

Less is More Work: A Governmentality Analysis of Authenticity Within Minimalism
Discourse

by

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Abstract

At its core, this is a project about the contemporary crisis of authenticity. Using minimalism discourse as a site to explore this crisis, my research into the minimalist lifestyle and its critique of consumerism is guided by two questions. First, how is the concept of authenticity mobilized within minimalism discourse? And second, how does the notion of authenticity contribute to governing the minimalist lifestyle and shaping the minimalist subject? To explore these questions a selection of self-help texts, or pedagogical lifestyle resources, are used. The discursive sites explored herein include guru books, Reddit forums, a documentary, Instagram posts, TED talks, and media coverage on the minimalist lifestyle. These diverse data sites are analyzed using mixed-methods including discourse analysis, frame analysis, and elements of grounded theory, and are shaped by a governmentality approach to theory and methodology.

The notion of authenticity is used to help naturalize governmentality and consumer culture. Minimalism, while offering a critique of consumerism, mobilizes authenticity in much the same way. The use of the rhetoric of authenticity within minimalism discourse takes the form of critique in three primary ways: (1) minimalists often express nostalgia for a pre-consumerism past, (2) minimalists tend to prioritize experiences over objects and (3), minimalists tend to distinguish between needs and consumer culture-created artificial wants in such a way that wants are deemed superfluous to living a fulfilling and meaningful life. What can be seen in minimalism discourse is a complex lifestyle oriented around highly intentional consumption practices and critical of individual participation in mass-consumption. Within this discourse, the rhetoric of authenticity is used as both a critique of consumerism and a justification for a highly regimented and responsabilized way of life that is, I argue, an example of governmentality in action at the level of the individual. It is my contention that through the incorporation of the rhetoric of authenticity, contemporary minimalism embodies neoliberal ways of thinking about the self as a project requiring continuous work.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Illustrations	vii
Introduction: Situating the Study of Contemporary Minimalism	1
Contextualizing Contemporary Minimalism	4
Political Economy Context	5
Cultural Context	9
Self-help as a Site for Research	15
Defining Contemporary Minimalism	16
Research Questions	19
Justifying and Critiquing Consumer Behaviour	20
Research Contributions	22
Project Outline	24
Chapter 2: Linking Authenticity, Consumerism, and Self-help	27
Consumerism and Consumer Culture	28
Citizens as Consumers	32
Learning Through Self-help	34
What is ‘Authenticity’, Anyway?	41
Foundational Theories of Authenticity	42
Language and Meaning	45
Identifying Authenticity in Objects, Experiences, and Selves	47
Authenticating Objects	48
Experiencing Authenticity	49
The Authentic Self	50
Contemporary Approaches to Authenticity	52
We are What We Buy?	57
Consumerism as Pathology	60
Cultivating a Core Self	61
Situating Minimalism Discourse	64
Voluntary Simplicity	69
Summary	79
Chapter 3: Learning to Self-govern Through Lifestyle	81
Authenticity as Motivation	84

Lifestyles of the Autonomous and Disciplined	86
Defining Lifestyle	87
The Role of Consumption in Lifestyle Formation	90
Lifestyle and Governmentality	94
Lifestyle and Politics	97
Governing Through Freedom and Choice	99
Subjectivity and the Minimalist Subject	104
Freedom and Power	107
The Enterprising Subject	109
Summary	116
Chapter 4: Establishing an Approach to Studying Minimalism	117
Linking Theory and Methodology	119
Theorizing Discourse	122
Using Data Across Discursive Sites	126
Data Sources and Collection	131
Reading and Coding	138
Summary	142
Chapter 5: Transitioning from Past to Future	144
Consumerism is Alienating	145
Marketing and Advertising	146
Greed	150
We are Slaves to Consumerism	152
Idealizing and Distancing the Past	157
Imagining the Future	163
Contextualizing Minimalism	169
Summary	175
Chapter 6: Objects, Experiences, and Capital	176
Objects, Stuff, Things, and Possessions	177
Memories	177
Emotions, Meaning, and Identity	179
Discarding is Easy(?)	185
Objects Keep Us from Living	187
Prioritizing Experiences	191
Identity	191
Fulfillment	194
Community and Giving Back	197

Millennials and Minimalism	201
Minimalism Requires Capital	203
Summary	206
Chapter 7: Meeting Needs in Pursuit of Wants	208
The Pursuit of Happiness	209
Dealing with ‘What If?’	215
Physical and Mental Health	222
Physical Health and Weight Loss	222
Mental Health	225
‘Luxury’ versus ‘Enough’	232
Environmental Impact	237
Natural and Artificial Needs	240
Summary	243
Conclusion: Critiquing Consumerism	245
Research Questions and Argument	246
Limitations and Future Research	248
Why Minimalism Matters	249
Structuring Discourses	249
Contradictions and Tensions	252
Minimalism, Governmentality, and Authenticity	254
Bibliography	257

List of Illustrations

Image 1	156
Image 2	172
Image 3	181
Image 4	188
Image 5	196
Image 6	218
Image 7	224

Introduction: Situating the Study of Contemporary Minimalism

Minimalism is a lifestyle choice. Minimalists choose to get rid of the unnecessary in favor of what's important. But the level of specificity is up to you. Minimalists search for happiness not through things, but through life itself; thus, it's up to you to determine what is necessary and what is superfluous to your life.

-Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus aka 'The Minimalists' (2015:25)

It's also not just about reducing physical THINGS! It's about a mental state, and a level of self awareness that helps bring about better choices in life. Thus leading you down a healthier path, towards more happiness.

-Reddit comment (original emphasis)¹

The quotes opening this project demonstrate the ways in which contemporary minimalism, what I characterize as decluttering minimalism², unintentionally embodies a neoliberal mentality in its effort to challenge consumerism as a defining feature of contemporary North American society. As Nikolas Rose argues, "... projects for the government of conduct will operate on a territory marked out by the vectors of identity, choice, consumption and lifestyle" (1996:344). Related to consumerism, minimalism, and lifestyle is the notion of authenticity which appears to be a driving force behind consumerism, while conversely, consumerism seems to be a driving force in the ongoing search for authenticity. As I argue herein, the desire for authenticity points to a level of discontent with present day social conditions which, within minimalism discourse, is aimed at contemporary consumerism. However, alternative means for finding authenticity appear to be lacking, and are increasingly being commodified³. Or, as Sarah

¹ Reddit, accessed June 14, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6exi18/when_you_started_becoming_more_minimalist_what/?ref=search_posts.

