

## The Simple Man: A Consumer Identity Project?

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### Abstract

In this study we analyze the Simple Man, or those men who have above average means in education, household income, or net worth but who consume conspicuously below their means. We interviewed ten such men and found that these men have highly individualistic identities and backgrounds, yet appear to stray away from products that separate them from others. These men also seem to have reached self-actualization, not needing products or material possessions to achieve fulfillment, status, or identity. These men have tastes that reflect low cultural capital (LCC) consumption but have the means and educations in many instances to engage in high cultural capital (HCC) consumption. The men in this study adamantly proclaim that they do not define themselves by what they own but neither do they appear to define themselves primarily by what they do, at least in terms of occupation. In short, these men appear complex in many ways yet live simple lives, or what might be termed complex simplicity.

**Keywords:** Cultural capital, anti-consumption, voluntary simplicity, anti-corporate, and materialism.



## The Simple Man: A Consumer Identity Project?

### Introduction

Forget your lust for the rich man's gold  
All that you need is in your soul  
And you can do this if you try  
All that I want for you my son  
Is to be satisfied.

And be a simple kind of man  
Be something you love and understand  
Be a simple kind of man  
Won't you do this for me son,  
If you can?

--*Simple Man lyrics from Lynyrd Skynyrd*

“To be a simple kind of a man,” is there really such a thing? If so, has the essence of the Simple Man in today's postmodern society already been captured through non-materialism, low cultural capital, voluntarily simplicity, minimalism, or anti-corporatism? Has the soul of the Simple Man been revealed through the Mountain Man Myth or through the Burning Man participants? Perhaps the Simple Man is a little of all of these characteristics, or perhaps something more or completely different.

In this study we call attention to the Simple Man, or those men who have above average incomes or net worth, or above average educations yet tend to live what appear to be simple lives. In 2005, over 26 million American men age 25 years and older reported they had attained at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) and holders of this degree made average earnings above the median (Census Bureau Data, 2006). Some of these individuals are likely included in the voluntary simplicity movement, which is largely viewed to be a lifestyle of the well off, and research alludes to this group's potential role as opinion leaders (Huneke, 2005). The varying definitions

of voluntary simplicity make it difficult to quantify the number of adherents, but some conservatively estimate ten percent of the U.S. adult population or 20 million people (Elgin, 2003).

The informants in our study, as will be revealed, are apparently unconcerned so much with material possessions and tend to march by the beat of their own drum. Many appear to have become disillusioned with the promise of the “good life” and have resigned to a much more self-fulfilling existence. These are men who seem to have life figured out on a different level, who can’t be lured by a “rich man’s” gold. While in earlier times some of these men may have jumped at the chance to make more money, grab hold of more possessions, or attain higher status, they now appear to have become self-actualized, precociously in some cases. Without envy, they look at others who want material goods and status as simply being different. Because these men have above average means, in most cases, the marketing implications become self-evident. Though perhaps difficult to identify, these men could potentially be targeted for philanthropy and experiential activities.

We examine the Simple Man in the context of consumer identity projects, such as Kozinets’ (2002) Burning Man participants, Thompson and Arsel’s (2004) anti-Starbucks consumers, and Belk and Costa’s (1998) Mountain Men. Unlike some of these consumers, the Simple Man does not act in rage, harbor ill-feelings toward those with more possessions than he, or exhibit frustration or contempt toward big corporations. In fact, the Simple Man appears to be happy for or supportive of those who have more. The Simple Man may not even constitute a consumer identity project, for he does not relate to the desire to seek identity through consumption or active anticonsumption. While he

refrains from defining himself by possessions, he does not go to the extreme of actively resisting brands (Holt, 2002) or using an oppositional narrative to frame his consumption preferences (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Though research on materialism (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002) indicate that those who are high on collectivism have more difficulties with materialism than those who are individualistic, our findings seem to indicate something else. The informants in our study are all men who were socialized in individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 1983) and have individualistic characteristics, yet appear to carry the same sense of dissonance as collectivist consumers when faced with choices of acquiring material possessions. This study explores this conflict and addresses whether something else is at play, aside from individualism versus collectivism, to create these feelings.

We also explore whether those individuals who might be considered high in cultural capital (HCC), as defined by Holt (1998), have what might be considered low cultural capital (LCC) tastes. In other words, to what extent do those who have a broad cultural milieu and elevated sensibilities prefer lifestyles and demonstrate consumption behaviors of those with more practical, utilitarian tastes. We begin our study with an analysis of the literature, focusing not only on cultural capital, but also materialism, anticorporate behavior, voluntary simplicity, and social isolationism.

