, and emotions to more rewarding relationships or endeavors.

3.3.1.4 Upward Spirals

Several interviewees described how practicing minimalism had far reaching effects throughout many domains of their lives, generating an upward spiral. Noah talks about how practicing minimalism has impacted his health for the better and allowed him to manage a serious health condition. He says that is in part due to the increase in financial security practicing minimalism has afforded him, which means he is no longer “staying up worrying about money” and experiences significantly less stress. He is now “living a more well-rounded life where I’m not working so hard, I’m not chasing all these material things and using my weekends to go to the mall to buy something, and spending the weekend clearing out and organizing everything that’s in my garage.” Having less stress also allows him to eat healthier, as he admits to being a “stress eater.” He sums up: “it’s this upward spiral where my health is better, finances are better, my relationships with my family, friends are better, I have more time for passion projects and pursuits that turn me on as a person and hopefully help the world also.” Several other interviewees described similar systemic and spiraling positive effects from reshaping their consumption habits and reducing their stress levels, allowing them to allocate time and energy to activities that pay dividends, such as exercise, reading, cooking, meditation, and time spent with close others.

3.3.1.5 Follow-up Survey Findings

To provide further documentation of the benefits experienced by minimalist consumers, a subset of U.S. based minimalists ($N = 82$) completed a follow-up survey about the impacts they experienced as a result of adopting minimalism (See Appendix D for the items). In reporting on how much of a difference practicing minimalism has made in their life on a four-point scale (“No difference” to “Big difference”), most participants (60%) said that minimalism had made “a big difference” in their lives. When asked to what degree these changes have been positive vs. negative on a seven-point scale (“Much more positive than negative” to “Much more negative than positive”), the vast majority (78%) reported that the changes had been much more positive than negative ($M = 1.32$). Participants were also asked the following as separate questions: Has/have your level of happiness, your financial security, your stress level, the demands on your time, or your sense of control over your life changed since practicing minimalism? Responding to five-point scales, the median responses were: “I’m more happy now” (median = 4, $M = 4.37$), “I’m slightly more financially secure now” (median = 4, $M = 4.20$), “I’m much less stressed now” (median = 1, $M = 1.64$), “I have fewer demands on my time now” (median = 2, $M = 2.30$), and “I feel much more in control now” (median = 5, $M = 4.38$). Participants were also asked if they experienced any of the eleven following benefits as a result of adopting minimalism: More free time, more financial security, better social/relationship connections, less stress, more mental

clarity, less housework/chores, increased self-knowledge, fewer distractions, feel more in control, and/or improved psychological well-being. Most participants (>50%) reported experiencing more financial security (59.3%), more free time (60.4%), more mental clarity (62.6%), improved psychological well-being (62.6%), less stress (64.8%), fewer distractions (68.1%), feel more in control (68.1%), and less housework/chores (72.5%). For a full summary, see Figure 5. In reporting which benefit of practicing minimalism has made the most difference in their life, the most popular responses were feeling more in control (18.3%), mental clarity (15.9%), more financial security (14.6%), and less stress (12.2%). For a further summary, see Figure 6.

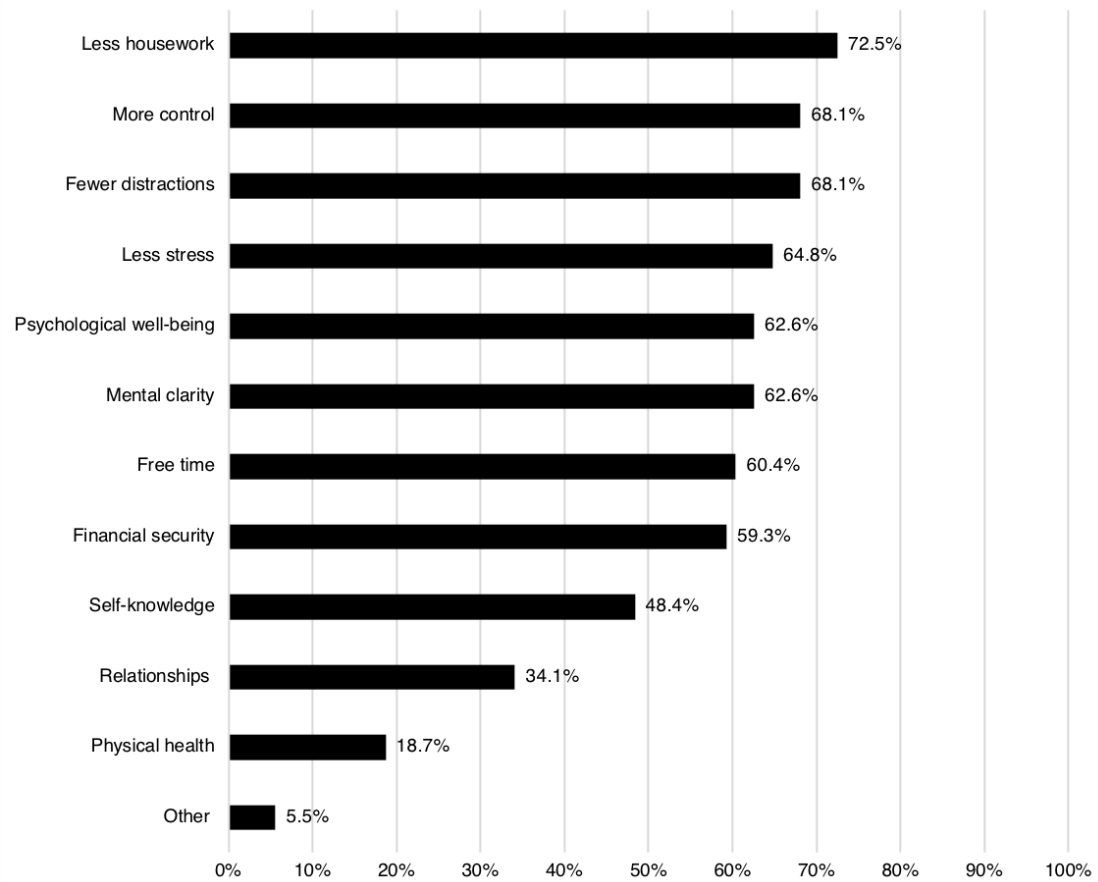


Figure 5: Benefits Reported as a Result of Practicing Minimalism. Participants were asked to report all benefits that they experience as a result of practicing minimalism.

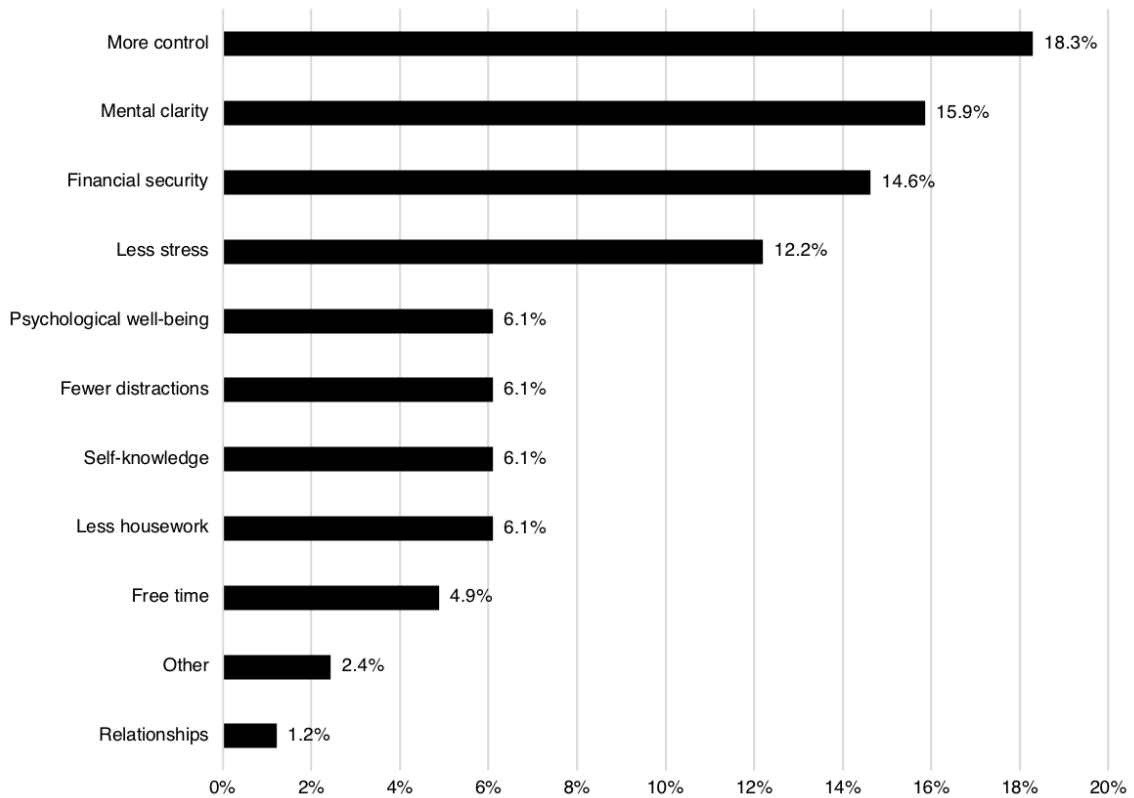


Figure 6: Most Impactful Benefit of Practicing Minimalism. Participants were asked to report which benefit that they experience made the most difference in their life.

3.3.2 Drawbacks

3.3.2.1 Drawbacks

So far, I have focused on the benefits of minimalism. What about the drawbacks? Generally, interviewees had very few to report relative to the benefits they experienced, with most stating that they experienced no negative effects of practicing minimalism. Some simply noted that implementing the practice of minimalism is effortful and requires a degree of ongoing commitment, but that they found this effort to be worthwhile. Common drawbacks described as a result of practicing minimalism arose in

relationships with other people who interviewees felt did not understand their choices. Several interviewees mentioned challenges that arose with respect to receiving gifts. For example, friends and family who did not understand or agree with the practice of minimalism would sometimes feel hurt or confused by requests not to give gifts to the minimalist for occasions such as holidays and birthdays and sometimes would simply ignore these requests. Such requests around gift giving sometimes became a point of conflict between minimalists and their non-minimalist loved ones, though some sort of compromise was generally able to be found. Commonly, minimalists would request that their loved ones gift them experiences (such as a restaurant gift card, event tickets, or museum membership) or consumables (such as coffee, chocolate, or alcohol). If their loved ones would not make such a compromise, some minimalists admitted that they would receive the gift graciously in order to keep the peace but would ultimately regift it, donate it, or otherwise rehome it, which sometimes could generate some feelings of guilt.