² This form of minimalism is focused on reducing the number of possessions a person owns and on altering future consumption attitudes and behaviour, rather than decluttering in the sense of organizing one's possessions. It has gained popularity in North America in recent years, seemingly because many people are questioning their consumer habits and adjusting to the post recession economy. This form of minimalism differs from more extreme forms such as homesteading or off-grid living, but may, for some people, be a precursor to these anti-consumerist lifestyles.

³ Even the minimalism guru texts under investigation in this research are meant to be purchased. Indeed, the ten texts under consideration were purchased for the purposes of this project.

Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, branded. According to Banet-Weiser, “in a culture that is increasingly understood and experienced through the logic and strategies of commercial branding, [and] characterized by the postmodern styles of irony, parody, and the superficial, the concept of authenticity seems to carry even *more* weight, not less” (2012:10 original emphasis). I share Banet-Weiser’s (2012:5) contention that authenticity is a core cultural concept within contemporary North American society that shapes our moral frameworks. Within minimalism discourse ‘authenticity’ is rarely mentioned, but the underlying desire for authenticity is utilized as a moral critique of contemporary consumerism and its participants, and can be understood as motivating the lifestyle.

Despite the pervasiveness of authenticity as an important cultural concept in contemporary North American society, there is little agreement on its fixed meaning. The openness of authenticity leaves space for people (or culture industries such as marketing and self-help) to mold its meaning to meet their needs. In this way, consumption can be authentic if that is the meaning we attach to it. It could also be argued, depending on the boundaries used to define authenticity, that in our postindustrial, postmodern age, consumption is actually the best path to cultivating authenticity, because consumer capitalism is the dominant organizing structure of society, making participation in consumerism ‘natural’. However, this is not the case for proponents of minimalism.

For the purposes of this project authenticity is understood as a discursive concept that manifests, within minimalism discourse, as a desire for simplicity derived outside of consumerism. This desire stems from a sense of discontent with the trappings of consumerism. Within minimalism discourse, the desire for authenticity is marked by nostalgia for a pre-consumerism past, a preference for consuming experiences, and an

emphasis on consuming to meet basic needs rather than satisfying wants. These are deemed to be more natural, and therefore authentic, ways to consume.

Minimalism, in its contemporary form, is a reaction to consumerism. My project engages with minimalism discourse within the vast field of self-help. Self-help, which I am broadly defining as pedagogical lifestyle resources⁴, is a point of juncture between authenticity and governmentality, as well as lifestyle and consumerism. These four concepts converge in the minimalist lifestyle. Furthermore, they are all culturally and temporally contingent. My research looks at decluttering minimalism while it is in progress, meaning my work is part of the ongoing project of understanding the present⁵.

In this chapter I outline the direction for my project, first by looking at the cultural and political economy contexts for my analysis. I then move on to discuss self-help as a data source and provide an overview of decluttering minimalism. Next, I lay out my research questions and argument. Finally, this is followed by a discussion of the contributions of my research and an outline of the remaining chapters.

⁴ These resources include everything from ‘expert’ sources such as books and seminars by lifestyle gurus, to more mundane influences such as social media and online forums. Together, these resources contribute to shaping a given lifestyle. For my purposes, I see these resources as forming the self-help industry.

⁵ In the interest of reflexivity, I feel it worth noting that having grown up in a middle-class family in the relatively affluent 1990s, and treating shopping as a leisure activity for most of my life, I am very much a part of North American consumer culture, and am therefore somewhat on the inside of my research subject. This means challenging and confronting my own experiences, opinions, and biases as I go. As argued by Goodman and Cohen, “That there are dangers associated with our necessary engagement with a culture is true of the study of any culture, but it is especially true of consumer culture for three reasons. First, the study of consumer culture does not have the rich history of scholarship that we see in the study of cultures shaped by production.... The second reason that the study of consumer culture is especially difficult is that we tend to think of consumption as a natural thing that is independent of historical and social context.” And, according to Goodman and Cohen, the third reason is that scholarly works are objects for consumption, so they are part of the system they are analyzing and critiquing. (2004:xiii-xiv).

Contextualizing Contemporary Minimalism

What is it about the contemporary moment that makes minimalism appealing?

The minimalism discourse I am engaging with really gained traction in the past few years after Marie Kondo's *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* became available in North America in 2014 and went on to sell millions of copies. As discussed later in this chapter and in the next, the form of minimalism I am analyzing is a small part of a broad and ongoing pursuit of the simplicity ideal. Therefore, it is necessary to look at some of the cultural and political economy context of recent years in order to situate the contemporary minimalist lifestyle.

To start, neoliberalism is a political and economic rationale that prioritizes the free market and deregulation. Through this way of thinking, the role of the state is diminished and responsibility is downloaded to individuals. According to David Harvey (2007:3), this way of thinking has become hegemonic and commonsense. Within North America, neoliberalism has shaped more than three decades of political and economic policy, which provides the backdrop for the context in which contemporary minimalism has gained popularity.

Consumer culture, which is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, has developed alongside neoliberalism to shape our everyday lives and to position consumption as the space in which we form identities and participate as citizens. There are also additional social, political, and economic factors such as environmental degradation and the global recession in the late 2000s that help to contextualize contemporary minimalism. It is pertinent not to assume direct cause and effect relationships when exploring these factors, but they are also necessary to consider when

looking at consumer behaviour and lifestyle because the choice to pursue minimalism, individual as it purports to be, does not happen in a void.

Political Economy Context

At the time decluttering was becoming popular, the United States and several other nations were a few years past a recession that saw people losing their jobs and homes. Additionally, young people continue to be burdened by student debt at levels far higher than those experienced by previous generations. While at the same time, employment in many fields continues to become more precarious.