### Literature Review

Achieving a self-identity through what one has rather than what one does has become paramount in the United States, and conspicuous consumption is often viewed as the means by which individuals differentiate their social categories (Belk, 1984a). Holt (1998) agrees that consumption continues to reinforce social class but counters that

consumption patterns, not objects, differentiate between the idealism of the cultural elite and the materialism of the lower social strata. At its most extreme, individuals seek happiness and fulfillment in the goods they buy, as consumption is central to one's life due to the "belief that well-being can be enhanced through one's relationships with objects" (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002, p. 349). Holt (1998), however, finds that materialists are no more (or less) motivated by status enhancement than individuals with elite tastes, or high cultural capital. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) find that materialism is related to heightened levels of stress among collectivist individuals and this psychological "tension mediates the relationship between materialism and subjective well-being for individuals with a high degree of collective-oriented values but not for those with a low degree of collective-oriented values" (p. 365).

Some argue marketing indirectly contributes to consumer and societal unhappiness by stimulating an ever increasing level of consumer wants and contributing to a legacy of materialism, as parents with limited opportunities pass their material aspirations to their children (Chinoy, 1952). By emphasizing the importance of materialistic beliefs, marketing may add to the psychological tension of a society that promotes a social compact to help and give (Belk, 1984b). Marketing may also play a direct role by attaching symbolic (Belk, 1985) and cultural meaning to goods, which can then be transferred from goods to individuals via exchange rituals (McCracken, 1986). We may expect to find those who lead simple lives face a daily struggle to reconcile their minimalist tendencies with larger society's embrace of materialism. Literature suggests this conflict may be due to a collectivist orientation.



Placing the Simple Man within the context of a larger social debate on globalization may help explain the motivations for his consumption choices. An anti-corporate countercultural movement has emerged in opposition to transnational companies and their global brands. Proponents of the homogenization argument view global brands as culture-crushing corporations that colonize local cultures, while the heterogeneity perspective finds global brands take on localized meaning (Thompson and Arsel, 2004), with consumers using brands as resources in creative self-identity projects (Holt, 2002). Thompson and Arsel (2004) introduce the hegemonic brandscape, a “cultural system of service-scapes that are linked together and structured by discursive, symbolic, and competitive relationships to a dominant market-driving experiential brand” (p. 632). They find that anti-Starbucks consumers establish loyalty to local coffee shops through a “culturally diffused oppositional narrative” (p. 639) stemming from an antiglobalization social movement. Some have a “cosmopolitan desire” to take part in authentic culture and view corporate brands as contrived, boring, and standardized while others act from an “emancipatory desire” to escape profit-driven capitalism and hold a more militant, sociopolitical opposition to brands (Thompson and Arsel, 2004, p. 639). What differences exist between these anti-corporate consumers who identify with a movement and those who act in isolation and are there more moderate anti-corporatists who do not define themselves by the brands they oppose? Literature suggests the Simple Man may seek either authenticity or escape from capitalism and global brands may serve as a focal point for expressing consumption preferences.

By his vary nature of choosing to live below his means, the Simple Man may fit within the voluntary simplicity movement. Voluntary simplicity refers to a conservation-

oriented lifestyle involving spirituality, avoidance of material possessions that do not contribute to the purpose of life, and a belief that restraint in some areas of life enables greater achievements in others (Leonard-Barton, 1981). Leonard-Barton (1981) defines it “as the degree to which an individual selects a lifestyle intended to maximize his/her direct control over daily activities and to minimize his/her consumption and dependency” (p. 244). Choice is a key theme (Huneke, 2005; Leonard-Barton, 1981), as opposed to involuntary simplicity resulting from economic or monetary constraints (Leonard-Barton, 1981). While simplifiers may share beliefs with anti-corporatists, Zavestoski (2002) argues voluntary simplicity involves an existential crisis while the latter involves an economic crisis (Bekin *et al.*, 2005); therefore, one would expect that those who have sound economic means might experience an existential crisis.

Voluntary simplicity contrasts with materialism, and Richins and Dawson (1992) found a negative relationship between the two. Elgin and Mitchell (1977) identify five basic values central to voluntary simplicity, comprising material simplicity, self-determination, ecological awareness, personal growth, and a desire for human-scale institutions and technologies. Leonard-Barton (1981) distinguishes among “conservers” who have been brought up to disdain waste of all kinds, “crusaders” who feel a social responsibility to lead a simple life, and “conformists” who may be motivated by a desire to fit in or guilt at being wealthy. Bekin *et al.* (2005) recognize idiosyncrasies and powers of the market as structural forces motivating people to take on a simpler life as “an alternative to the paradoxical work-to-consume ethic” (p. 416). Etzioni (1998) segments simplifiers into three types of varying degrees: “downshiffters” maintain much of their luxurious lifestyle; strong simplifiers trade high paying, high stress jobs for lower income

and more time; and the simple living movement comprises individuals who make drastic changes to their lifestyle (Bekin *et al.*, 2005; Huneke, 2005). Studies have found American voluntary simplifiers are more likely to be younger, female, Caucasian, and highly educated although income levels vary (Huneke, 2005; Leonard-Barton, 1981).