Another main difficulty minimalists described facing was related to judgment or other negative reactions by others. Some minimalists shared that they felt other people judged them for their unconventional practices – e.g., coworkers or potential romantic partners. As a result, some interviewees with more extreme and visible minimalism practices felt concerns that their employer might feel warranted in paying them less than others (because they seemed to need less) or that they missed out on potential romantic

opportunities with individuals who found their lifestyle off-putting. (However, a few who discussed judgment by others stated that they did not personally feel that this had a negative impact on their lives, but instead found it to be useful in filtering out those who valued material possessions or social status over character.)

Other minimalists shared that they felt others sometimes felt threatened or judged by them, particularly if they had highly contrasting consumption habits. They found that some people seemed to feel a need to explain or defend themselves or apologize for their different consumption habits even if the minimalist did not feel or express any judgment. As Samantha explained it: "People always make comments when they come over. They're like, 'Your house looks like a model home.' And then they have to go into a list of defending why they can't keep their house clean or whatever. A lot of people just think it's weird...But I would say for the most part, it intimidates people and makes people feel insecure, and I still haven't figured out a way to present it without making people feel insecure."

Lastly, many minimalists noted that the process of implementing minimalism can be effortful, including the process of introspecting and getting honest with oneself, decluttering, and changing one's habits. As Emma put it, "it's difficult work. And it's easier to hide behind the new blouse or the pretty plate or whatever you use to give yourself that endorphin rush to make you feel better about things and avoid what is particularly unsettling under the surface." She sees this impulse to self-soothe and

distract oneself through consumption as a widespread problem that is important to surmount. “So,” she says, “what appears to be negative isn’t necessarily negative – it just feels uncomfortable.”

In sum, nearly all of the drawbacks that interviewees raised with respect to their practice of minimalism arose in interactions with others, and most often had to do with the fact that some people found their lifestyles to be aberrant or confusing.

3.3.2.2 Follow-up Survey Findings

Follow-up survey participants ($N = 82$) were also asked if they have experienced negative impacts from practicing minimalism. Most (53%) said no, while one-third (33%) reported experiencing “a few,” 5% experiencing “a lot,” and 9% reporting that they were unsure. Participants were asked if they experienced any negative impacts in the following domains as a result of adopting minimalism: demands on time (feeling greater demands on time), family relationships, financial security (feeling less financially secure), friendships, health, psychological well-being, romantic relationships, stress levels (feeling more stressed now), and work or career. The most commonly reported negative impacts were in the domains of romantic relationships (8.8%), family relationships (7.7%), psychological well-being (7.7%), and friendships (5.5%). For a further summary, see Figure 7.

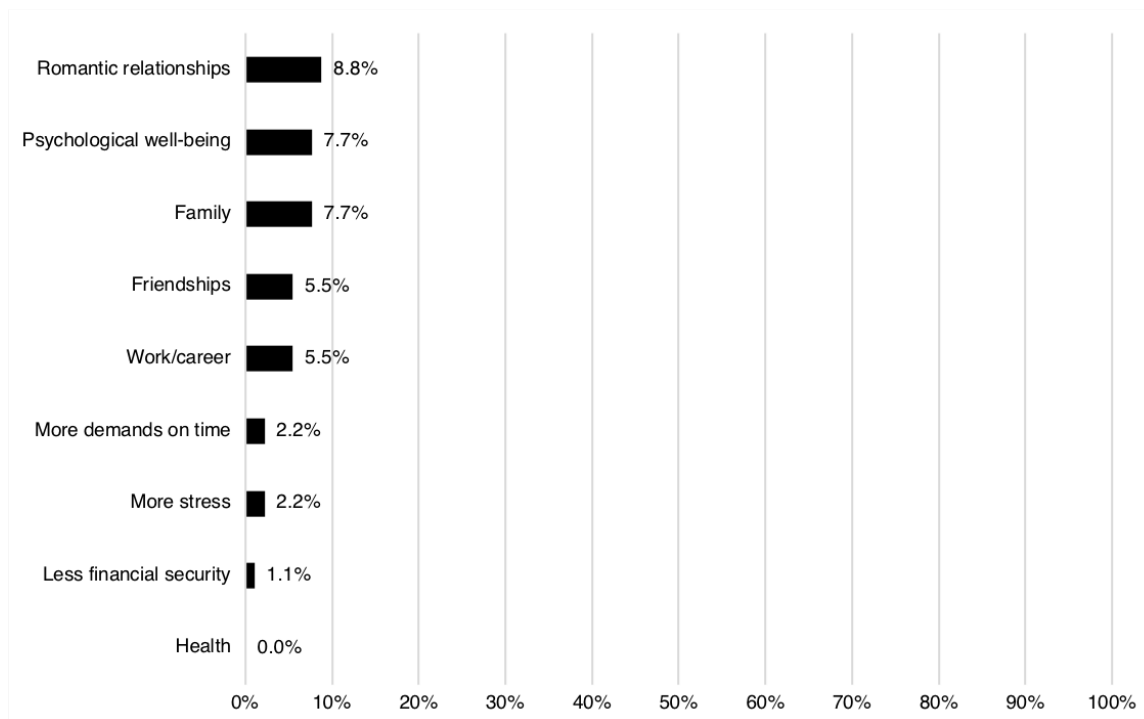


Figure 7: Drawbacks Reported as a Result of Practicing Minimalism. Participants were asked to report all drawbacks that they experience as a result of practicing minimalism.

3.3.3 Summary of Benefits and Drawbacks

Across both qualitative and quantitative studies, minimalists reported experiencing a number of benefits and few drawbacks as a result of practicing minimalism. Participants reported that the impact of minimalism on their lives was overwhelmingly more positive than negative and often led to upward spirals of significant life change. The most important benefits seemed to be a variety of psychological benefits (such as feeling more in control, less stressed, fewer distractions, and having greater mental clarity) and increased financial security, though most participants also reported having more free time and less housework. Drawbacks largely

related to social relationships and arose as a result of others finding minimalist consumption to be confusing, odd, or threatening.

4. Theoretical Framework: Minimalism as a Case of Salutogenic Consumption

So far, the data suggest that we can understand minimalism as an orientation towards value-driven and resource-building consumption practices and that consumers seek and experience increased well-being across a variety of domains through adopting a minimalist orientation towards consumption. Based on the themes and patterns that have emerged, I propose that minimalism can be understood more generally as a case of salutogenic consumption – that is, an approach to consumption that fosters well-being through the cultivation of internal and external resources.

4.1 Antonovsky's Theory of Salutogenesis

The theory of salutogenesis was first proposed by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1979, 1987), who sought to understand why some people remain healthy even under extremely stressful conditions and pushed the field of medicine to conceptualize health as something more than the absence of disease. He proposed that health and illness are not binary categories but that people exist somewhere on a spectrum between the states of health and disease, the “neutral” point being referred to as a state of “dis-ease,” in which a person is neither experiencing the ease of good health nor the debilitation of disease. He defined salutogenesis, the progression of health, in opposition to pathogenesis, the progression of disease. Therefore, any experiences or inputs can be characterized along a spectrum from salutogenic (health promoting) to pathogenic (disease promoting). Antonovsky was most concerned with understanding

the impact of stressors – from the most extreme to the mundane – on our health. He argued that, regardless of how we define stressors, “the overwhelming number of human beings are, most of the time, in the throes of confronting what they define as stressors” (1979, p. 73), that human life is “inevitably and perpetually stressful” (1979, p. 84), and that how we react to such stressors determines how they impact our health.

Antonovsky argued that well-being is not achieved through the elimination of stressors but from having (1) resources that actively promote well-being and allow a person to adapt to and cope with stressors successfully and (2) a sense of coherence about the world and how to operate within it. In his model, the way a person responds to stressors – including the resources they employ – can have pathological, neutral, or salutary consequences on their health and well-being. The resources that Antonovsky conceives of as facilitating effective stress management are similar to those previously discussed – they include not only tangible resources such as material wealth and provisions but also social connections, power, status, ego identity, knowledge, intelligence, skills, access to information, physical fitness, and community institutions, to name a few. Drawing on such resources, people are able to devise coping strategies, rely on support systems, and find their footing in reaction to whatever stressors might arise, allowing them to restore order to their lives and come out perhaps feeling even better resourced (e.g., if they have created or strengthened social connections or developed new habits of self-care) and with an expanded understanding of themselves and the

world. Of course, people often fail or are unable to find ways to restore order in times of chaos and may turn to more pathogenic coping responses such as isolating oneself; self-medicating with intoxicants; spending too much time watching TV, scrolling social media, or playing videogames; or soothing oneself with unhealthy food. Therefore, it is important that responses to stressors are rational (well-suited to the situation), flexible (open to evaluation and revision), and farsighted (having the long-term in mind) if a coping strategy is going to engender salutary rather than pathogenic consequences (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987).

Having sufficient resources, Antonovsky (1979, 1987) theorizes, should support the development of a sense of coherence – that is, a worldview that one’s internal and external environments are lawful, predictable, and explicable (comprehensible); that there are resources available to meet the demands of one’s environment (manageable); and that these demands are challenges worth engaging with (meaningful). Of these three key elements – comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness – Antonovsky argues that meaningfulness is the most essential component for developing a strong sense of coherence; without this element, people are inclined to give up on attempts to acquire the resources that would establish manageability and allow them to make sense of unexpected challenges. I posit that, for those who practice it, minimalism begins as a search for meaning, through the investigation and clarification of that which is most personally valuable, which then prompts a person to seek and develop a

comprehensible model of the world through the adjustment of various consumption levers and, as a result, enables the cultivation of resources needed to successfully manage the demands of life. In sum, minimalism is an approach that assists consumers in (1) building resources and (2) developing a sense of coherence about themselves and the world they live in.