Moreover, the growing awareness that our global system of production and consumption is resulting in vast environmental degradation is often cited as a reason for anti-consumption sentiments. For example, Albinsson and Perera, in an analysis of contemporary sharing economies, observe the growing popularity and desirability of sustainability that “may be in part due to increased awareness of the negative societal and personal consequences of overconsuming material goods, as well as the global financial downturn of the late noughties” (2012:303). Further to this, Schor and Thompson (2014) argue neoliberal ‘business-as-usual’ economics, wherein growth is prized above all else, stand in direct conflict to addressing environmental degradation. It is likely some of these factors, particularly an awareness of the personal impact of overconsumption, contribute to the current popularity of minimalism.

As mentioned above, the apparent surge in the popularity of minimalism in the past five to ten years coincides with the global recession in 2008 and its aftermath. According to Cushman, “The Great Recession of 2008 began as an economic crisis of epic proportions, precipitated by falling housing prices, bad mortgage loans and

foreclosures, free falling economic markets, failures of large and small businesses (including traditional and seemingly indestructible financial giants) and a subsequent rise in unemployment” (2015:9). Danziger states that the recession lasted roughly from December 2007 through June 2009 but that “Disparities in employment, income, wealth, and health, which had widened in the decades leading up to the Great Recession, have widened even further in its aftermath” (2013:7). This is echoed by Schor and Thompson who observe, “The unchecked economic and political power of the global financial sector led to a monetary meltdown whose aftershocks are still being felt ...” (2014:6). Along with the knowledge of the ecological destruction caused by consumer capitalism, many people in the past decade have faced unexpected financial uncertainty brought about by the very system that was thought to provide wealth and stability. Therefore, it is possible to see how this could also be a factor in the choice to pursue a minimalist lifestyle, particularly if one is no longer able to consume at their previous level, or if their aspirational level of consumption is even further out of reach.

One of the results of contemporary capitalism is that employment is increasingly experienced as precarious. This is the case across industries, but particularly for low-wage jobs. As Schor and Thompson observe, the business-as-usual economy, “is yielding lower wages, more precarious employment, and higher prices for basic necessities such as food and energy” (2014:11). Further to this, Migone (2007) notes the post-Fordist economy values ‘flexibility’ which creates the conditions for precarity, and that more and more people are being excluded from participating in the market because of growing income inequality. In one of the few studies of contemporary minimalism Rodriguez also points to the neoliberal emphasis on flexibility arguing it, “often entails instabilities in

housing and employment, which are the sorts of experiences that have characterized the period during which minimalism has grown in popularity” (2017:7). I share Rodriguez’s view that current economic conditions help to explain the popularity of minimalism over the past several years, but in my data this is rarely cited⁶ as a reason for adopting the minimalist lifestyle.

In addition to precarious labour, Mulchay (2017) uses a governmentality lens to look at the development of the responsabilized financial subject and contends, “As the financial crisis of 2007-2009 illustrates, financialization gives rise to economic precariousness and inequality for workers that is not related exclusively to the domain of employment, when global finance markets are connected to household finances” (Mulchay 2017:217). As a result, people are increasingly reliant on not only employment, which is uncertain, but also on unstable financial markets to secure their futures, or just to get by (Mulchay 2017). Much as Mulchay finds people are increasingly subject to neoliberal responsabilization through financialization, I argue people are similarly responsabilized through their lifestyle choices, and this is particularly evident in minimalism. Though it is not as widespread as financialization, minimalism offers a window into the ways in which neoliberal governmentality is exercised at the level of individual lifestyle.

Looking at the period of roughly the past ten years, statistics support the trends of unstable employment, rising housing prices, and rising consumer debt. Statistics rarely

⁶ Instead, some reference is made to getting out of debt. This is particularly true for Millburn and Nicodemus (2014, 2015a, 2015b), who also make a passing reference to the recession, and a number of Reddit commenters (e.g., Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6abbnk/what_are_you_trying_to_achieve_in_minimalism/), but the recession is not cited as a reason for the debt. There is however, brief mention of the Recession’s impact on the housing market in *Minimalism: A Documentary About The Important Things* (D’Avella 2015).

paint the whole picture and therefore need to be used with caution, but they do help to illustrate the impact of some of the factors just discussed. Unemployment rates, for example, rarely distinguish between sectors or types of employment, nor do they necessarily indicate which demographics are most impacted by high unemployment. In the United States, the unemployment rate began increasing steadily in May of 2008 and peaked at 10 percent in October of 2009 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017). According to Danziger, “Between 2007 and 2011, median family income [in the United States] declined by 8.2 percent, and the official poverty rate increased from 12.5 to 15.0 percent” (2013:13). Furthermore, during this time, “about one-fourth of all households lost at least 75 percent of their wealth and more than half of all households lost at least 25 percent” (Danziger 2013:14). Additionally, the Federal Reserve Bank (2017) states that, in large part due to mortgages, the current, “overall household debt [is] \$164 billion above its peak at the start of the financial crisis in the third quarter of 2008, and 15.1 percent above a trough in the second quarter of 2013”. Indicating that while the unemployment rate has returned to a pre-recession level of around 5 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017), people are still carrying large amounts of debt. Based on data from the Federal Housing Financial Agency (2017:5), prices for new homes in the United States dropped considerably beginning in July 2007 and bottomed out around December 2011. Meaning, for many people, their homes, which are often considered an investment, lost value.

Canada demonstrates similar trends over the past several years, with the exception of housing prices. In the July 2017 Labour Force Survey, Canada’s unemployment rate was at 6.3 percent, which is noted as the lowest rate since just prior to the “labour market downturn” in 2008-2009 (Statistics Canada 2017a). Canadian families have also

experienced rising debt levels over the past few decades. Between 1999 and 2012, both debt and asset values increased with real estate worth being the primary reason for these changes (Statistics Canada 2017b). New housing prices have risen consistently and considerably in Canada in the past five years (Statistics Canada 2017c), which is likely connected to the increase in both asset value and debt experienced by many Canadians. While in the United States homes were losing value, in Canada, people are increasingly being priced out of the housing market, with both scenarios resulting in greater personal debt or financial strain. Taken together, these economic factors contribute to shaping the cultural context in which decluttering minimalism has gained popularity.