Maslow's theory of human motivation is often called upon to describe a person whose basic needs have been satisfied and may move on to realize higher needs of self-actualization. This parallels the view that as societies experience higher levels of economic and physical security, basic values shift from a materialist emphasis on "physical sustenance and safety" to a post-materialist emphasis on "belonging, self-expression and the quality of life" (Inglehart, 1981, p. 880). This lends credence to the perspective that voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle of the well-off. However, Huneke (2005) distinguishes two types of needs and suggests "the point on Maslow's hierarchy at which an individual shifts focus from deficit to growth needs varies greatly from one individual to the next" (p. 545).

One may question whether voluntary simplicity leads to greater feelings of happiness and satisfaction with life, especially considering materialism's negative relationship to these indicators of subjective wellbeing. Materialism's negative correlation to collective-oriented values (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002) may imply that voluntary simplicity is positively related to collectivism. Based upon this logic, we might anticipate the Simple Man to be a collectivist. He should recognize the tradeoff between his choice of lifestyle and that which his means could afford. We may also expect him to exhibit values and motivations found in voluntary simplifiers and he may or may not strictly adhere to the principles of voluntary simplicity. Our literature review

suggests the Simple Man may focus on the need for self-actualization but may also view the marketplace as a resource for obtaining ideas and products that afford a more manageable and gratifying lifestyle (Huneke, 2005).

Another stream of literature that may add to our understanding of the Simple Man is social isolationism. Throughout history religious leaders, writers, and poets have consciously chosen isolation as a means to achieve solitude that is believed to enable spiritual growth and creativity (Long *et al.*, 2003). Some people seek positive types of solitude to escape the oppressiveness of excess sociality or to rebel against the oppressiveness of traditional societal norms and expectations. The 1960s counter culture movement (Holt, 2002), the 1980s punk counterculture (Fox, 1987), and voluntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton, 1981) exemplify individuals who make a concerted effort to distance themselves from larger society and exercise control over their daily lives.

Social isolationism has been examined within the field of consumer research in an attempt to explain why and how some individuals voluntarily stand apart from society and reject marketing dictates. Ozanne and Murray's (1995) postmodern reflexively defiant consumer has a critical awareness that consumption perpetuates social domination and chooses consumption patterns that defy the prescribed consumption code. While this view holds that consumers need an awakening, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) find examples of consumer resistance in everyday life. They suggest a vision of the liberated postmodern consumer as one who engages in "creative resistance" (Holt, 2002) and creates his own culture without relying on marketers' guidance.

Both theories suggest the Simple Man will gain independence from the market when he frees himself from its cultural authority. Holt (2002) counters that acts of

reflexive and creative resistance actually occur within the market and personal sovereignty itself becomes commodified. Based upon this, we may expect to find the Simple Man actively resisting market meaning, whereby consumption remains fundamental to identity formation. Holt (2002) predicts that in the post-postmodern era, some consumers will “opt out of brand-assisted identities to pursue other bases of identity formation” or will create “narrowly focused consumption communities” (p. 87) that allow only a fraction of consumer culture to penetrate.

Consumer identity projects such as Belk and Costa’s (1998) Mountain Man Myth and Kozinets’ research on Burning Man participants (2002) and *Star Trek* fans (2001) examine how consumers construct self-identity through consumption practices and resources available in the market. In each, a consumption ideology and material possessions are central to identity formation. Identity projects are contextualized to illuminate the ways in which macro, meso, and micro level forces shape an individual’s construction of identity, which is tied to group affiliation. Mountain Men and Burning Man participants are believed to temporarily escape the market’s influence while taking part in their sacred events, where group norms help create an alternate reality. *Star Trek* fans are not discussed in terms of liberation from the market, but more in terms of their continual struggle to reconstitute meaning and reclaim their own individual identities from society and producers of the show. Consumption or anticonsumption being this fervent among our Simple Man participants remains to be seen.