Antonovsky proposes that the process of salutogenesis is mediated by a sense of coherence, established through sufficient access to resources, which allows a person to respond to the stressors in one's life in ways that give rise to salutary rather than pathological outcomes. In a similar way, I propose that minimalism provides an approach for achieving salutogenesis through consumption by prompting individuals to clarify self-defined values and shift consumption behavior in accordance with those values (by decluttering and/or changing consumption habits), which drives the cultivation of valued resources and a stronger sense of coherence. Together, greater resources and a stronger sense of coherence give rise to greater well-being more broadly (i.e., beyond physical health as focused on by Antonovsky). While Antonovsky proposes a sequential process wherein resources give rise to a sense of coherence which in turn gives rise to health, I argue that minimalist consumption can foster each of these constructs – resources and a sense of coherence – directly and that each of these constructs mutually supports the other's further development (i.e., that building resources cultivates a stronger sense of coherence and that a stronger sense of coherence

supports further building of resources). In turn, I predict that having more resources and a stronger sense of coherence each directly contribute to increased well-being more broadly. See Figure 8 for a visual depiction of the proposed theory.

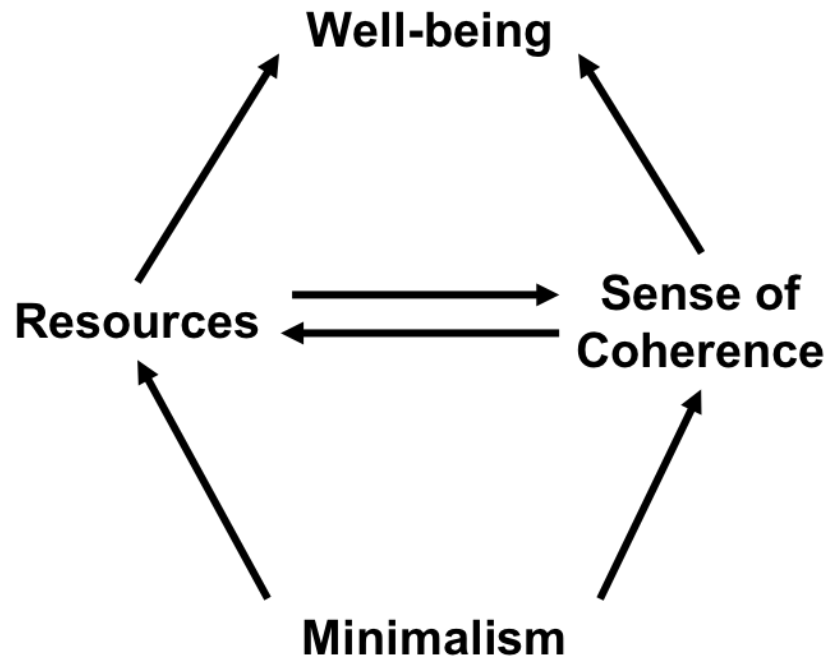


Figure 8: Proposed Theory of Minimalism as a Case of Salutogenic Consumption.

4.2 Salutogenic and Pathogenic Consumption

I have previously discussed evidence to suggest that minimalist consumption is value-driven, resource-building, and appears to contribute to greater well-being across a variety of domains, at least among those who choose to practice it. On these grounds, I have suggested that minimalism be classified as a case of salutogenic consumption. To further develop the idea of salutogenic vs. pathogenic consumption more broadly, I will now discuss in further detail two examples of consumption cases we might classify as

pathogenic. In brief, I suggest that consumption is more likely to be pathogenic if it is (1) materialistically or extrinsically motivated or (2) driven by a “wanting” reward system that is dissociated from the “liking” reward system. There are undoubtedly other cases of pathogenic consumption, such as hoarding, compulsive shopping or gambling, neglecting to account for associated costs (monetary and non-monetary), and too highly discounting long term costs or rewards, but for the purposes of the current work, I will explore only two such cases.

4.2.1 Materialism

To be high in materialism is to place high importance on material possessions and see the acquisition of such possessions as a necessary or desirable means of achieving positive outcomes, including happiness (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Consequently, materialism might be considered as an antithesis to minimalism. Much work in consumer research has found that materialistic values are consistently associated with negative outcomes across a wide variety of populations, including lower self-esteem, well-being, quality of life, and satisfaction with life in general (Kasser, 2002; Richins and Dawson, 1992; Roberts and Clement, 2007; Roberts, Tanner, and Manolis, 2005; Sirgy, 1998). Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) have argued that a conflict between extrinsic and material values (e.g., money, image, and fame) and intrinsic and collective values (e.g., self-acceptance, affiliation, and community) can account for the negative relationship observed between materialism and subjective well-being. Materialism has

also been shown to be positively correlated with physical and psychological illnesses, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Kasser and Ryan, 1993, 1996, 2001; Kasser and Ahuvia, 2002). Importantly, these negative outcomes are observed even among those with greater financial resources (Kasser and Ryan, 1996) and among those who actually attain their materialistic aspirations (Kasser and Ryan, 2001). Relying on experiments rather than correlations, Bauer, Wilkie, Kim and Bodenhausen (2012) found that even in those who were not particularly high in materialism, cuing a materialistic mindset by viewing desirable consumer goods or framing information in terms of its relevance to “consumers” vs. “citizens” increased materialism and made people more self-absorbed, less happy, and more antagonistic towards others.

While materialism may cause us to push away from others, it does not seem to reduce our inherent need for belonging and social relationship. A longitudinal study tracking the cyclical relationship between loneliness and materialism over time found that loneliness increases levels of materialism and that certain types of materialism additionally increase loneliness (Pieters, 2013). In such cases, loneliness and materialism reinforce one another as one’s materialistic pursuits drive loneliness and one’s loneliness then drives increased materialistic pursuit, suggestive of a pathogenic process.

In sum, materialism appears to have (or at least be associated with) a number of negative impacts on health and well-being, possibly through multiple pathways such as financial strain, weakening social connectedness, and failing to achieve one’s goals,

thereby contributing to a weaker sense of coherence. Based on this, I argue that materialism can be classified as a case of pathogenic consumption which can deplete resources, weaken one's sense of coherence, and contribute to reduced health and well-being.

4.2.2 Dissociation Between Wanting and Liking

On a neurological level, it is common that our “wanting” and “liking” rewards systems are imperfectly linked, to variable and sometimes dramatic degrees (Berridge and Robinson, 2016). The more dramatic the dissociation between these two rewards systems, the more pathogenic consumption behavior can be expected to result. One example of extreme dissociation between these systems is observed in addiction: an addict experiences intense cravings for a substance or experience despite negative consequences and regardless of a conscious desire to refrain from the “wanted” substance or behavior. To oversimplify it, addiction drives wanting of that which we do not like. However, these dissociations can be observed in everyday consumption behavior as well – for example, we might feel a pull to continue eating even when it's no longer enjoyable, consume media that upsets us, or spend our Sunday on the couch even though we would have enjoyed meeting up with friends or getting outside for a hike. When done occasionally, the impacts of indulging these impulses are negligible; however, when such impulses become habitual or compulsive, pathogenic effects are to be expected.

While mesolimbic dopamine is popularly conceptualized as a “pleasure chemical,” decades of scientific research have now established that dopamine mediates desire, not pleasure, and that our desire pathways are much stronger in driving behavior than our pleasure pathways (see Berridge and Robinson, 2016 for a review). Thus, when these pathways have become dissociated from one another, we will be driven more strongly by specious desires than what we would actually enjoy, and the more we indulge our dopaminergic cravings, the more powerful they become, furthering widening the gap between what we want and what we like. Short of clinical addictions, it is common for the average person to experience at least occasional urges to engage in impulsive behavior driven by “wanting” even in the absence of “liking,” particularly when triggered by reward-related cues or by vivid imagery about the reward (Berridge, 2012) and when dopamine reactivity is heightened as a result of stress, emotional excitement, hunger, or intoxication (Anselme, 2016; Berridge, 2012; Robinson and Berridge, 2013). The more we indulge in those immediate desires that proffer no lasting fulfillment beyond the temporary relief of said desire, the stronger our “wanting” urges and the dopaminergic pathway that fuels them will become. Therefore, the hedonic treadmill (Brickman and Campbell, 1971; Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman, 1978) may function as it does not only because we so quickly adapt to new situations, but because much of what we chase only generates further wanting rather than the pleasure or satisfaction we seek and expect. Consumption driven by “wanting”

and disconnected from “liking” should be expected to threaten and deplete resources and weaken one’s sense of coherence as one fails to find satisfaction from that which they want and receive, ultimately threatening well-being.

What fuels such dissociation? Perhaps echoed in the finding that loneliness seems to fuel materialistic consumption, the addiction literature has found that addictive behaviors only arise in environments lacking “enrichment,” and that environmental enrichment both prevents and treats addictive urges, acting as a buffer against stress-induced cravings and even eliminating already established addiction behaviors (Chauvet et al., 2009; Imperio et al., 2018; Solinas et al., 2008). An environment lacking in sufficient stimulation (whether social, cognitive, or physical) heightens sensitivity to dopaminergic cravings, and thus should be expected to encourage more pathogenic consumption behavior, particularly under stress. Pathogenic consumption behavior – e.g., materialistic pursuits; overspending; bingeing on food, intoxicants, or media – may further impoverish one’s “environment,” thus risking a downward spiral. However, in an enriched environment, hedonic indulgences become less attractive and, if consumed, are likely to be consumed in ways that do not lead to addiction. Further suggestive of this application to consumption behavior, Clark et al. (2010) find that those who have higher levels of interpersonal security – a sense of being loved and accepted by others – value their possessions less than those who do not (see also Keefer et al., 2012). Through this lens, we can consider minimalism, or salutogenic consumption more broadly, to be

a means for constructing an “enriched environment” for oneself that will naturally result in a decreased tendency towards addictive or pathogenic consumption behavior. This should assist an upward spiral towards well-being.