Cultural Context

In addition to these political economy factors, my research takes place within the context of a far-reaching consumer culture. Ritzer and Jurgenson argue, “Whether it is called consumer society, consumer culture, or even consumer capitalism is less significant than the fact that all of these ideas draw our attention to the increasing importance of consumption, especially relative to production” (2010:16). This can be seen across cultures and is evident in my data. I am accessing data as they are available to me in Canada, and many of the sources are American, but a number of the minimalism gurus are from Japan or influenced by Japanese culture, and it is apparent from Reddit and Instagram that there are people practicing minimalism in European⁷ nations. This demonstrates the shared culture of consumerism amongst many industrialized nations and the desire of many people to challenge this dominant cultural imperative.

Furthermore, the multi-billion dollar marketing industry is a powerful agent of

⁷ In general, it is not stated where Reddit users are located, but a few users identify their place of residence as part of their discussions about the minimalist lifestyle.

socialization (Caston 1998) in contemporary consumer societies. Marketing is not a major focus of my project, but it is a crucial element of the transmission of consumer culture, as well as a common target within minimalism discourse. The marketing industry plays a crucial role in circulating cultural ideas including some of those I am engaged with, particularly authenticity and the autonomous individual. Marketing and advertising, not unlike self-help, are sites of pedagogy wherein we learn to internalize norms and values as well as ways of thinking about ourselves, especially as consumers.

Additionally, authenticity is tied to morality—if you are authentic, you must therefore be a good person (or brand)—and it is for this reason appeals to authenticity are such effective marketing strategies. To be true to yourself and to participate in modern society, you must be a consumer. The pervasiveness of the ideal of authenticity within marketing and branding also seems to point to its value as a cultural concept.

Further demonstrating the importance of authenticity as a cultural concept, Pooley contends, “... the ethic of authenticity is a product of history, but that does not mean that we should dismiss its claim on us. It has become a widely resonant moral ideal; it is part of who we are.” He argues that thinking about authenticity in this way, “allows us to develop an immanent critique—to point to the ways that our culture of self-fulfillment contradicts the moral ideal it purports to express” (2010:82). This approach lets us think about authenticity as a force within our culture that has real, felt implications for how we conduct ourselves, our relations with others, and our relations with the material world.

In an analysis of the ways in which people relate to the material world Arnold and Lang (2007) used ethnoarchaeological research of 24 middle-class, dual-wage-earner families in Los Angeles to look at how they use their domestic spaces. These authors

state that homes are becoming increasingly cluttered, in part because families cannot afford houses large enough to store their numerous belongings. They found most participants were “battling a nearly universal over-accumulation of goods” (Arnold and Lang 2007:36). Based on this, Arnold and Lang contend, “This reveals something important about family priorities, the intensity of consumerism in the U.S., and family struggles to organize their lives” noting there is a growing industry of organization gurus who aim to help families deal with their clutter (2007:41). Indeed, dealing with the over-accumulation of consumer goods is the type of minimalism focused on in this research.

As Arnold and Lang describe, “Early 21st century America is the most materially saturated society in global history” (2007:37). While America⁸ is often situated as the pinnacle of material excess, consumer culture extends well beyond the United States to exert a nearly global influence. In line with this, Migone claims, “Hedonistic consumerism, the highly wasteful and discriminatory pattern of consumption that predominates in current capitalist models, is the latest evolution in the forms of modern capitalism” (2007:174). Moreover, Etzioni cautions, “as so many societies with rapidly rising populations now seek affluence as their primary domestic goal, the environmental, psychological and other issues raised by consumerism are being faced on a scale not previously considered” (2004:408). Addressing the personal consequences of contemporary capitalism, Alexander and Ussher posit, “high consumption lifestyles, so often held up as the peak of human development, are in many cases engendering an unexpected discontent or malaise among those who live them” (2012:70). Taken

⁸ Throughout this project I refer to North American society or culture to refer to the socio-cultural and economic aspects of contemporary consumerism shared by Canada and the United States. Consumerism and minimalism are not limited to this geographical area, but as a Canadian researcher, I am using data and socio-cultural references applicable to a North American context, and available to me in Canada.

together, these critiques paint a rather dire picture of contemporary society and help demonstrate some of the rationale behind the minimalist lifestyle.

In the 2001 foreword to the second edition of his seminal work, *The Simple Life*, David Shi argues the contemporary desire for simplicity, “is largely a reaction against the distinctive demands and frenetic pace of modern, high-tech, high-stress life—with all of its anxieties and insecurities. Today, most of the people attracted to simplicity are provoked by motives that are more therapeutic than spiritual⁹” (2001:xii). Shi, like Schor (1998) points to the ‘work-and-spend’ cycle as impacting our happiness, health, marriages, and families. Both of these works pre-date the Recession of 2008 which likely exacerbated many of these concerns, yet what they are describing still aids in understanding the context of contemporary minimalism. Shi argues the desire for simplicity has always been part of the American imagination and like Shi’s view of simplicity, I see minimalism, and to a lesser extent, authenticity, “both as a sentimental ideal and as an actual way of living” (2001:7). It seems from my data that minimalists genuinely feel minimalism is a superior way of living, that they benefit from the lifestyle, and that others could too.

Cushman similarly argues capitalism has always been balanced by the cultural values of “self-control, asceticism, and thrift diffused through various institutions such as religion and education. These values are particularly imbued in American cultural history, regularly reproduced in a variety of institutional sectors, and emerge strongly in times of anxiety and crisis” (2015:9). I would add that these values, which are highly compatible with neoliberal notions of individualized responsibility, are also diffused

⁹ The notion of anxiety recurs in my data and is discussed in coming chapters while the spiritual element is addressed in the conclusion.

through contemporary self-help. Moreover, Cushman asserts, “the evolution of capitalism occurred with a simultaneous evolution of a culture of critique of it, and especially of the ‘sin’ of excess acquisition. This *dialectic of acquisitiveness and asceticism* is one of the most remarkable contradictions of capitalism” (2015:11 original emphasis). Cushman also argues, “As economic downturns occur, ‘prosperity talk’ gives way to a critical moral discourse. A central feature of this moral discourse is ... *greed talk* [which is] a vocabulary of disapprobation used to describe ‘economic deviance’, which might be defined as excess acquisition of material wealth, capital, or goods in an environment of scarcity” (2015:9 original emphasis). If greed talk is a critique that emerges in times of economic uncertainty, then perhaps authenticity talk can be viewed in a similar way as arising from moral uncertainty. Much like Shi’s (2001) argument that the simplicity ideal has paralleled America’s economic development, the desire for authenticity is similarly evergreen. Authenticity, like greed, can be seen as a critical moral discourse aimed at questioning an increasingly ‘unreal’ culture.

