

Covid-19 silver lining: A simplistic consumption metamorphosis?

 By [Ilse Struweg](#)

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Consumer consumption has long evolved beyond its primary functional purpose of serving consumers' most basic human needs in Maslow's hierarchy. This has positioned marketing as a central protagonist in presenting the mass scale consumption of goods and services since the late 20th century as an elemental - rather than purely epiphenomenal - characteristic of society, as suggested in Peter Corrigan's book, *Sociology of Consumption* (1997).



Source: [Pexels](#)

Such consumption has been invigorated by unlimited options, ease of payment, engaging marketing communication efforts, and technological advances that have further fueled consumers' hedonic motives and thus increased the profits of businesses.

Modern consumption is driven by various factors, such as consumers' desire to acquire experiences, services, and products to reach 'well-earned' states of happiness and comfort, and to gratify material needs that just happen to satisfy certain physical needs. Many consumers also use their consumption to communicate a certain lifestyle, their social class, and their value judgements. As a result, many consumers have reached the point where the distinction between essential and unnecessary experiences, services, and products has become blurred.

Like many previous global historic events – although even more so – the Covid-19 pandemic has precipitated a crisis of meaning whose abnormal effects have created an abyss. Simultaneously, one of the aftermaths of Covid-19 has been its impact on Baudrillard's (1970) model of mass consumption, through various levels of confinement and restrictions. As a result, an adjusted consumption model appears to likely – one that compels simplicity as its principal feature.



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The idea of voluntarily simpler consumption is most definitely not new. Richard Gregg introduced it in 1936 while exploring Ghandi's lifestyle – one of low consumption, ecological responsibility, and self-sufficiency – which avoided the clutter of many possessions that were irrelevant to the main purpose in life: securing true abundance, based on exercising restraint in other dimensions of life.

In essence, a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity means that consumers are willing and content to purchase fewer products. The unprecedented context of Covid-19 has not only led consumers to question their purchase decisions and to change their behavioural patterns of consumption voluntarily, but has also led to the involuntary adaptation to simpler choices that have been brought about by lockdowns and by restricted movements and shopping hours.

Additionally, some consumers have decided to buy locally, rather than consuming foreign brands and products; and many have turned to do-it-yourself projects (such as baking and gardening).

Excessive consumption has been blamed for causing some of the world's major problems, including global poverty, global warming that results in environmental degradation, and even consumer discomfort. Perhaps the Covid-19 era is an opportune time for a shift from materialist consumption to simpler lifestyles, to transition to a more sustainable society in which consumers focus on what is really needed.

Marketing opportunities

Although it is acknowledged that the voluntary simplicity movement's understanding is more complex than first appears, and is probably easier to apply in developed countries, there are still several opportune marketing moments to be considered.

Marketing strategies should capitalise on the window of opportunity in the Covid-19 era of consumers' voluntarily simpler consumption behaviour. Marketers could create customer engagement activities specifically for individuals who are inclined to adopt a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity – and for those who have been forced to adopt to such a lifestyle by the various restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.



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Perhaps retailers could focus more on products that consumers can create themselves. Marketers have the opportunity to focus their marketing communication activities on the quality, functionality and longevity of products (and to deliver on that promise) rather than focusing on a "You deserve it" narrative. It is an opportune time to focus on sponsoring social responsibility projects that further promote voluntarily simpler behaviour.

And, yes, it is true that, after the Covid-19 crisis, many consumers will most likely return to their pre-Covid consumption

habits. Even so, one can hope that consumers will have had time to interrogate their own creation of meaning through their consumption patterns, and so be encouraged to discover for themselves the alternatives offered by simpler patterns of consumption.

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