4.3 Follow-up Survey Findings

To seek additional support for the theory of minimalism as a case of salutogenic consumption through the cultivation of resources and a strong sense of coherence, an additional follow-up survey study was conducted with consumers that spanned the spectrum from completely non-minimalist to completely minimalist ($N = 227$). In order to create a sample with substantial variation and representation along the spectrum of minimalist consumption, participants were recruited through two means: (1) a posting on the online worker panel Prolific Academic, intended to bring in more general consumers, and (2) an email to self-identified minimalists who had participated in previous studies and had expressed an interest in participating in follow-up studies. Participants from both recruitment methods were pooled and each participant was asked the degree to which they practiced minimalism as a lifestyle (on a scale of 0-100). Therefore, the degree to which someone practiced minimalism was captured as a continuous variable rather than a binary categorization of minimalists vs. non-minimalists. This operationalization scheme allows for greater detail and power in assessing the relationship between practicing minimalism and other measured constructs and seeks to minimize the degree to which comparisons between minimalists

and non-minimalists would be confounded by the two-pronged recruitment method. In a further attempt to address this limitation, several background questions were collected in an attempt to control for differences between the two populations from which participants were recruited. Participants also completed measures of how rich they felt across 12 resource domains, a Sense of Coherence measure (13-item; Antonovsky, 1987), the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983), and a measure of the degree to which the things they own contribute to their well-being (on a 7-point scale, from “The things I own harm my well-being” to “The things I own support my well-being”). See Appendix E for measure items.

An index of all 12 domains for which participants reported how rich they felt themselves to be (friends, family, romantic partnership, free time, financial security, mental health, comfortable living situation, physical health, self-awareness, life satisfaction, material possessions, and community or social support) was strongly positively correlated with the degree to which one practiced a minimalist lifestyle, $r(225) = .44, p < .0001$, such that a more minimalist lifestyle was associated with greater richness across these domains. The index of richness across 12 resource domains was highly reliable, $\alpha = .88$. Correlating each resource domain individually with minimalism practice revealed reliably significant and positive relationships, $ps \leq .01$; see Table 3 for individual pairwise correlations between minimalist lifestyle practice and richness in individual resource domains.

Table 3: Correlations Between Richness in Resource Domains and Degree of Minimalism Practice.

Variable	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Financial security	0.3896	<.0001
Life satisfaction	0.3682	<.0001
Physical health	0.3651	<.0001
Community or social support	0.3365	<.0001
Friends	0.3024	<.0001
Mental health	0.2936	<.0001
Comfortable living situation	0.2735	<.0001
Material possessions	0.2526	0.0001
Free time	0.2455	0.0002
Self-awareness	0.2296	0.0005
Family	0.1767	0.007
Romantic partnership	0.1692	0.01

The degree to which one practiced minimalism was marginally significantly associated with a Sense of Coherence ($p = .06$), but further inquiry into the subscales of this measure reveals inconsistent patterns between the subscales of the construct. Practicing minimalism more seriously was significantly positively correlated with the meaningfulness subscale, $r(225) = .21$, $p = .001$, but significantly negatively correlated with the comprehensibility subscale, $r(226) = -.20$, $p = .002$, and not significantly correlated with the manageability subscale, $p = .23$. While there are many possible interpretations of such a pattern and insufficient data to clarify the process underlying the relationships between these variables, one possibility is that those who believe that life is highly meaningful but also overwhelming and confusing (i.e., low in comprehensibility) are more drawn to minimalism in an attempt to make sense of the

oneself and the world. Most of the manageability items, which showed no relationship to minimalism practice, focus on managing social interactions with others. It may be that a measure that was more expressly designed to capture the practical manageability of life might yield different results in this population rather than the more interpersonally-focused SOC-13 manageability subscale. While these results are not perfectly demonstrative of Antonovsky's theory as applied to consumption, they are not inconsistent with the theory. As previously discussed, Antonovsky (1979) argued that meaningfulness was the most essential primary component of a sense of coherence, and that as long as a person could find meaning, they could be expected to move in the direction of a stronger sense of coherence, particularly as resources grow.

Richness across the twelve resource domains was strongly negatively correlated with perceived stress, $r(227) = -.62, p < .0001$, such that those reporting greater richness of resources reported lower levels of stress. Additionally, the degree to which a person practiced minimalism was moderately negatively correlated with perceived stress, $r(227) = -.36, p < .0001$; said differently, those who practiced minimalism to a greater degree reported lower levels of stress. The degree to which a person practiced minimalism was positively correlated with the degree to which they felt that the things they owned contributed to their well-being, $r(226) = 0.26, p < .0001$. Results of all relationships reported from this survey do not significantly change when demographic factors such as age and population from which the participants were recruited from are controlled for.

4.4 Summary of Theoretical Framework

In an attempt to conceptualize minimalism as a consumption orientation more broadly, I have proposed that minimalism can be viewed as a case of salutogenic consumption – that is, consumption that is focused on building well-being through the active cultivation of valued resources and a strong sense of coherence (meaningfulness, comprehensibility, and manageability) about oneself and the world. Based on the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative data, I posit that (1) the practice of minimalism directly cultivates internal and external and tangible and intangible resources as well as a strong sense of coherence about the world and oneself, (2) a feedback loop exists such that greater levels of resources further contribute to a strong sense of coherence while a strong sense of coherence further contributes to the building of additional resources, and (3) the building of resources and a strong sense of coherence supports increased well-being. This proposed process is depicted in Figure 8.

In response to stressors, minimalist consumers may be more inclined to consume in accordance with their values and rely on internal and external resources in ways that allow them to experience salutary rather than pathogenic effects of such tension. For example, in a stressful time, one person might cope by reaching out to a loved one for support, going to the gym, and spending time meditating or getting a massage. Another person might engage in retail therapy (see Atalay and Meloy, 2011), increase their alcohol consumption, and self-soothe with comfort food that they have delivered. In the

first case, we might expect salutary effects – their relationship with their loved one might become stronger, their physical fitness is improved, and their sympathetic nervous system calmed. By engaging in these behaviors, they are more likely to feel a sense of support, strength, and equanimity even in the face of stressors. In the second case, we might expect some short term relief as a result of their more indulgent consumption, but ultimately, we could expect to see pathological effects if one habitually engages in such behaviors when stressed – for example, increased debt as a result of increased spending on alcohol, food delivery, and retail therapy; feeling more isolated and out of control; and/or diminished physical and mental health. Regularly engaging in pathogenic consumption behavior can be expected to result in a downward spiral – depleting one’s resources and well-being while contributing to a disordered view of the self and the world – while adopting a salutogenic approach to consumption can be expected to result in an upward spiral – cultivating resources and well-being while contributing to a more orderly view of the self and the world.

A simple quantitative investigation sought to provide additional support for this theory, finding that across a broad spectrum of consumers, practicing minimalism was strongly correlated with greater richness across a variety of resource domains, the perception that one’s possessions support their well-being, a stronger sense of meaning, and lower stress levels. Given the correlational nature of these data, it is impossible to say which direction these relationships run and how direct or indirect the pathways

between them are. It seems likely that many of these pathways are bidirectional or multiply determined (for example, to look at just one pair of constructs: it may be that minimalism increases one's resources, and/or that those who have greater resources are more inclined or able to pursue minimalism, and/or that the accumulation of resources through minimalism further encourages more minimalist practices). With these caveats in mind, the observed relationships are consistent with the theory that minimalism is a case of salutogenic consumption.

5. General Discussion

Across four datasets using both quantitative and qualitative methods, I have sought to answer the following questions: what does it mean to practice minimalism, what motivates consumers to adopt minimalism, and what impacts do people experience as a result of practicing minimalism?

At its core, minimalism is about intentionally shifting consumption towards habits and practices that maximize value and minimize burdens. Investing one's time, money, attention, energy, and space into that which one most values and withdrawing it from that which is not valued allows for the building of important resources such as psychological well-being, strong social connections, financial security, and a clear sense of identity and meaning while reducing consumption behaviors that deplete resources, such as impulsive buying, oversized housing, unaffordable cars, and habitual hedonic indulgences. In order to prioritize that which one most values, consumers must

challenge externally-dictated narratives about how they should be consuming and develop their own internally-defined value systems to inform their consumption habits. Practically speaking, minimalists implement value-driven consumption behavior by decluttering that which is unnecessary or burdensome and shifting their consumption towards behaviors that will build rather than deplete their valued resources. In order to do this, minimalists engage in cost-benefit analyses of their consumption over long time horizons, which allows them to improve their consumption decisions and maximize returns on investment. In sum, minimalism can be conceptualized as a mode of consumption that is value-driven and resource-building.

In many cases, a significant life transition or experience – happy, neutral, or traumatic and extraordinary or ordinary – served as the impetus for adopting minimalism. Many minimalists approached these points of change in their lives as opportunities to intentionally redesign their lives for the better – to explore questions of what they most value and to actively architect a life that upholds those values and builds one’s resources. Minimalist consumers most commonly cite motivations to reduce stress and improve psychological well-being as their primary reasons for pursuing minimalism. As consumers, minimalists eschew status-driven and competitive consumption behavior and have strong anti-consumerism attitudes. As personal goals of reducing stress and achieving greater well-being are attained, minimalists often develop additional and more outwardly focused sources of motivation, such as a desire to reduce

one's impact on the environment or engage in more ethical consumption behavior.

Acquiring additional sources of motivation may further bolster the continued practice of minimalism and provide an additional mechanism for positive reinforcement (e.g., via the "warm glow" from contributing to the common good; Kahneman and Knetsch, 1992; Nunes and Schokkaert, 2003; Ritov and Kahneman, 1997).

As a result of adopting minimalism, minimalists reported experiencing many benefits and relatively few drawbacks. Most minimalists reported experiencing positive and significant changes in their lives in a variety of domains, including experiencing increased financial security, more free time, more mental clarity, improved psychological well-being, less stress, fewer distractions, a greater sense of control, and less housework/chores. As a result of the significant life changes adopted as a result of minimalism, many experienced a positive upward spiral of associated benefits as a result of reshaping their consumption habits and reducing their stress levels, which allowed them to allocate time and energy to activities that paid dividends, such as exercise, hobbies, and time spent with close others. The drawbacks that minimalists reported generally arose in interactions with others – such as situations of gift-giving or visible differences in consumption habits – and most often had to do with occasions of other people finding minimalist consumption, in whole or in part, to be confusing, odd, or threatening. However, most found these instances to be rare, navigable, and generally inconsequential.