Alongside the discourses of authenticity, simplicity, and greed is the counter discourse of accumulation embodied in the idea that ‘more is better’ and the constant touting of ‘new and improved’. This discourse helps to propel consumerism as we know it and can be seen in everything from price incentives for purchasing items in bulk to the near-constant updating of consumer goods such as electronics, vehicles, and fashion. Discourses around collecting and home renovations, as well as discourses around growing the nation’s economy are also in keeping with the promotion of accumulation. Conversely, while the practice of hoarding runs counter to minimalism, the discourse around hoarding is remarkably similar to that of minimalism in that it offers a moral

critique of over-accumulation.

As Gilbert (2008) argues, consumerism and commodification have increasingly come to dominate areas of society such as public services. Gilbert notes that while this offers the perception of more choice it increasingly negates other forms of civic engagement and that “This is perhaps the key mechanism of neo-liberal governance: to offer more ‘choice’ but less democracy” (2008:557). While I am not dealing directly with questions of political democracy, minimalism does appear to be a lifestyle in which people could engage in politics through everyday consumer practices. Furthermore, minimalism is related to the notion of the consumer-citizen which is the dominant subjectivity within neoliberal societies, and which I address in the following chapters.

The cultural and political economy factors shaping contemporary minimalism are related in a few ways. First, as Benson, Drawing on Bourdieu (1984) and Appadurai (1986) among others argues, “Claims to authentic living are thus thoroughly intertwined with the politics of connoisseurship and the political economy of taste” (2013:502). Moreover, as Albinsson and Perera (2012) contend, the contemporary capitalist system of mass-consumption and production has negative effects on both society and individuals. Prioritizing the economy above all else shapes how political decisions are made as well as what we come to value. They are also linked through the ‘work and spend cycle’ which is both an economic actuality and a cultural imperative. For many, it has become the norm to work outside of ‘regular’ hours in order to either get ahead financially, or more often, in order to get by. This employment reality is tied to both the ‘work hard and play hard’ idea and the ‘American Dream’ in which it is believed hard work within a meritocratic system means anyone can succeed. However, as outlined above, these

cultural ideals do not align with economic realities. This is a tension minimalism and other forms of voluntary simplicity attempt to address. The self-help industry also attempts to address this tension by offering advice on everything from how to be a better employee, to how to save and invest money, to how to be happier.

Self-help as a Site for Research

The ever-expanding and diversifying self-help industry is increasingly pervasive and influential within North American culture, especially when it comes to sources of lifestyle expertise. This can be seen in the growing number of specialty television channels available such as the Food Network and HGTV, as well as the numerous day-time programs made up of lifestyle segments about everything from the latest fashion trends, to the best travel destinations, to the newest workouts. Importantly, much of this revolves around consuming, given that much of the self-help industry is commodified.

When thinking about self-help, perhaps Oprah or the ever-growing section of the bookstore come to mind, but the industry is much more vast. Self-help includes everything from books, to websites (including blogs and social media), to workshops, podcasts, support groups, popular media, and therapy. The sites chosen for this project are not the only sites of minimalism discourse available, nor are they fully in agreement as to what it means to participate in the minimalist lifestyle. Nevertheless, these pedagogical lifestyle resources provide an interesting entry point into an exploration of authenticity, lifestyle, and consumption. The discursive sites explored herein include books, Reddit forums, a documentary, Instagram posts, TED talks, and media¹⁰ coverage on the lifestyle.

¹⁰ My data sources are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Defining Contemporary Minimalism

Minimalism, as a lifestyle, is not one-size-fits-all, but rather, exists on a spectrum spanning from those who are intentional about limiting purchasing¹¹ to those who live with as few possessions as possible. It also exists in the broader orbit of the voluntary simplicity movement, which itself is quite diverse in terms of approaches to living a ‘simple life’ ranging from using a bicycle instead of a car, to living completely off the grid. Schor notes, “In contrast to those of us caught up in the competitive spending process, simple-livers struggle against the dominant cultural assumptions about consumption, continually chipping away at the symbolic meanings of consumer objects” (1998:139). As a lifestyle, it is also distinct from the minimalist movements in design, art, fashion, music, and cuisine, although proponents of the minimalist lifestyle may also embrace these aesthetics. Based on my data, those who identify as minimalist tend to express an opposition to consumerism through a reduction of their existing possessions in combination with altering their consumption habits going forward, and tend to engage in the lifestyle for individual-centered reasons. That is to say, though it is sometimes referred to as a movement, my data indicate participants think about it more in terms of their individual preferences and lifestyle choice. While this may be indicative of what Giddens (1991) refers to as life politics or what Haenfler, Johnson and Jones (2012) refer to as a lifestyle movement, the decluttering minimalist lifestyle does contain an element

¹¹ Though not a part of this project, I recently spent a year abstaining from purchasing non-consumables such as clothing and books. This behaviour was typically met with astonishment followed by either praise or skepticism, or both. I was also working a retail job at the time. It resulted in altering my consumption practices well beyond the original year. What this demonstrated to me was the taken-for-granted role that consumption plays in our everyday lives at both an individual and social level. Not consuming for pleasure, or leisure, or gift giving, or just because, seems to be a small but potentially radical act in our contemporary consumer culture.

of critique of the dominant culture, but throughout the data it is rarely talked about as a way of creating broader social change.