### Methodology

For this study we used a qualitative method because we wanted to uncover the latent motives, meanings, consequences, and overall themes entrenched in Simple Man

consumption practices, and chose the personal interview as the technique. We used what McCracken (1988) terms the long qualitative interview, a lengthy interview that is undertaken to understand the world from the subject's perspective and the context that shapes his or her experiences. McCracken (1988) claims that eight interviews are sufficient to engage in this process. We conducted ten interviews with individuals in the West and Midwest. Most of the informants were known to the interviewers, as insight about wealth or education was needed in order to form our sample pool. Ages of the informants were between 37 and 72 (see table 1). In 2005 in the United States, the real median earnings of men was \$41,386, the real median income of households was \$46,326 (DeNavas-Walt *et al.*, 2006) and the median household net worth was \$465,970 (Riper, 2006). Each of our informants, except for the Catholic priest, exceeded at least the median income or net worth median. An estimated 28 percent of U.S. adults age 25 years and older had attained at least a bachelor's degree and ten percent held at least a master's degree in 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 ). Most of our informants had a bachelor's degree, with the majority having at least a master's level degree.

Our method of inquiry began with "both a review and a 'deconstruction' of the scholarly literature" (McCracken, 1988, p. 31) to identify analytic categories and their relations. Understanding existing assumptions and expectations within academia enabled us to recognize contradictory data that we collected. The literature also helped suggest categories and their relations that helped establish additional topics to investigate.

Once we conducted the interviews, we engaged in coding the data per the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Open coding involves breaking down the data to identify ideas, events, incidents, and acts.

Each author developed such codes and examined areas of convergence. In our study, for example, such convergent codes included the fact that these men seem to downplay success, view material objects in many cases as burdens, and place relationships as primary motives. From these findings, we then used microanalysis to create higher order concepts called categories. Categories stand for phenomena, or “repeated patterns of happenings, events, or actions/interactions that represent what people do or say, alone or together, in response to the problems and situations in which they find themselves” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 130). To extend the example used above, we determined from our literature review that our convergent codes meant that these men appeared to be following the dictates of self-actualization. We therefore used this code and other second order findings as nuggets for analysis in our findings.

Our next step involved axial coding. To aid in contextualizing and establishing relationships among phenomena, Strauss and Corbin (1998) offer a paradigm that integrates “structure” (p. 127), or the conditions that give rise to a phenomenon, with “process” (p. 127), or the action/interaction over time of individuals and groups in response to a phenomenon, and the resulting consequences. This involves analyzing data to discover how action/interaction “can change in response to shifts in the context” and how “in turn, action/interaction can bring about changes in the context, thus becoming part of the conditions framing the next action/interaction sequence” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 165). We projected what we felt were conditions that might create differences in our results. For example, in our discussion we determined that one’s urbanicity or upbringing in a small town versus a big city may have an impact on their moral grounding.

## Findings

### Premature Self-Actualization

Maslow's theory of the Hierarchy of Needs suggests that people self-actualize when all of their more basic needs have been satisfied. As stated in Reiss and Havercamp (2005), Maslow believed that older, more mature people are inclined to reach this peak experience more so than others. A contemporary study examined the degree of self-actualization among participants younger and older than the age of 36 and findings indicate a declining interest in lower motives as individuals age (Reiss and Havercamp, 2005). The men in our study are all over the age of 36 and appear to have self-actualized, though our data indicate that these markers of self-actualization have been in place for most, if not all, of their lives. In general, our informants provided glimpses of why we believe they have self-actualized, including elements of contentment, a lack of envy, and a yearning for edifying experiences. These men also seemed to realize that material possessions do not lead to happiness and feel their legacies will not necessarily be earth-shattering. For the most part, these men were concerned with being physically fit, but in a way that reinforced personal fulfillment rather than status or wanting to look good to impress others.

Several of our informants alluded to the notion of contentment, which to us described a feeling of being satisfied in terms of their more basic needs for safety, security and belongingness, and a lack of longing for material possessions. This contrasts with some of the previously mentioned consumer identity projects that find individuals yearning for certain material objects to help define themselves. These men also seemed content in terms of their need for affiliation, as they generally described strong



relationships with their family members and friends. Noticeably absent was a striving toward status. Though some sought promotions in their careers or more money, the motivation could not be attached to creating favorable separation from others but to providing better lives for others. When Jim, a pharmacy manager in his mid 40s was asked to describe the perfect life for himself, he suggested that winning the lottery would not be bad, but the money would be primarily used for friends and family:

I would like to win the lottery but I'd like to win enough money so I could give it to all my friends and of course take care of family and have plenty of money left over for donations, etc. Even if you won all the money in the world you can't do everything with it if you don't have friends to do it with because they have jobs, they have a life, they've got to do stuff too. So that would be the perfect world if you didn't have to worry about money.