In an attempt to conceptualize minimalism as a consumption orientation more broadly, I have adapted and expanded Antonovsky's (1979, 1986) theory of salutogenesis to argue that minimalism can be viewed as a case of salutogenic consumption – that is, consumption that is focused on building well-being through the active cultivation of valued resources and a strong sense of coherence (meaningfulness, comprehensibility, and manageability) about oneself and the world. Relying on the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative data, I have posited that (1) the practice of minimalism directly cultivates internal and external and tangible and intangible resources as well as a strong sense of coherence about the world and oneself, (2) a feedback loop exists such that greater levels of resources further contribute to a strong sense of coherence while a strong sense of coherence further contributes to the building of additional resources, and (3) the building of resources and a strong sense of coherence support increased well-being. I do not purport to have shown a causal relationship for this model but, based on a process of induction, propose this as a possible explanation for the observed findings. This theory is further supported by additional quantitative survey data from a broad spectrum of minimalist and non-minimalist consumers which found that practicing minimalism was associated with greater richness across a variety of resource domains, the perception that one's possessions support their well-being, a stronger sense of meaning, and lower stress levels.

Minimalism is not the only case of consumers practicing salutogenic consumption. However, the benefit of “minimalism” as a label for such consumption practices is that it serves as something for consumers to identify with and point to as an intentional practice, thus explaining consumer behavior that might otherwise be seen as deviant or unintentionally nonconforming. The current minimalism movement provides a model of salutogenic consumption and permission to deviate from social norms with reduced cost given its current popularity and visibility. While there may be a social cost to nonconformist consumption behavior, I would argue that that cost may be lower now than ever before, particularly with respect to material consumption. One of many explanations for this may be that globalization and the proliferation of consumption possibilities, niche markets, and targeted vs. mass marketing have significantly impacted the development of local norms, broadly heterogenized consumption, and have fragmented consensus on what is normative or desirable. Trends previously created largely by mass media forces are increasingly determined by social media, and thus are increasingly ephemeral and abundant. In addition, attempts to establish connections with others by using displays of status do not appear to be successful. For example, Garcia et al. (2018) find that people report being more interested in befriending a person exhibiting neutral-status signals as compared to high-status signals (e.g., one driving a Honda vs. a BMW). Therefore, it may be the case that eschewing status-driven consumption actually provides social benefits.

5.1 Reconceptualizing and Building Wealth

For arguably most people, there are more valuable forms of wealth than those that can be acquired through the prioritization of financial wealth. Minimalist consumers recognize this explicitly, whether they do so early in their lives, after achieving material success and finding that it did not offer them the fulfillment they had hoped for, or after losing everything of material value and finding they did not need it after all. These alternative forms of wealth can include social relationships, physical health, mental health, fulfilling work, ample free time, community resources, engaging hobbies, spiritual or religious experiences, education, knowledge, skills, and a sense of identity, autonomy, meaning, ease, and/or freedom, among others. As Jill, describing her shift from more materialistic to more minimalist consumption, put it: “we wanted wealth in a different way – the wealth to be able to travel more, the wealth of not worrying, not having to budget for the expenses that a large home requires.”

Prioritizing the cultivation of valued resources requires the recognition that resources can only come at the expense of other resources, and thus minimalists strive to be intentional about how they trade their resources in order to build those that are most valued. By being more discriminating about the investment of their resources, minimalist consumers receive higher returns on their investments while expending less, which can support a process of compounding returns and contribute to an upward spiral. Just as positive investments can compound into additional gains, negative

investments should be expected to compound into additional losses, contributing to a downward spiral. (It is important to note that, in many cases, the question of whether something is a positive or negative investment must be regularly revisited and reevaluated; these values or expected returns are not expected to remain static. As Arlo put it, “Life is always changing. Some things will have more lasting value than others and that’s okay.”) Those investments that are incurring or are expected to incur losses should be cut so that resources can be re-allocated towards that which is expected to offer a positive return. Just as increases in consumption can result in compounding financial (among possible other) costs, small reductions in consumption expenses can produce compounding financial benefits. Reducing unnecessary expenses increases financial security in two important ways – first, by enabling an individual to pay off debts and/or accumulate a cushion of savings and/or investments and second, by reducing how much it is that the person needs in order to live comfortably. Just as there is security and freedom in having greater wealth, there is security and freedom in needing less. Being able to reduce unnecessary expenses acts on both of these levers.

5.2 Minimalism: Accessible to All or Only the Well-off?

“Minimalism” as a popular concept is sometimes derided as being only for those who are especially well-off (e.g., see Fagan, 2017). While I disagree with this position (as did nearly all of the minimalists I interviewed), there is truth to the argument that a minimalist lifestyle is not equally accessible to everyone. Before discussing barriers to

minimalism, I will seek to distinguish between the consumption practices that are commonly misconceived as minimalism – that is, the eschewal of possessions at extreme levels – and minimalism as I have documented it herein.

As a result of the increased access to ownership due to lowered costs of production and the huge shifts in the way we consume goods and services – from the proliferation of knowledge goods to the sharing economy for physical goods – the amount of material goods owned by consumers has increasingly become independent of their level of wealth for perhaps the first time in history. Previously, status was tied to accumulation and ownership, as when Veblen proposed his theory of conspicuous consumption by the upper classes and argued that “it becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property, in order to retain one’s good name” (1899/1994, p. 29). However, those in higher socioeconomic classes are increasingly signaling status through the consumption of experiences rather than the ownership of material goods (Bronner and de Hoog, 2018). Capturing these shifts, Bourdieu (1984) emphasized the importance of cultural rather than economic capital as a means to signal status. Through cultural capital – such as education, intellect, skills, knowledge, style – one is able to distinguish oneself from others more radically and inimitably than by conspicuous consumption alone. As a result, many consumers have eschewed old-fashioned conspicuous consumption in favor of a more strategic focus on accruing and exhibiting cultural capital through the accumulation of experiences (e.g., travel, food), skills (e.g.,

backpacking, meditation, musical ability), and/or aesthetics (e.g., curated capsule wardrobes, building with reclaimed materials (e.g., see Weinberger, Zavisco, and Silva, 2017). And as a result of widespread participation in social media, it is easier than ever to widely broadcast one's high levels of cultural capital, which may have even greater social currency than economic capital (see Currid-Halkett, 2017). As a result of this shift in status-signaling strategy, minimalist consumers and consumers who minimize their possessions for extrinsically vs. intrinsically motivated reasons may, in some cases, be difficult to distinguish at a glance or in the abstract. But given the focus on internal values and the pursuit of meaning by the population of minimalist consumers that I have explored herein, I predict that the benefits of a more minimalistic lifestyle would be reduced for those whose eschewal of material goods is motivated by extrinsic rather than intrinsic reasons.

While minimalism is an ideology and I would argue that consumers at all levels of a consumerist society can adopt such an ideology towards consumption, it is true that practicing minimalism is easier when one has the financial security to buy what is needed when it is needed. Without this security, holding on to things which one does not have present need for can make more sense as a means of security. Rather than conferring status as ownership has traditionally done, holding on to excess possessions can be financially protective for those in the lower and middle classes (as long as the costs to store it – either within one's living space or outside of it – do not exceed the

benefit they retain). Keeping excess possessions can be protective if one might at some point need the items being kept, thus preventing the need for later repurchasing, or if one could resell the item on the second-market (e.g., eBay, craigslist, or pawnshops) for cash in times of financial need. However, this does not mean that minimalism cannot be applied to future purchasing of material goods or to other resource domains outside of material possessions. To practice minimalism, as Catherine put it, “you just need a little bit of time, a little bit of reflection. It’s easy therapy and relatively free.”

For minimalist vs. non-minimalist consumers at the lowest end of the economic spectrum, it may be that there is little observable difference in material consumption patterns as material consumption is more highly constrained at the lower end of the economic spectrum than for consumers with more economic freedom. However, to suggest that lower income consumers cannot be minimalist is to imply that they have no agency in the marketplace or in the ownership of possessions, acquired through the marketplace or otherwise. As discussed in the work by Grigsby (2004) on voluntary simplifiers, eschewing consumerism can be empowering for lower income consumers who might otherwise feel defined or controlled by their reduced access to consume. In this case, minimalism might offer an increased benefit to lower income consumers, as it has been found that consumers raised in poverty are those most susceptible to marketing efforts and the belief that if only they had more money and more freedom to buy the things they desire, they would be happy (Chaplin, Hill, and John, 2014). As has

been extensively documented by Kasser (2002), this belief system is not only inaccurate but also distracts people from investing in and pursuing that which actually does bring satisfaction and well-being. As such, adopting a minimalist philosophy may be beneficial even if it does not have a large impact on one's material consumption behavior. In addition, when consumers deprioritize status and ownership in their consumption, new means of access and security may become open to them, such as through the embrace of libraries, free events, shared interest groups, and community resources. But a subset of consumers, such as those who experience financial scarcity (or did so in childhood; Mittal and Griskevicius, 2014), may find more benefit from the security they feel from having extra possessions than they would experience from having more freedom and mobility. While more secure consumers might experience owning fewer possessions as freeing, consumers more familiar with material insecurity may experience it as exposing. Financial security and class culture can also shape preferences for material vs. experiential purchases (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Lee, Hall, and Wood, 2018; Weinberger, Zavisco, and Silva, 2017), potentially reducing the value that a consumer might experience from an increased focus on experiential pursuits. However, such behaviors need not necessarily be considered to be in conflict with minimalism if they are in accordance with a person's value system and support the building of valued resources.

5.3 Differentiation from Voluntary Simplicity

As previously discussed, movements promoting reflection and reformation around the relationship one has to their material possessions and consumption practices are not new. However, in considering two modern movements, voluntary simplicity and minimalism, significant differences are apparent. Most clearly, the voluntary simplicity movement was primarily motivated by a desire to reduce harmful environmental impacts (Elgin, 1981; Miller and Gregan-Paxton, 2006; Ballantine and Creery, 2010; Alexander and Ussher, 2012), whereas minimalism has shown to be motivated primarily by a desire to improve one's own psychological well-being (with only 10% from the initial survey reporting environmental concerns as their chief motivation). While many minimalists (70%) did include reduced environmental impacts among their full set of motivations, the adoption of environmental and ethical motivations appeared to develop later and at lower rates as compared to psychological well-being and stress reduction.