Though minimalism exists on a spectrum and there is no one distinct way to be a minimalist, there are some commonalities that became clear in my data which have allowed me to sketch an image of the decluttering minimalist lifestyle¹². First, minimalism tends to focus on individual purchasing behaviour and accumulation, and through this, is critical of consumerism, but does not necessarily seek sweeping social change. Second, minimalism tends to be about meeting needs rather than ‘giving into’ wants, by focusing on being content with what one has. Third, minimalists tend to be more concerned with their own practices than with altering others’, though judgment is implicit in their lifestyle given its counter-cultural nature. And fourth, minimalists tend to believe their lifestyle is more likely to result in happiness, personal fulfillment, and a sense of freedom than participating in consumerism.

Relatedly, according to Rodriguez, “Although not always explicitly anti-capitalist, minimalism represents an increasingly popular critical reflection on the ills of consumerism and an effort to forge new ways of resisting and living amidst capitalism in the United States” (2017:2). Rodriguez, who looks at minimalism as a potential radical political movement, explains that the names for minimalism have varied over time and include: ‘voluntary simplicity movement’, ‘simple living’, ‘decluttering movement’, ‘downshifting’, ‘localization movement’, and ‘New Puritanism’. The minimalism I am focused on falls into the category of ‘decluttering’ wherein people work to get rid of their ‘junk’. However, this form of minimalism can involve elements of downshifting and is

¹² In particular, I am looking at what I refer to as decluttering minimalism which sees proponents practice ‘decluttering’ wherein they work on dramatically reducing the number of things they own and then alter their habits to maintain a lower level of consumption than they engaged in previously.

focused on changing individual attitudes and behaviours around consumption and accumulation. It has gained popularity in the years following the 2008 Recession and the release of Marie Kondo's *Life-changing Magic*, which brought decluttering to the attention of the mainstream. This form of minimalism is important to engage with because, on the surface, it appears to be straightforward, accessible, and mundane. However, decluttering is a highly complex process, relies on a great deal of social and cultural capital, and demonstrates the hegemony of neoliberalism within contemporary consumer society. For these reasons, I have chosen to focus on this seemingly insignificant, and under researched lifestyle. At the same time, it allows an ideal entry point into the ongoing contemporary concern with authenticity because of its emphasis on the individual and its critique of consumer culture.

Along with Rodriguez (2017) I contend that minimalism is a valuable location for academic engagement given that it offers a complex critique of status quo consumerism. Furthermore, and in line with my findings, Rodriguez asserts minimalists, "tend to emphasize individual benefits rather than fostering social projects" but that there is potential for this within the movement (2017:8). While I am not sure minimalism can become a sweeping social movement, there are certainly elements of community present in the discourse despite the overall emphasis on the individual.

My engagement with the minimalist lifestyle is not intended as a judgment, but rather as an exploration and consideration of the role of authenticity within contemporary consumer culture. While it may seem odd to look at consumer culture via a lifestyle that appears to be in opposition to it, minimalism is still very much a part of consumer culture, and may in fact be even more consumed by consumerism than the 'average

consumer'. Ultimately, decluttering minimalism is a lifestyle oriented around anti-consumption rather than anti-consumerism and it offers a rich location for the study of authenticity and neoliberal governmentality. Albinsson and Perera, in an assessment of sharing and collaborative consumption, assert it is generally understood that anti-consumption means, "anti-overconsumption or anticonsumption of goods that are detrimental to personal and societal well-being, as some level of consumption is necessary to maintain life in modern societies" (2012:304). This is consistent with minimalism discourse where, for example, Francine Jay (aka Miss Minimalist) encourages her readers to be 'minsumers' who reduce their overall consumption to consume critically and with intention, but do not withdraw from consumption entirely.

Research Questions

The types of questions asked by a researcher shape their project through the theoretical, methodological, and epistemological assumptions present in the questions. In other words, the questions asked dictate what is knowable through the project. Taking a Foucault-inspired¹³ approach to my research means I am interested in the ways in which truth and subjectivity are constituted through discourse. According to Flyvbjerg, "Foucault stressed that our understanding will suffer if we do not start our analysis with a 'How?'" (2001:136). 'How?' questions allow us to look at the ways taken for granted means of thinking and behaving operate in our everyday lives. Taking this approach to my research subject, there are two guiding questions for my project. First, how is the concept of authenticity mobilized within minimalism discourse? And second, how does the notion of authenticity contribute to governing the minimalist lifestyle and shaping the

¹³ My work is Foucault-inspired insofar as I am drawing on some of his concepts and the works of others who have used his approach to governmentality, but this is not a wholly Foucauldian analysis.

minimalist subject? Together, these two questions address my core concepts of authenticity, lifestyle, and governmentality.

In addition to these primary questions, there are a few supplementary questions addressed throughout my research. For example, why are people pursuing minimalism in the twenty-first century? What purpose does the concept of authenticity serve in contemporary consumer society? What is lifestyle and how does it pertain to everyday conduct? And, in terms of methodology, how can we best approach the study of discourse across multiple sites?

Justifying and Critiquing Consumer Behaviour

The notion of authenticity is used to help naturalize governmentality and consumer culture. Minimalism, while offering a critique of consumerism, mobilizes authenticity in much the same way. Decluttering minimalists appear to believe their lifestyle is more authentic, or a clearer path to authenticity, than participating in consumerism. In order to achieve a sense of authenticity, they lead highly regimented lives of discipline and intention guided by a belief in freedom of choice and self-fulfillment. This leads to minimalists taking purposeful personal responsibility for their everyday conduct including consumption, health, finances, and environmental impact. Minimalism addresses individual behaviour rather than systemic sites of power such as government policies, or trans-national corporate practices, and does not tend to be outwardly critical of these institutions.

Moreover, minimalism discourse is steeped in what I refer to as the rhetoric of authenticity. Authenticity can be understood as a means of cultural critique because of the

element of judgment implicit within its use¹⁴. The use of the rhetoric of authenticity within minimalism discourse takes the form of critique in three primary ways: (1) minimalists often express nostalgia for a pre-consumerism past, (2) minimalists tend to prioritize experiences over objects and (3), minimalists tend to distinguish between needs and wants in such a way that consumer culture-created artificial wants are deemed superfluous to living a fulfilling and meaningful life. What we see in minimalism discourse is a complex lifestyle oriented around highly intentional consumption practices and critical of individual participation in mass-consumption. Within this discourse, the rhetoric of authenticity is used as both a critique of consumerism and a justification for a highly regimented and responsabilized way of life that is, I argue, an example of governmentality in action at the level of the individual.

