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Researched Position Paper: Consumer Minimalism

Introduction: You may ask, “What is consumer minimalism?” Consumer minimalism is a lifestyle choice in which people who can already afford the essentials of life choose to buy, use, and live with less material things. “Minimalistic consumers focus on simplicity by decreasing their consumption and lessening or limiting the number of possessions” (Duong et al).

Supporters of this lifestyle approach say that it solves the problem of overconsumption and the stress of “keeping up with the Joneses.” Opponents of this approach say that it goes too far, overpromises solutions, and produces other problems. I’m on the side of the supporters, although we don’t have to 100% go to the way of extreme minimalism. Since we are all consumers, especially in consumer-driven societies like modern America, then knowing how to use consumer minimalism will help us make informed choices for how best to spend our hard-earned money.

Background History: Let’s start with some background history. I became interested in consumer minimalism around the late-2010’s, when books like Marie Kondo’s *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* and DIY home improvement shows like *Tiny House Nation* began to get popular in mainstream and social media. I learned that “Minimalism in consumption can be expressed in various forms, such as monochromatic home design, wardrobe capsules, tiny home living, and decluttering” (Wilson and Bellezza). As a child of Filipino immigrants in a big family, these proponents of consumer minimalism appealed to me because I grew up an

unintentional minimalist, as my family needed to stretch our household income to the next paycheck. We did “reduce, reuse, recycle” before it was even a “green” slogan, when outgrown clothes got handed down to the younger kids, empty Cool Whip and margarine tubs became food storage containers for leftovers, and we called what we did “being frugal.” However, as my parents and siblings improved economically over the years, I also saw my family start to buy more than what we really needed, and “wants” started to become “needs,” which is called “lifestyle creep”: one car became four cars, cell phones were upgraded even though the older models were still fine, and impulse shopping from places like Amazon increased because it’s a good deal or it’s popular. I saw my parents’ and siblings’ respective homes become so overcrowded and cluttered because of overconsumption that they would sometimes forget what they had purchased or even why they wanted those purchases in the first place.

In contrast, when I became my own homeowner, my childhood minimalist habits stuck with me, mostly so that I wouldn’t worry about living paycheck to paycheck or getting into scary debt due to lifestyle creep. Also, I became a single mom at the same time when the popularity of consumer minimalism in social media exploded with content creators: tiny house owners gave tours, van lifers vlogged their day-to-day schedule, retirees and divorced individuals decluttered their living spaces and downsized their homes, and so on. Even more recently, fashion even got the consumer minimalist treatment; as [Trang Duong et al.](#) explains, “Several leading brands, such as Muji, COS, and Patagonia, also inspired the simplicity value by offering minimalist clothing styles and homewares that are made to last and encourage consumers to buy less.” So, I had learned how popular consumer minimalism was from Instagram and YouTube, which to this day I find both fascinating and personally informative. But – as mentioned before – I’m the odd one out in my family. My parents and siblings would see consumer minimalism as a form of

suffering, almost against the immigrant's American Dream of getting rich and having the freedom to buy whatever we want, whenever we want, and sharing the wealth with others through material things – which brings me to the opposition's viewpoint.

The Opposition's Viewpoint: Those who oppose consumer minimalism come from different viewpoints because they have different reasons for their overconsumption, but I'll narrow the scope to just two. The first oppositional viewpoint I call the *conspicuous* consumer from Veblen's "conspicuous consumption" (Trigg). They are those who in the past were so low-income, even poverty-level, that just paying the basics of day-to-day living was a struggle. But now they are financially prosperous enough to indulge in luxuries, to signal to the world that they have succeeded economically and socially. My own family, specifically my immigrant parents, hold that viewpoint. My parents would "spend money on artifacts of consumption in order to give an indication of their wealth to other members of society" (Trigg) – that is, they would signal to others that they have achieved the American Dream by their material things. This signaling even included themselves, as my parents would behold their big McMansion home, their multiple high-end vehicles, and their filled-to-the-brim closets, and they would feel a sense of security and pride. Many persons with a low-income background but then rose economically – either through their jobs or luck or both – would find this oppositional viewpoint familiar. Therefore, consumer minimalism for some *conspicuous* consumers would feel like regression, falling back into the financial struggles of the past, when they had low socioeconomic status and the insecurity that comes with that.