The Catholic priest in our sample, according to his own words, was striving to earn his doctorate to better teach the doctrine of Catholicism and better lead young priests into the values the church had once been known for but lost recently to scandal. His reason for acquiring knowledge was motivated by how it could better humankind, not his selfish desires:

When I go back to the seminary, I want to talk about responsible media use and, you know, I'm not – when I preach, I don't say, "Get rid of your TV." I mean I say – what I do say is certain families – certain Catholic families – in the parish have done this and they find it quite rewarding but if one does watch TV, there's a way of watching it correctly, you know, and it's kind of like informing people to use media responsibly and not let it control you.

Our informants generally appeared to not only be content with their lots in life, but also free of envy for those who have more possessions, thereby once again hinting toward self-actualization. In some cases, the informants realized that they could have more possessions, bigger homes, and more luxurious cars, but chose to live simpler lives in order to reduce stress. The lack of envy demonstrated was genuine and not due to a

rationalization process associated with those whose resources are more limited. This exemplifies the notion of conscious choice found in existing research on voluntary simplicity. Many informants simply responded that such a lifestyle is fine if that is what these people want. Ben, a nearly retired school teacher in his late 50s, said, "If it works for them, I figure it's their business. It's their choice in terms of what's important to them and style or whatever." When we asked our informants to give us their impressions of the quote, "Those who die with the most toys wins," the responses invariably indicated that they were neither jealous nor bitter. When we asked Jose, an engineer in his early 40s, whether he ever becomes envious of people who have things that he'd like to have, he responded with the following:

I used to, like I said before, when money was the thing. But now I really try to focus on the positive parts of things and being thankful for the things that I have, not for the things that I don't have.

When we asked Bob, a rancher in his late 30s, how he feels about people who own a lot of material possessions, he answered in the following manner:

I sometimes wonder how the person feels [who] has those items or what they're really going through. . . . I see a lot of young people with lots of toys and I wonder for one . . . what kind of stresses are they putting on themselves to have those items and maybe I shouldn't feel that way. Maybe they're not having any problems but sometimes I just feel concern, you know, when I see people with a lots of items like that.

Some, however, realized with laughter that these lifestyles are fruitless and unfulfilling.

Ben, the nearly retired school teacher, thought that the statement "He who dies with the most toys wins" was stupid:

Because everybody who dies ends up with no toys. Once you're dead, they don't belong to you anymore. They belong to somebody else. They're not yours. There's more to life than toys.

Another indication that these men were self-actualizing was the need for edifying experiences over possessions. Similar to those who choose social isolation as a means to free themselves to pursue higher goals (Long *et al.*, 2003), confront society's traditions (Fox, 1987), or reclaim control over everyday life (Leonard-Barton, 1981), these men seem to distance themselves from conventional consumption as a way to free themselves from material constraints. The informants indicated that vacations, overseas trips, and more time with their children were the highest priorities, and that tying themselves to other more materialistic outcomes was more of a burden than highlight. These trips in some regard contained elements of a pilgrimage and *communitas* (Arnould and Price, 1993), where uniting, recreating, becoming reborn were paramount to work, or reasons for work. Jose, for example, recently went on a religious pilgrimage with his wife to the Vatican in Rome. Jerry, the Catholic priest, announced that he had plans to go to Portugal for spiritual renewal. Bob, a rancher in his late 30s, had recently been on excursions to South Africa and Ireland. His growth from extraordinary experiences emerges from the following statement:

Everybody takes vacations for different reasons but, you know, I get something out the places we go and we usually research and, you know, we do take in a lot of the culture and like to learn about the people and the culture that we're going to, and that interests us and actually a lot of vacations that we've taken is based on that so – and so, yeah, I've really grown as a person by vacationing.

The notion of self-actualization was also embedded in the way our informants viewed their legacies, or the lack thereof. Many of the younger informants shrugged off the idea that their lives had serious impact on others, and mentioned that the words on their tombstones should indicate that they were, in essence, simple, decent people. Roland, a medical consultant in his early 40s said the following in regard to legacies:

Yeah, because, you know, my theory on that is once you're dead you're dead. I mean look back and think about your own family and legacy. What do you know? People know things about their parents, maybe their grandparents. Once you get to the great grandparents and beyond . . . what do you really know about them.