The sites of minimalism discourse I have engaged with are predominantly first-person accounts of the lifestyle and are a unique example of what Nikolas Rose, drawing from Foucault, refers to as ‘enterprise’ in which a person becomes an “entrepreneur of itself” (1998:158) and conducts their life like a project to be managed. In addition to the rhetoric of authenticity, this discourse is couched in the language of neoliberal governmentality, particularly individual choice, and freedom. Based on my data, the minimalist lifestyle seems to be both counter-cultural and yet firmly entrenched in neoliberal ways of thinking. Through their lifestyle oriented around personal opposition to the status quo of consumerism, minimalists are fashioning themselves as neoliberal subjects. However, this does not appear to be the intent of the lifestyle. Rather, minimalism is a prime example of the ways in which governmentality seeps into our

¹⁴ This will be discussed in much greater detail in the following chapter which serves as a literature review on authenticity, consumerism, and self-help.

everyday discourse and ways of thinking. The sites of minimalism discourse I have engaged with illustrate how authenticity is mobilized through practices of governmentality both internally and externally. Ultimately, the cultivation of personal authenticity is used as a justification and rationalization for participation in the minimalist lifestyle and helps to reinforce the notion of the individual responsabilized self, while at the same time critiquing consumerism for inhibiting authenticity.

Research Contributions

This project contributes to the ongoing theorizing on three areas of interest to sociologists, namely authenticity, governmentality, and discourse. I am bringing these three areas together through my analysis of decluttering minimalism. My project also contributes to the ongoing conversation on consumer culture by looking at the ways in which minimalism discourse problematizes consumerism through the rhetoric of authenticity and a complex negotiation of individual behaviour. To the discipline of sociology, I am contributing an approach to studying minimalism, and lifestyle more generally, as an aspect of everyday life. I am also contributing a discussion on how minimalism, though critical of consumerism, ultimately works as a part of capitalism.

My research uses data from across genres and mediums by looking at a discourse that takes place throughout multiple sites, each with their own conventions and rationalities, yet very closely related and compatible. This inter-textual analysis contributes to advancing our thinking about what constitutes discourse and how it functions. In this sense, my research offers an aggregate of minimalism discourse reflective of the ways in which people increasingly access and engage with information.

I also contribute to the growing body of research on self-help as a site of governmentality (e.g., Lewis 2008; Rimke 2000; Sothorn 2007) by looking at governmentality at the level of first-hand accounts, which differs from the institutional or top-down level where governmentality analyses often take place (e.g., Rose 1998 on the ‘psy’ disciplines). To this conversation, I add an exploration of the ways in which governmentality is embodied and expressed through discourse by lay individuals. My research demonstrates the pervasive nature of neoliberal ways of thinking and how they come to shape worldviews, even when those views are critical of neoliberal tenets.

The minimalism I am looking at differs from the forms of voluntary simplicity that often draw academic attention (e.g., Housel 2006 on ‘homesteaders’; Schor 1998 on ‘downshiffters’; Vannini and Taggart 2016 on ‘off-griders’). I focus on much more mundane actions which may be more broadly attainable and therefore potentially more impactful than some other forms of simple living. While minimalism is rarely referred to as a movement within the sites I have investigated, the self-help gurus in particular advocate that minimalism is a lifestyle everyone can participate in and benefit from because it is mainly about reducing consumption (though some do downshift in other ways). This form of minimalism has received little academic attention, but is important to engage with as it appears to be an increasingly popular lifestyle choice that could impact how people participate in, or challenge, consumer capitalism.

My research is also contributing to the body of work that looks at how critiques of the dominant culture often become incorporated into it, particularly through commodification and branding¹⁵ (e.g., Boterill 2007; Frosh 2001; O’Neill et al. 2014).

¹⁵ In line with another consumer trend that sees items delivered to the doorstep, there is even a subscription service called ‘Minimalism & Co.’ that offers a quarterly delivery of minimalist—functional and nicely

The minimalist gurus whose works I have engaged with all turned their lifestyle into a profitable endeavor by publishing books about their experience as minimalists or offering advice for those interesting in becoming minimalists. Minimalism, in the form of decluttering and reduced consumption, has potential as a sustainable response to consumerism, but could also become a consumer trend, and these possibilities are both worth considering for their potential to impact consumer culture.

Lastly, my work helps to address the contradiction between consumer-driven neoliberal economics and the self-regulation called for by minimalists. This tension is present within minimalism discourse wherein minimalists are encouraged to alter their consumption rather than to cease consuming altogether. In particular, minimalists are encouraged to consume experiences, or local, or handcrafted goods. In this way, minimalism could be seen as little more than a taste-based lifestyle. However, I maintain that the potential exists for it to be a critical lifestyle that challenges status quo consumerism and neoliberalism if practitioners so choose.

Project Outline

The following chapter is a literature review covering authenticity, consumerism, and self-help. It explores how these concepts are related and establishes how each is utilized for the purposes of this project. The chapter pays particular attention to authenticity as it is a difficult concept to define, yet is crucial to my argument. Chapter 2 also outlines the contemporary study of consumerism and consumer culture. Finally, my

designed—items for around \$100 (Brownlee 2016). This is just one example of the potential for minimalism to be commodified in such a way that it would lose its critical bent and instead become more of a lifestyle aesthetic.

literature review looks at the ways in which self-help is related to governmentality and the circulation of the idea of authenticity.

Chapter 3 addresses theory and outlines my approach to lifestyle and governmentality. In this chapter I look at how lifestyle and governmentality link with self-help, consumer culture, and authenticity through the notion of enterprise (Rose 1998). This chapter establishes minimalism as a site in which these broader sociological concepts are brought together in a complex way to challenge status quo consumerism.