Another clear difference in these movements is that voluntary simplicity advocated for a harder line on consumption behavior that may be better described as anti-consumption as opposed to the anti-consumerism of minimalists. Within voluntary simplicity, there is a stronger focus on reducing consumption as much as possible and a higher value placed on frugality. In a study investigating the challenges faced by beginner voluntary simplifiers (Ballantine, Arbouw, and Ozanne, 2011), participants

described the difficulty of breaking their consumption and purchasing habits particularly because of how it often left them feeling socially isolated now that they were trying to avoid behaviors such as eating out and spending money on going out with friends. This is in stark contrast to the minimalist participants who clearly prioritized consumption that offered valued experiences and opportunities to connect with close others. Among minimalists, reduced spending was not the chief motivation for nearly 95% of participants surveyed in the initial survey. Even among those who cite financial motives for pursuing minimalism, minimalists largely advocate investing in that which aligns with their values, which may involve consumer experiences and goods that facilitate social connection, the development of hobbies, or self-expanding (but possibly expensive) activities such as traveling. While minimalism encourages being critical of whether one's consumption behavior is adding value to one's life, it is not anti-consumption or necessarily frugal as a rule. Minimalism is focused most universally on optimizing the investment and cultivation of one's tangible and non-tangible resources while voluntary simplicity focuses more broadly on reducing participation in the capitalist economy entirely, including working less, spending less money, and generally reducing one's need for money and consumption. Thus, minimalism is more focused on the inner rather than external architectures that are shaped by our consumption.

5.4 Practical Implications

Minimalism is often seen as a viable path to reduce environmentally unfriendly consumption behavior; however, promoting minimalist consumption will likely be more successful when focusing on the personal benefits rather than the environmental impacts. For example, such appeals should focus on the potential for reduced stress levels; greater mental clarity, ease, and sense of control; and increased financial security. High levels of stress, feeling overwhelmed by the demands of life, and financial strain are experienced by a significant number of consumers (e.g., see Magni, Martinez, and Motiwala, 2016; American Psychological Association, 2019) while purely environmental appeals are less likely to be prioritized by consumers and may even backfire among some consumers (e.g., see Brough, Wilkie, Ma, Isaac, and Gal, 2016).

In the marketplace, marketers should understand the alternative consumption preferences of minimalists: preferences for experiences and close social relationships over things; high quality, long-lasting products that offer long-term value; corporate social responsibility; and the ability to rent, borrow, share, or otherwise access goods and services without ownership. Given minimalists' anti-consumerist sentiments, desire for freedom and self-definition, and sophisticated understanding of marketing tactics, strong push marketing strategies should be expected to inspire backlash from minimalist consumers. Firms interested in marketing to minimalist consumers should utilize pull marketing strategies and/or soft, non-intrusive push strategies. Value

propositions should focus on how the product can conserve or cultivate minimalists' valued resources. For example, in a robot vacuum such as Roomba, minimalists might be most attracted by the idea of buying back the time they spend vacuuming and having one fewer task to manage as opposed to the impressive mechanics of the Roomba's technology. A key pain point for minimalist consumers is any obligation that does not add value to (or worse, subtracts from) their lives and/or depletes valued resources such as time, attention, energy, and money.

5.5 Contributions and Limitations

This work has sought to make several contributions to the literature on consumer behavior. The first is early documentation of a growing segment of consumers. By better understanding this group of consumers, it is my hope that we will be able to promote more salutary and environmentally friendly consumption practices in a time when the health and well-being of individuals and the planet are at great risk. On a theoretical level, this work has explored the ways in which consumption can function to build vs. deplete consumers' resources of varying types. In addition, this work has applied Antonovsky's theory of salutogenesis (1979, 1987) to consumption behavior for the first time (to my knowledge). The theory of salutogenic vs. pathogenic consumption and how such processes unfold could serve as an important framework to advance the understanding and promotion of consumer well-being.

A key limitation of the present work is that no causal relationships have been demonstrated. Causal investigation poses a particular challenge in this area given that minimalism is practiced as a long-term lifestyle. However, longitudinal studies that follow new minimalists over time could allow for the documentation of causal processes. Experiments are also possible, though compliance and ecological validity might pose challenges. Critically limiting and endemic to researching this topic is that practicing minimalists are self-selected. Therefore, while the analysis presented herein might accurately explain those who have been observed, that does not mean that any person randomly assigned to adopt minimalism should be expected to exhibit the same benefits with minimal drawbacks. While the degree and types of benefits and drawbacks should be expected to differ between individuals who attempt minimalism, I would predict that nearly everyone would benefit to some degree from more minimalist or salutogenic consumption practices, just as eating healthily or engaging in physical activity are universally if not uniformly beneficial. Just as eating healthily or exercising offers varying degrees and types of positive benefits across individuals, the degree to and ways in which a given person will benefit from such a shift in their consumption habits should be expected to vary as well. However, given the flexibility, self-direction, and diversity of minimalist practices, it seems that most Western consumers who are able to would benefit from rethinking how their consumption habits might better align

with their values, contribute to building rather than depleting their resources, and serve to reduce rather than exacerbate the impacts of the stressors they experience.

6. Conclusions

We are living in what some might consider an increasingly pathogenic society, as suggested by the fact that despite the advances of modern medicine, Americans are in many important ways in increasingly poor mental and physical health. And despite our material wealth, Americans today suffer from many poverties – social isolation, economic insecurity, limited access to healthcare, lack of stable or fulfilling employment, lack of spiritual or religious practice and community, lack of meaning, and lack of autonomy. We often look to consumption to solve our problems, boost our moods, and construct our identity. However, with help from the siren songs of marketers and hardwired impulses that evolved in a world very different than the one in which we live, we often engage in consumption behavior that is misaligned with our most deeply held values and serves to threaten rather than support our well-being. In so doing, we often threaten not only our own well-being but the habitability of the planet on which we are wholly reliant. In this work, I have sought to investigate the merits of minimalist consumption – a mode of consumption that is value-driven and resource-building – and have found it to be a promising pathway to health, wealth, and well-being for those who are overly taxed and burdened, materially and psychologically, by the consumer culture in which they live.

Appendix A: Differences Between Twitter and Reddit Samples

Demographics

In general, those on Reddit were younger ($M_{\text{Reddit}} = 28$ years, $M_{\text{Twitter}} = 44$ years), more likely to have never married (36% of Reddit participants were single and never married compared to 13% of those from twitter; 27% of Reddit participants were married compared to 62% of Twitter participants), less likely to have children (14% of Reddit participants had children compared to 67% of Twitter participants), somewhat more politically liberal (the median Reddit participant was “somewhat liberal” while the median Twitter participant was “centrist”), and less likely to be religious (30% of reddit participants identified as agnostic and 39% as atheist, while 46% of twitter participants identified as Christian and 12% as agnostic). Those on Twitter had completed slightly higher levels of education and had higher household incomes (median household income for Twitter participants was \$70,001-100,000 compared to \$50,001-\$70,001 for Reddit participants; however, after taking into account household size, median adjusted income was the same across samples at \$30,001-50,000). The Reddit sample had a greater proportion of men (40% male from Reddit vs. 24% male from Twitter) though both samples were predominantly female. The racial and ethnic backgrounds of each of the samples were roughly equal (76% White, 13% Asian, 6% Hispanic or Latinx, 2% Black or African). The surveys were open to participants from around the world, with 71% of the

Twitter sample coming from U.S.-based participants as compared to 66% U.S.-based participants from Reddit.

Results

Differences between samples are reported here if statistically significant.

Practice of minimalism

Those from Reddit reported that minimalism was significantly more different from how they were raised as children as compared to those from Twitter, $M_{\text{Reddit}} = 1.64$ and $M_{\text{Twitter}} = 1.89$, $F(1, 806) = 7.77$, $p = .005$. Those from Twitter were significantly more likely to live with others who also practiced minimalism (54.2% from Twitter vs. 32.3% from Reddit), $\chi^2(4, N = 808) = 20.19$, $p = .0005$. Those from Reddit were significantly more likely to report minimizing physical clutter and belongings (99.5% from Reddit vs. 81.9% from Twitter), $\chi^2(2, N = 808) = 17.01$, $p < .0001$, and digital content (72.1% from Reddit vs. 54.2% from Twitter), $\chi^2(2, N = 808) = 5.40$, $p = .02$, while being significantly less likely to minimize demands on one's time (58.1% from Reddit vs. 63.9% from Twitter), $\chi^2(2, N = 808) = 4.48$, $p < .03$.

Motivations

Those from Reddit were significantly more likely to cite improved psychological well-being among their motivations for pursuing minimalism (89.9% from Reddit vs. 77.1% from Twitter), $\chi^2(2, N = 808) = 7.78$, $p = .005$, as well as a desire to reduce one's environmental impact (71.7% from Reddit vs. 54.2% from Twitter), $\chi^2(2, N = 808) =$

10.22, $p = .001$, while being significantly less likely to cite spiritual or religious reasons (17.1% from Reddit vs. 32.5% from Twitter), $\chi^2(2, N = 808) = 12.49, p = .0004$. In comparing the single most important source of motivation for pursuing minimalism between samples, differences were only apparent between less commonly selected responses; e.g., those from Reddit were over twice as likely to select environmental reasons (11.22% from Reddit vs. 4.8% from Twitter) while those from Twitter were over three times as likely to select spiritual or religious reasons (9.6% from Twitter vs. 2.5% from Reddit), full contingency $\chi^2(9, N = 807) = 24.62, p = .003$. The most commonly selected responses (improved psychological well-being and reduction of stress) were nearly identical across samples, with 37.0% from Reddit and 37.4% from Twitter selecting improved psychological well-being and 26.0% from Reddit and 22.9% from Twitter selecting reduction of stress.

Appendix B: Initial Quantitative Survey Items

Participants first responded to a captcha verification and provided informed consent to participate.