Similarly, the other oppositional viewpoint I call the *maximalist* consumer from the field of fashion and design. This is where "more is more" (Zomorodi et al). They are those who use their *conspicuous* consumption as a form of self-expression, to signal their strong identity,

unique personality, and self-worth. I again bring my parents, specifically my mom, as she indulged her love of knock-off designer handbags; large collection of colorful makeup, jewelry, and tailored dresses and pant suits; and regular visits to hair salons and aestheticians to make “loud and proud” her five foot, elderly Filipina self. Like queer costume designer and performance artist Machine Dazzle (Zomorodi et al), my mom when she was young had been marginalized (that is, being treated as insignificant and powerless): she was a poor farmer’s daughter in 1950’s Philippines and later a low-income Filipino immigrant in 1970’s America. So, her consumer choice to have “more is more” is a gift for her younger self who didn’t have a voice to say she deserved beautiful, expensive things. Many persons who are marginalized for various reasons – whether it be their past, their identity, their job, or even their passionate hobbies – would find this second oppositional viewpoint familiar. Therefore, consumer minimalism for some *maximalist* consumers would also feel like regression, falling back into a past when they couldn’t stand out as an individual, when they were taught to fit in and be like everybody else in their childhood community. As an adult child of my parents, I understand the reasons for these two oppositional viewpoints – the *conspicuous* consumer and the *maximalist* consumer -- yet I still disagree with both viewpoints.

My Rebuttal of the Opposition: Of course, the reasons behind both *conspicuous* and *maximalist* consumers are valid and make perfect sense, as seen in my parents’ background and experiences. However, I still choose consumer minimalism because of flawed assumptions when those reasons are put into action, resulting in negative effects. To recap, *conspicuous* consumers “spend money on artifacts of consumption in order to give an indication of their wealth to other members of society” (Trigg), but the assumption that outward signs of wealth equal actual wealth is flawed. We don’t need to struggle to find examples of truly wealthy people living modest,

unassuming lives: one persuasive example would be billionaire investor Warren Buffett (“Business Insight”). Also, to recap, *maximalist* consumers believe in the motto of “more is more” (Zomorodi et al) – the assumption being that the more the “good” things are, the more benefits, especially when expressing personal design and personality through *conspicuous* consumption. However, the counter to that *maximalist* consumer assumption would be “Too much of a good thing is *too much* of a good thing.” Just like eating too much delicious food can give us a stomachache, too much *maximalist* consumption can have unintended negative effects, like unmanageable clutter, reduced usable space, misplaced or lost items, or boredom of special, unique purchases that are no longer special because they are no longer new – which leads to another cycle of buying for another special, unique item. I’ve seen these negative effects in my parents’ home, where my mom’s unique quality of style gets drowned out by excess quantity. And both forms of consumption – *conspicuous* and *maximalist* – have the same shared negative financial effects of increased consumer debt, high maintenance costs, and low priority in saving money for an emergency or long-term investment, whether that be retirement or their children’s education, as I’ve also seen and personally impacted. So, I choose consumer minimalism over these two oppositional viewpoints.

Of course, I choose consumer minimalism not only to avoid the negative effects of overconsumption, but also for the benefits consumer minimalism has provided. The obvious benefit is financial: the less stuff I buy and own, the more money I have. The more money I have, the more financial options I can do with it, like paying off debts, having an emergency fund, supporting family members who need financial help, paying for an occasional bucket-list vacation, and saving for retirement. But the less obvious benefit is psychological: the peace of mind of not worrying about money; the peace of mind of not being overwhelmed into choice

paralysis with too many outfits to choose, too many meals to make, and so on; the freedom in being able to go anywhere without being slowed down with too much stuff; the empowerment that I can pay to solve my own problems and even help pay to solve the problems for those I care about. But ultimately, consumer minimalism has freed up my time because I don't have to work overtime to pay for consumer debt and I don't have to work on the evenings and weekends to clean a huge house and do massive loads of laundry. Dr. **Nicole Olynk Widmar** asks, "In other words, does the lack of 'stuff' in my possession — with or without having saved resources (money) — make me happier?" I would answer, "Yes."

However, consumer minimalism is a spectrum, so there is plenty of room for even *conspicuous* and *maximalist* consumers to practice consumer minimalism. For instance, some consumer minimalists prioritize "green" conservation and environmental sustainability with their minimalist decision-making (**Trang et al, Meissner**), but I don't. I own a regular suburban house (as opposed to living in tiny home or van). I drive a gas car, commuting from my home to work over twenty miles away. I have a bookcase filled with actual books and have kept some of my student papers from my undergraduate and graduate days. I have no problem drinking water from a plastic bottle. As **Miriam Meissner** points out, "minimalist interpretations of socio-ecological mindfulness [from "green consumer minimalists] tend to focus on individual experience and choice". If we expand this "individual" idea to include any consumer, then why and how we apply consumer minimalism will depend on our own individual experience and choice. In other words, if some consumers like my parents decide to practice consumer minimalism, it wouldn't look like how I do it – as it should be as they aren't me, and I'm not them.

Conclusion: **Thus, I believe that we consumers should all practice consumer minimalism in our own individual way since it will help us make informed choices for how best to spend our**

time and hard-earned money. Especially in an uncertain economy, overconsumption like *conspicuous* and *maximalist* consumers will lead to needless stress. In contrast, the various consumer minimalist methods “revolve around the reduction of material belongings, mental distraction, and work-life stress” (Meissner), with benefits in both financial and psychological health. Whether consumer minimalism can solve your current consumer problem or provide those consumer benefits I can’t guarantee, but I recommend trying an approach that makes sense in your situation -- and find out for yourself.

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