### HCCs with Simple Tastes

Many of the participants appear to have the social milieu to be considered HCCs (Holt, 1998), but instead choose to lead simple, practical lives. Though they may consume objects of high quality, they tend to pride themselves on durability, making their vehicles, appliances, houses, and other big purchases last as long as possible. They are more concerned with utilitarian characteristics of their possessions than with formal aesthetics (Holt, 1998). When asked to describe his house, Roland responded it is “nothing special but it does the trick” and further elaborated:

Well, we only use it for just – it's a house that's got – we got bedrooms and a kitchen and dishwasher, washing machine. It's close to town and it's got a nice big back yard, but it's basic versus the house that might be being built by our neighbors and friends and other people that build a lot bigger places with a lot more, you know, newer amenities and fancy trim and tile in the bathroom and all that stuff, but it's just your kind of more basic build.

They exhibit in some cases elements of frugality, but it would be inaccurate to say these men are selfish or stingy. Though capable of the highbrow consumption associated with HCCs, these men often view such consumption and materialism as being selfish or self-absorbed. Many exhibit the opinion that materialism is a form of compensation, as Jerry, the Catholic priest, conjectured that “sometimes people have things as a consolation” because they are “lonely or something as a hedge against the future, something maybe to mask a little insecurity as well.” This is a well-observed criticism regarding materialism, and the reason why it often leads to lower wellbeing among materialists (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002).

These men have the resources, backgrounds, and worldly views and ways to be HCCs, but they choose to live their lives as LCCs. Not only are these men driven to settle down in a social milieu with which they are very familiar and in most cases far from cosmopolitan, they are also willing to accept a “hometown discount” to get, or to maintain their presence, there. Their upbringings have influenced them to choose to live mostly in small towns, which often involves sacrificing the choices and higher salaries associated with bigger cities. Their hometowns, upbringings, and families trigger reminders to remain humble in the wake of financial and educational successes. Jim, a pharmacy manager living in Idaho, said the following in regard to living in Boise rather than the more affluent and cosmopolitan cities in the West:

You don't get the hustle and bustle of the city life I guess you could say. If you go visit somewhere like – I've been to Vegas; I've been to California with the traffic and I never did care for that, so that was one reason I didn't want to move to Reno. Of course it was probably too expensive to try to live up around Tahoe when I was first coming out of school, but that's very beautiful up there too.

Three of our participants, including Jim, are pharmacists or have pharmaceutical backgrounds. Each has an income well above the national median and each has his PharmD degree, a professional degree earned beyond the five-year bachelor degree. Despite their above average educations and incomes, each man has consumption preferences that place him firmly within the LCC categories (Holt, 1998). Each proclaimed durability and pragmatism as valued product attributes, and each signified that his choices for media and entertainment were basic and simple as well. Todd, a pharmacist in his early 40s, does not view his house as a canvass upon which he expresses his aesthetic tastes (Holt, 1998). When asked to what extent his possessions define him, Todd proclaimed the following:

I would say the lowest extent, not really particular about the type of car I drive. I'd rather have an automobile that's practical rather than catching someone's eye. . . . I do like to have the comfortable home, but not in the sense of trying to be a showoff.

Responses from most of the other informants also suggested simple, LCC tastes were more the norm than the exception. Their consumption of mass cultural texts also reflects LCC tastes as they seem to interpret these texts in down to earth terms rather than critiquing their artistic value. The participants generally prefer music, books, movies, and television shows that are educational, nostalgic, or pertain to their lives. Chester, a retired high school library media specialist, explained that he and his wife “spend hardly any time in front of the television” because he believes network shows are all designed for younger people. When he mentioned a rare occasion of seeing a movie recently, he gave his opinion of “Borat” in the following passage:

It was too much like real life. It exposed the attitudes of a lot of people, racial, ethnic and that kind of stuff because they didn't realize he was filming them to make them absurd.

John likes sport movies that positively portray the underdog. He also mentioned that he likes medical books and articles and said, “I always think maybe some day I'll run across something that will help somebody some time.” Kerry described liking certain songs that resonate with him personally as reflected in this statement:

I think Bruce Springsteen *Glory Days* is a really neat song because it's a guy kind of revisiting his youth and wondering what it was like, and now, being a responsible middle-aged guy, and I can relate to that.

Even Ben, the nearly retired school teacher with a master's degree in visual arts education, refrained from using technical jargon or giving an artistic interpretation. He likes movies that have a connection to his life or relate to different parts of his empirical world as reflected in the following:

And I think in terms of the love stories and the Sleepless in Seattle type things, how individuals relate to each other – their kindness, their caring, their frustrations, their anxieties, [and] their heartbreak. So there's sort of an adventurous side I guess for me, a person who is willing to take calculated risks and then there's the caring, nurturing side of me.