1. What does “minimalism” mean to you? How would you define it?

2. Do you currently live a minimalist lifestyle?

- Yes, and I have for some time
- Yes, but I am just beginning to do so
- No, but I would like to at some point in the future
- No, and I am not interested in doing so

3. How long have you been pursuing minimalism?

Years: _____

Months: _____

4. How different is minimalism from how you were raised as a child?

- Very different
- Somewhat different
- Slightly different
- Not very different

5. As an adult, has pursuing minimalism been very different from how you lived previously?

- Very different
- Somewhat different
- Slightly different
- Not very different

6. Do those you live with also practice minimalism?

- Yes

- Some of them
- No
- Not sure
- Not applicable; I live alone

7. What do you intentionally minimize, declutter, or simplify in your life? Please check all that apply.

- Physical clutter and belongings
- Friendships or relationships with others
- Digital content (such as emails or photos)
- Demands on my time
- Exposure to media (such as social media, news media, TV, or advertising)
- Experiences (e.g., travel, new restaurants)
- Meals or eating behavior
- Other (please describe) _____

8. What are your motivations for pursuing minimalism? Please check all sources of motivation that feel true for you.

- Reduce environmental impact
- Spiritual or religious reasons
- Reduce stress
- Reduce financial burdens
- Improved psychological well-being
- Social or relationship reasons
- Reduce housework burdens
- Free up time
- Visual appeal of an uncluttered space
- Other: please describe _____

9. Which source of motivation for pursuing minimalism is **MOST** important to you?

- Reduce environmental impact
- Spiritual or religious reasons
- Reduce stress
- Reduce financial burdens

- Improved psychological well-being
- Social or relationship reasons
- Reduce housework burdens
- Free up time
- Visual appeal of an uncluttered space
- Other: please describe _____

10. What was going on in your life when you decided to pursue minimalism? Was there anything specific that made you want to live more minimally?

11. There are two aspects of minimalism that get the most attention: (1) minimalism as an aesthetic or design style and (2) minimalism as a philosophy or lifestyle.

Minimalism as an aesthetic or style could be characterized as a visual style with clean lines, neutral colors, and a relatively simple or uncluttered appearance.

Minimalism as a philosophy or lifestyle is often described as owning only that which presently adds value to your life and letting go of the rest.

People who consider themselves minimalists might value both of these elements or only one. **To what degree are each of these elements important or desirable for you?**

Not at all desirable Extremely desirable
 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Minimalism as a design style

Minimalism as a lifestyle

12. How did you learn about minimalism? You may check all that feel true for you.

- Book (may specify)
- Blog (may specify)
- TV show
- Documentary
- Friends or family
- Social media
- News article
- Other, please specify

13. [This item displayed for Reddit respondents only.] Below are 8 statements with which you may agree or disagree. Please indicate your agreement with each item. [Items displayed as a matrix with the following possible responses for each: 1 - *Strongly disagree*, 2 - *Disagree*, 3 - *Slightly disagree*, 4 - *Neither agree nor disagree*, 5 - *Slightly agree*, 6 - *Agree*, 7 - *Strongly agree*]

- I lead a purposeful and meaningful life
- My social relationships are supportive and rewarding
- I am engaged and interested in my daily activities
- I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others
- I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me
- I am a good person and live a good life
- I am optimistic about my future
- People respect me

Please provide the following background information about yourself.

14. What is your age? _____

15. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-describe _____

16. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
17. What is your relationship status?
- Single, never married
 - Partnered for less than 1 year
 - Partnered for more than 1 year
 - Engaged or living together
 - Married
 - Separated or divorced
 - Widowed
18. Do you have children? If yes, please enter the number of children you have.
- Yes _____
 - No
19. What is your current employment status? Please check all that apply.
- Unemployed
 - Employed 1-19 hours per week
 - Employed 20-39 hours per week
 - Employed 40+ hours per week
 - Retired
 - Part-time student
 - Full-time student
20. What is the approximate yearly income that your **household** brings in?
- \$0-15,000
 - \$15,001-30,000
 - \$30,001-50,000
 - \$50,001-70,000
 - \$70,001-100,000
 - \$100,001-150,000
 - \$150,001-250,000
 - Over \$250,000
21. How many people are dependent on this income, **including yourself**? _____

22. How difficult has it been to pay the bills lately?
- Not difficult at all
 - Slightly difficult
 - Fairly difficult
 - Very difficult
23. How would you describe your current living space?
- Single-family detached home
 - Duplex or townhome
 - Condo or apartment
 - Mobile home
 - Travel trailer or camper
 - Tiny home
 - I have no stable residence
 - Other; please specify _____
24. Do you currently rent or own your current living space?
- Rent
 - Own
 - N/A; I do not have a stable residence
25. What best describes the area in which you currently live?
- Rural area
 - Small city or town
 - Suburb near a large city
 - Large city
26. In what country were you born?

▼ United States ... Zimbabwe

27. In what country do you currently live?

▼ United States ... Zimbabwe

28. How would you describe your race or ethnicity? Please check all that apply.
- Asian
 - Black or African
 - White or Caucasian
 - Hispanic or Latino
 - Native American
 - Pacific Islander
 - Other, please specify _____
29. How would you describe your political views?
- Strongly liberal
 - Somewhat liberal
 - Centrist
 - Somewhat conservative
 - Strongly conservative
30. What best describes your religious or spiritual beliefs, if any?
- Christian; may specify _____
 - Islam
 - Catholicism
 - Judaism
 - Hinduism
 - Buddhism
 - Taoism
 - Shinto
 - Sikh
 - Indigenous or folk religion
 - Agnostic
 - Atheist
 - Other: please specify _____
31. [Displayed to Reddit respondents only.] How important is **religion** in your life?
- Not at all important
 - Slightly important
 - Moderately important

- Very important
- Extremely important

32. [Displayed to Reddit respondents only.] How important is **spirituality** in your life?

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Very important
- Extremely important

[Displayed to participants who are at least 18 years of age, living in the U.S., and selected “Yes, and I have for some time” in response to question #2 about currently living a minimalist lifestyle.]

Would you be interested in completing a follow-up phone interview about your experiences pursuing minimalism? The phone interview would take approximately 60-90 minutes and the information you share would be kept confidential. As a thank you for your time, you will receive your choice of a \$20 Amazon gift card or a \$20 donation to the charitable organization of your choosing.

This is completely optional. **If you may be interested in completing an interview with us, please enter your email below.** Entering your email does not commit you to completing an interview. Your email address will not be used for any other reason but to follow up with you about completing an interview with a Duke University researcher.

Appendix C: Qualitative Interview Guide

Preamble

I'm working on my PhD at Duke University studying consumer psychology and in particular, I am focusing on minimalism and how people are practicing it, what draws people to minimalism, and how it affects their lives. So, I'm looking forward to hearing more from you about minimalism in your life.

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

The recording will only be kept until it is transcribed; the audio will not be used for any purpose except to complete transcription. After it is transcribed, any identifying details about you will be removed so that your identity will be kept confidential throughout the research process and for anything that we use these data for.

These interviews usually take about an hour to an hour and a half, though it's a bit up to you and how much you have to share. I am happy to talk for longer but if there are any constraints on your schedule or if you start to get tired at any point, you can always let me know and we can wrap up whenever you need to. Do you know if you have a set time that you need to be done by?

In general, I'm going to be asking you questions about your philosophy and approach to owning and consuming less and how that's affected your life. If there is any question or topic that comes up that you don't feel comfortable talking about, just let me know – we can skip over it and it won't be any problem. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Warm-up and background questions

Before I ask you more specifically about minimalism, I'd like to get a bit of a sense of who you are. Can you tell me a little bit about who you are, how you spend your time, and what life is like for you right now?

Can you tell me about where you live?

- What is your house/apartment like?

- Does anyone else live there with you?
- Do you like where you live?

Can you tell me about what you do for work?

- Are you happy with your job/work?

How long have you been in this field of work?

Philosophy and practice of minimalism

Would you call yourself a “minimalist”?

Why or why not?

How do you define a “minimalist” or “minimalism”?

How would you describe your approach to life in terms of minimalism?

What does this look like for you?

When did you begin living this way?

What made you want to live this way?

People have different reasons for pursuing a simpler lifestyle – environmental concerns, financial security, spiritual reasons, personal reasons. What would you say was your primary motivation for adopting minimalism?

How did you first learn about this lifestyle?

Is there a spiritual and/or religious component to minimalism for you?

Was adopting minimalism a big change from how you were living previously?

Is this lifestyle very different from how you grew up?

What was going in your life when you decided to adopt a more minimalistic lifestyle?

Would you say there was anything specific that pushed you to make this change?

When did this happen?

When you decided to pursue this lifestyle, what did that process of downsizing and changing your habits actually look like? Where did you begin?

How long did it take you to downsize?

Would you say this is still an ongoing process?

How do you make the decisions about what to keep vs. what to get rid of? Do you have specific questions you ask yourself or rules that you use to decide what to get rid of?

Was/is getting rid of things difficult for you?

What were the easiest things to decide to get rid of?

- Why was this an easy/obvious decision?

Can you tell me about some of the possessions that you've chosen to keep?

- What items were the easiest decisions to keep? Why?
- Do you have any go-to brands that you rely on or prefer?

Can you tell me about some specific items that you struggled to get rid of but ultimately decided to let go of?

- How did you make that decision?
- Why did it feel hard to get rid of?
- How do you feel now about having gotten rid of it?

Is there anything you regret having gotten rid of?

Sometimes people hold on to possessions mainly because of the memories they represent. Can you tell me about any possessions like that that you chose to hold onto?

- What memories did they help you hold on to?

Similarly, sometimes people get rid of possessions because they don't want to be reminded of the memories they represent. Can you tell me about any possessions you chose to get rid of because they reminded you of something you didn't want to think about?

Which of your possessions do you feel you get the most value out of?

If you had to estimate, about how much of your possessions did you get rid of?

- For example, what percentage?
- How do you feel about how many possessions you own now?

Thinking of the things that you decided to get rid of, what were your reasons for purchasing them in the first place?

Can you tell me about how you shop for things?

- What factors do you take into consideration now when buying something new?
- Is this different from the past?

Do you have any specific rules or questions you ask yourself when trying to decide what to buy?

Impacts of minimalism

How would you say your life is different since pursuing a more minimalistic lifestyle?

- If participant mentions reduced spending on material goods, ask: What do you do with the money you no longer spend on possessions; do you save that money or do you spend it in other ways?
- Have there been changes in how you spend your time?

Are there things that you've been able to focus more on as a result of minimizing?

How has what is most important to you changed?

1. What would you say is most important to you now?

Has living more minimally led you to change anything else in your life?

Have you noticed changes in yourself since adopting a more minimalistic lifestyle?

How has your relationship to the things you own changed as compared to in the past?

2. Do you feel that the stuff you own now has a different meaning to you than it did before? In what ways?

Has your view of or reaction to advertising and marketing changed since you began living more minimally?

Do you feel like you get more out of the possessions you have now?

Does having less stuff ever make you feel deprived?

A lot of proponents of minimalism talk about many different benefits of pursuing minimalism. What benefits of living minimally have had the biggest impact for you?

Have there been any drawbacks or negatives?

What is the hardest thing about adopting or practicing minimalism?

Do you think simpler living (in some form or another) is something you will pursue for the rest of your life or do you see it as temporary?

3. Do you think it is a sustainable lifestyle?
4. Why/why not?

Given all of the advances in technology and everything that has been made possible by the internet and internet-connected devices, do you think it is harder or easier to practice minimalism now than in the past, say a couple of decades ago?

- o Do you rely on internet and technology more or less now?

Minimalism & other people

Do you share with other people in your life that you live more minimally?

- o Who have you shared this with?
- o How have you shared this with them?

How have people in your life reacted to your practice of living more minimally?

2. Do others in your life also practice a minimalistic lifestyle?

Have your connections with other people changed at all since adopting a more minimalistic lifestyle?

Do you feel a sense of community or connection with other people who live similarly? Or does it feel like a personal/private practice?

Why do you think minimalism has become so much more popular in recent years?

Do you think everyone could benefit from adopting a minimalistic lifestyle?

3. Do you think minimalism is accessible to everyone?
4. Sometimes I read/hear arguments that minimalism is only for people who have reached a certain level of wealth. What do you think about that argument?

What advice would you give to someone just starting out with living more minimally?

Do you have any favorite books/blogs/podcasts/film/minimalism resources that have influenced how you practice minimalism?

Cool down

As someone who's very intentional about how you spend your time and what you let into your life, what made you want to do this interview with me today?

Is there anything else that comes to mind that you think I should know about you or about this topic?

How do you feel about how this interview went?

That is all the questions that I have for you -- do you have any questions for me?

Closing statement

As I mentioned in the survey/post, we are offering interviewees a \$20 amazon gift card OR a \$20 donation to the charity of their choice as a thank you for your time and

contributing to our research. After we get off the phone, I will send you an email with a short survey that will include a question about your preference for payment. After we get that survey back from you, we will process your payment and send you confirmation of whichever you choose, the gift card or the donation.

Appendix D: Positive and Negative Impacts Follow-up Survey Items

1. In general, how much of a difference has practicing minimalism made in your life?

- No difference
- A small difference
- A moderate difference
- A big difference

2. Has your level of happiness changed since practicing minimalism?

- I'm much less happy now
- I'm slightly less happy now
- I'm about as happy as I was before
- I'm slightly more happy now
- I'm much more happy now

3. Has your level of financial security changed since practicing minimalism?

- I'm much less financially secure now
- I'm slightly less financially secure now
- I'm about as financially secure as I was before
- I'm slightly more financially secure now
- I'm much more financially secure now

4. Has your stress level changed since practicing minimalism?

- I'm much less stressed now
- I'm slightly less stressed now
- I'm about as stressed as I was before
- I'm slightly more stressed now
- I'm much more stressed now

5. Have the demands on your time changed since practicing minimalism?

- I have much fewer demands on my time now
- I have slightly fewer demands on my time now
- I have about the same amount of demands on my time as before
- I have slightly more demands on my times now
- I have much more demands on my time now

6. Has your sense of control over your life changed since practicing minimalism?

- I feel much less in control now
- I feel slightly less in control now
- I feel about the same level of control now
- I feel slightly more in control now
- I feel much more in control now

[Benefits Block – Counterbalanced with Drawbacks Block]

7. Which of the following possible **benefits** of practicing minimalism do you experience?

Please check all that apply.

- More free time
- More financial security
- Better social/relationship connections
- Less stress
- More mental clarity
- Less housework/chores
- Increased self-knowledge
- Fewer distractions
- Feel more in control
- Improved physical health
- Improved psychological well-being

- Other, please specify: _____

8. Which of the following benefits of practicing minimalism has made the **most** difference in your life?

- More free time
- More financial security
- Better social/relationship connections
- Less stress
- More mental clarity
- Less housework/chores
- Increased self-knowledge
- Fewer distractions
- Feel more in control
- Improved physical health
- Improved psychological well-being
- Other, please specify: _____
- N/A

[Drawbacks Block – Counterbalanced with Benefits Block]

9. Have you experienced negative impacts from practicing minimalism?

- Yes, a few
- Yes, a lot
- No
- Unsure

10. [displayed for all except those who marked “No” on question 9] Which of the following aspects of your life have been **negatively** impacted by your practice of minimalism? Please check all that are true for you.

- Family relationships
- Romantic relationships
- Friendships
- Work or career
- Demands on my time (feeling greater demands on time)
- Financial security (feeling less financially secure now)
- Stress levels (feeling more stressed now)
- Psychological well-being
- Health
- Other, please specify: _____

11. [displayed for all except those who marked “No” on question 9] Please tell us more about the **negative** impacts you have experienced from practicing minimalism.

12. To what degree have any changes in your life since pursuing minimalism been positive vs. negative?

- Much more positive than negative
- Somewhat more positive than negative
- Slightly more positive than negative
- Neither positive nor negative / Equally positive and negative
- Slightly more negative than positive
- Somewhat more negative than positive
- Much more negative than positive

13. Before the survey ends, is there anything that comes to mind that you think we should know? This question is optional.

Appendix E: Theory Follow-up Survey Items

1. Minimalism as a philosophy or lifestyle is often described as owning only that which adds value to your life and letting go of the rest.

To what degree do you practice a minimalist lifestyle?

Not at all
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Completely



2. [displayed to those reporting >0 on question 1]

How long have you been practicing minimalism?

Years _____

Months _____

3. Please indicate how common it is for you to experience the following situations [response options on 5-point scale from *Never* to *Very often*, except for items 5, 8, 12 which uses indicated anchors]:

1. Do you have the feeling that you really don't care about what is going on around you?
2. Has it happened in the past that you were surprised by the behavior of people whom you thought you knew well?
3. Has it happened that people whom you counted on disappointed you?
4. Do you have the feeling that you are being treated unfairly?
5. Until now your life has had: no clear goals – very clear goals and purpose
6. Do you have the feeling that you are being treated unfairly?
7. Do you have the feeling that you are in an unfamiliar situation and don't know what to do?
8. Doing the things you do every day is: a source of deep pleasure and satisfaction – a source of pain and boredom
9. Do you have very mixed-up feelings and ideas?

10. Does it happen that you experience feelings that you would rather not have to endure?
11. Many people sometimes feel inferior to others in certain situations. How often have you felt this way in the past?
12. When certain events occurred, have you generally found that: you overestimated or underestimated their importance – you assessed the situation correctly?
13. How often do you have the feeling that there is little meaning in the things you do in your daily life?
Items # 2, 6, 8, 9, 11 = Comprehensibility
Items # 3, 5, 10, 13 = Manageability
Items # 1, 4, 7, 12 = Meaningfulness

6. To what degree do you feel that you are rich in the following categories? [response options on a 5-point scale from Not at all to Very much so]

- Friends
- Family
- Romantic partnership
- Free time
- Financial security
- Mental health
- Comfortable living situation
- Physical health
- Self-awareness
- Life satisfaction
- Material possessions
- Community or social support

7. Please indicate how often the following statements have been true for you [response options on 5-point scale from *Never* to *Very often*]:

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?

4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside your control?
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

8. Think for a moment about everything that you own. In general, to what extent do the things you own contribute to your well-being?

[response options on 7-point scale, 1 = "The things I own harm my well-being," 4 = "The things I own have no impact on my well-being," and 7 = "The things I own support my well-being"]

9. What is your age?

10. What is your gender?

Female

Male

Non-binary

Prefer to self-describe: _____

Prefer not to say

11. What is the highest level of education that you have completed? [dropdown list]

12. What is the approximate yearly income that your household brings in?

\$0-15,000

\$15,001-30,000

\$30,001-50,000

\$50,001-70,000

\$70,001-100,000

\$100,001-150,000

\$150,001-250,000

Over \$250,000

13. How many people are dependent on this income, including yourself? _____

14. Which social class do you most identify with? You may check more than one if that feels the most true for you.

Upper class

Upper middle class

Lower middle class

Working class

Poor

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Biography

As a route to accessing higher education, Aimee Chabot enlisted in the U.S. Army in 2006. She was an honor graduate of the U.S. Army Intelligence Center in 2007 and served for four years as a military intelligence analyst. Among other assignments, she deployed to Kosovo as a peacekeeper with the United Nations for the year following Kosovo's declaration of independence.

Aimee received her B.A. from the University of California, San Diego in 2013, majoring in Psychology with a minor in Critical Gender Studies. As an undergraduate, she was a Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program scholar and became a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Psi Chi Honor Societies. Aimee completed an honors thesis in Psychology, which was awarded the Norman Henry Anderson Honors Thesis Award for Independent Contributions to Research, and a second honors thesis in Critical Gender Studies, which was awarded the CGS Department Honors Thesis Award. Aimee completed her M.A. in Psychology from UCSD in 2014. As a graduate student at UCSD, she was awarded the Eugene Cota-Robles Graduate Research Fellowship.

Aimee began the PhD program at Duke University in 2015. As a graduate student at Duke, she has been the recipient of a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, a University Scholars Program fellowship, and the James B. Duke Fellowship. She has co-authored papers in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of*

Sciences, Psychological Science, Sex Roles, and Contemporary Clinical Trials, and a chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Adolescent Substance Abuse*.