LCC tastes are also evident as most of these men discussed leisure activities more in terms of intrinsic enjoyment and social interaction than for personal achievement and expression (Holt, 1998, p. 18). Jose found “the thrill of the hunt” to be the most enjoyable aspect of hunting, more so even than a successful shot. John, a retiree in his 70s, said he liked to work out three times a week for the following reasons:

I enjoy that a lot because there are a lot of people. There are probably 100 or almost 200 people my age there. We walk before the exercise starts, and I visit with a lot of people my age, and we have a lot in common, so that's fun.

#### Individualism/Materialism Conflict

Though research indicates that those with a high collectivist orientation have difficulties with materialism (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002) these men, who appear to be highly individualistic or who have been socialized in individualistic settings, also seem to have difficulties. They are fully aware of the shallow promises of obtaining what they often and derogatorily term “things,” and seem to inherently understand the negative effects these things have on other people, particularly their friends. They do not use the oppositional narrative (Thompson and Arsel, 2004) characteristic of anti-corporatists to frame their consumption preferences. They abstain from collecting identity markers such as name brands, elite products, elaborate homes and expensive cars because these objects create dissonance, not only because of the stress involved in making payments and maintaining them, but because they unnecessarily and painfully distinguish these men from their friends. Jerry, the Catholic priest, spoke of preaching on materialism and a

disease he referred to as “affluenza” or “trying to be affluent.” He observed that “the rich are kind of enslaved by this desire to keep their riches and to gain notoriety.” While Jerry does use high quality items for conducting mass, his reluctance to be ostentatious is reflected in the following:

If I was a parish priest in, let’s say, Pueblo, Colorado or even, let’s say, Declo, Idaho or something, where it’s a bit of a poor area, I would want to moderate the amount of money I spend because I’d want to acculturate that according to, you know, the perceptions of the people and the economic level.

Todd stated that he has evolved to a point where material objects are no longer a priority and noticed in the past that having nice things often sparked feelings of jealousy from others. He also spoke of the small town influence on his simple lifestyle and the relative nature of luxury:

. . . . I live in a small town, you could probably count the number of sports cars in the town on one hand that I would consider a luxury sports car. So it’s not something that you see around this area. . . . But it seems as though even the well to do in this area would be more likely to have a very expensive pickup than a Lamborghini. Even though they can afford the Lamborghini, they would be dairy farmers, extremely wealthy and such would be more likely to have an extended cab pickup in their driveway than a sports car.

These men reflect characteristics of normative individualism, including freedom of choice, personal responsibility, recognizing and living in harmony with one’s true self, and respect for the integrity of others (Waterman, 1981). Literature generally associates normative individualism with materialism but these men seem to believe that a materialist lifestyle reflects negatively on a person and they strive to avoid characterizing themselves in this way. Most of them expressed a desire to not be ostentatious with material goods or go beyond their means. This is true of Ben, who seems to prefer more inconspicuous consumption because as he says, “I’ve always felt a little nervous around people who are too boisterous or too full of themselves. I would rather be a field mouse if I can help it.”



Chester also prefers not to collect material goods but appears to enjoy the fact that this distinguishes him from a predominantly materialist society. He has never felt the need to stand out by having better things than other people and said, “One of our friends [in a rural community in Kansas] was concerned about his retirement income because he didn’t want to have to downsize his life, and I told him we never upsized so it’s no issue for us.” Jim, the same informant who boasted about owning the same “rig” for 17 years, spoke of the inherent emptiness found in having things without friends, suggesting that such accumulation of things may lead to superficial relations, as people may just want to be your friend because you have things. He also alluded to the importance of interconnectedness, by using friends’ resources to compensate for the lack of resources. He owns a waterskiing rope, but no boat. One of his friends owns a waterskiing boat, and Jim supplies the rope. He explained why in the following passage:

I wanted a certain type of rope where I could get on one ski and [the] guys used to tease me all the time. “You got a ski rope but you don’t have a boat?” . . . . It’s just one of those things. You have good friends and friends help you out here and there. I guess it’s just one of those things that you get by with what you’ve got and if not you can get some help from your friends, you know?

This tendency to not want to stand out among peers is a trait of collective cultures (Hofstede, 1983), but appears to be evident in this subculture of men as well. Not only did these men hesitate to boast about any of their possessions, but they also seemed to shy away from adherence or loyalty to specific brands, especially upscale brands. Brands to these men were not markers of their identities or used as extensions of the self (Belk, 1985), but simply used as cues of durability and quality. Brand accolades were often given out after the fact rather than before purchase, as such praise had to be earned or be based on true merit. Kerry, an unemployed master’s degree holder in his mid 40s,

proclaimed his loyalty to Target, but only because the brand resonated with his self-image, was practical, clean, and convenient. Roland, who is on his second Jeep vehicle, denounced his latest purchase, and said he holds no allegiance to the company. He does have loyalty to REI, a consumer co-op specializing in outdoor equipment, but only because he said that he feels the company offers quality products with lenient return policies:

They have some different brands. You know, they've got their own REI label and they have Patagonia and Columbia and in boats, they have several different brands. Well, I am loyal to the store, [but] I'm not necessarily tied to any one of those brands because they stand behind all of them. They're kind of like the Nordstrom's of outdoor equipment.

#### Discussion

The findings in this study suggest that there is a subculture of men who desire a simple life without necessarily being hardcore voluntarily simplistic. Like strong simplifiers (Etzioni, 1998), they often trade lucrative, stressful careers for more time. However, they stray from strict adherence to voluntary simplicity principles and make exceptions, especially when making a special purchase for themselves or others. Similarly, the Simple Man appears to choose his lifestyle as means to pursue higher goals. He seems to live in his own world and by his own standards, and unlike prior research that finds voluntary simplicity a difficult lifestyle to maintain and more likely found among women (Huneke, 2005), simple living, though much less extreme than voluntary simplicity, seems to come naturally to this group of men. They do not need continual support and reinforcement.

Literature refers to two primary ways of defining the self: through what one owns or what one does (Belk, 1984a). The findings in this study suggest that this notion can be

expanded. The men in this study adamantly proclaim that they do not define themselves by what they own but neither do they appear to define themselves primarily by what they do, at least in terms of occupation. They seem to self identify in basic ways, by what they do on a daily basis: their experiences or relationships with friends and family. Like the trained eye of a photographer who examines the inverted image of a negative, these simple men appear to find satisfaction in what others do not see. Marketers may have to train their eyes as well and techniques such as experiential product positioning may appeal to this group, or positioning based upon how products may lead to or help fulfill self-actualizing experiences.

Another perspective of consumption's role in defining identity proclaims that consumption patterns distinguish social classes. The findings of this study hint at potential intricacies in the relationship between HCC and LCC. Holt (1998) summarizes that "cultural capital resources are accumulated in three primary sites of acculturation: family upbringing, formal education, and occupational culture" (p. 7). What is the result of the ways in which these three dimensions interact? Most of the men in this study experienced a more LCC family upbringing and mention material restraints or small town atmosphere as strong influences. Perhaps materialism results in dissonance for these men, who have evolved into HCC individuals due to their education and occupation, because of their relatively LCC upbringing. They have evolved to become HCCs with LCC consumption patterns.

Other identity projects locate consumers in temporary and transient social groups, often requiring a special physical location (Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2002). If emancipation from the market is possible, these studies find it to be temporary. In

contrast, the findings of this study suggest a subculture of men who, in a sense, enact nonconsumer identity projects. They are permanent and integral to these men's daily lives. As such, these projects do not require a special time and place. Whereas props and socially constructed reality are common among consumer identity projects, the men in this study seem to escape the pressure to consume and determine their own reality. This counters Holt's (2002) prediction that the post-post modern era will find consumers becoming liberated from the market through their acts of consumption.

Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) find that materialism does not conflict with community values, which implies "that while community values may be collective oriented, they are distinctly different from family values and religious values" (p. 365). This suggests a potential distinction between the private and public domains of collective values. Examination of the differences in value systems and behaviors based on gender and culture would lead to a greater understanding as well. While scholarly literature focuses on the American manifestations of voluntary simplicity in individual consumers, much can be learned from voluntary simplicity in other cultures, in collective environments, and from a longitudinal perspective (Bekin *et al.*, 2005). In sum, more detailed information and a broadened scope of inquiry are needed to fully understand the complex yet simple lives involving the Simple Man, or what might be better understood in oxymoronic fashion as complex simplicity.

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## Appendix

*Table 1—Simple Man Informants*

Name	Region	Age	Occupation	Education
Todd	Northwest	41	pharmacist	PharmD
Jose	Northwest	40	engineer	bachelor's in engineering
Bob	Northwest	37	rancher	bachelor's in agriculture
Kerry	Midwest	46	unemployed	master's of science
John	Northwest	72	retired cabinet maker	high school diploma
Jerry	Northwest	42	priest	one year away from doctorate
Jim	Northwest	43	pharmacist	PharmD
Roland	Northwest	42	medical consultant	PharmD
Ben	Midwest	58	three months away from retired elementary school art teacher	master's of science
Chester	Midwest	62	retired high school media specialist	master's of secondary education