The fourth chapter expands on the third by establishing the methodological approach to my research. In this chapter I discuss my Foucault-inspired approach to discourse theorizing and analysis and discuss the ‘nuts and bolts’ of my data collection, reading, and coding process. This chapter also looks at how to negotiate and make sense of discourse across genres, and addresses the use of social media as a source of data.

Chapter 5 begins my empirical discussion and is oriented around the broad theme of past and present as it relates to authenticity within minimalism discourse. This chapter explores how minimalism discourse presents an idealized past and an imagined future to critique contemporary consumerism. It also looks at how minimalism discourse presents consumerism as being bad for the individual, particularly through the use of prison and slavery metaphors. This chapter concludes by outlining the ways the media sources I have analyzed offer a political economy explanation for minimalism, which is often lacking in the expert minimalism texts.

Chapter 6 revolves around the broad theme of experiences and objects. Both of these concepts are essential to how we understand and utilize authenticity, and both are fundamental to how minimalists shape the boundaries of their lifestyle. Experiences are

privileged by minimalism discourse, yet objects and material culture are central to the lifestyle insofar as they are the physical manifestation of participation in consumerism. The over-accumulation of objects is also put forth as yet another element of the minimalist critique of consumerism.

The seventh chapter addresses the final empirical theme of needs and wants. This is one of the most complex elements of the minimalist lifestyle wherein distinctions are made between real and artificial needs as well as material and existential wants. This chapter explores the negotiation of these distinctions as well as the minimalist pursuit of happiness and concern for the environment. In this chapter I also discuss the framing of physical and mental health within minimalism discourse. Finally, I explore the tension between ‘luxury’ and ‘enough’ that is present in the minimalism discourse.

The final chapter provides a summary of my argument and research findings. In particular, minimalism discourse is considered in relation to broader structuring discourses such as spirituality. This chapter also discusses the limitations of my project. And finally I propose possible directions for future research on authenticity and alternative consumption lifestyles.

Chapter 2: Linking Authenticity, Consumerism, and Self-help

Building from the opening chapter, which established the political economy and cultural context for my project, the aims of this chapter are to link authenticity, consumerism, and self-help, and to situate my analysis of minimalism discourse within this conversation. All three of these areas have individually been considered extensively within academic research, and some work has been done to connect authenticity with consumerism and self-help respectively, but little has been done to address the three together. I am approaching minimalism discourse as a point where these three interrelated concepts meet, allowing me to explore the ways in which they work together to form meanings and shape lifestyles against a backdrop of contemporary consumer culture.

These three concepts share an emphasis on the individual self. Running throughout most of the scholarship considered in this chapter is the contention that our understanding of, and emphasis on, the self is historically and culturally contingent (e.g., Rimke 2000; Rose 1999a; Van Leeuwen 2001), yet taken for granted as natural and fixed. As McGee asserts in her analysis of self-help, “it is our culture’s fantasy of a disengaged, masterful, rational, and controlling self that creates the possibilities for endless and futile self-improvement” (2005:173). This emphasis on the self is manifested in the search for authenticity, which is the primary focus of my research, but is also the basis for consumerism and the self-help industry (which is tied up in consumerism).

This chapter begins with an overview of the three concepts individually in order to establish how they are understood for the purposes of my project. I then move on to look at how authenticity has been formulated in relation to consumerism and then in relation to self-help. Finally, the chapter concludes by connecting self-help,

consumerism, and authenticity by looking at how they come together within alt-consumerist¹⁶ practices, which I connect to my focus on minimalism discourse.

Consumerism and Consumer Culture

As outlined in the introductory chapter, we live in an advanced consumer capitalist society wherein consumption shapes everything from personal relationships to political participation. Consumer culture has been the basis for a long tradition of scholarship on the relationship between production and consumption, and what this means for how we interact with social institutions and our fellow citizens. Increasingly, scholarship on consumer culture emphasizes the role of material culture in processes of identity formation. My primary focus here is on the ways in which consumerism and consumer culture are connected to the notion of lifestyle.

Research on consumer culture stems from the earlier tradition of cultural theorizing that was critical of the rapidly changing social conditions brought about by industrialization. These early critics were concerned with what they saw as the decay of culture resulting from these processes. Adorno, in his essay entitled ‘Culture Industry Revisited’ noted, “The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object” (1991:99). This is a noteworthy reformulation of the system of consumption and is a useful starting point for thinking about consumer culture. Even though it was intended as a negative assessment of the culture industries, it is interesting to contemplate consumers as the object rather than the subject of consumerism. The culture industries need the idea of the consumer in order to function

¹⁶ As mentioned in the opening chapter, I refer to minimalism as alt-consumerism rather than anti-consumerism, because it is more about rethinking and altering individual consumer practices than abstaining from consumption altogether or mounting a wide-scale opposition to it with the aim of social change.

and they are part of the system prioritizing ‘consumer’ as the dominant role for members of a consumer society. As discussed later in this chapter, ‘consumer’ is increasingly being linked to ‘citizen’ which impacts how people interact with each other and institutions within society. While it is interesting to think about the consumer as an object, it is more pertinent, as I am using a Foucault-inspired analysis, to consider how ‘the consumer’ is shaped as a subjectivity through discourses including the culture industries such as advertising and self-help, which is explored in detail in the two following chapters.

In response to the Marxist tradition, early cultural studies theorists sought to emphasize that culture does not exist solely at the level of ‘high’ culture. Drawing from their English working class backgrounds, they argued that while culture is material, it is also symbolic. Hall (1996) contended that cultural studies addresses areas Marxist theorists did not, such as culture, language, and the symbolic. Cultural studies theorists argued consumption could be thought of as a system of communication through which we relate to others and create our sense of identity (Hall 1996; Miller 1987, 1995, 1998), and that there is agency in consumption practices. In particular, the works of Veblen (1953) on the leisure class, Bourdieu (1984) on the system of distinction, and Baudrillard (1995) on simulacra, influenced the study of consumer culture by thinking about consumption as a symbolic process. The tradition of social critique is still very much present within academic work on contemporary consumerism, but it is also increasingly present within consumer practices themselves as is the case with minimalism.

Looking at the contemporary state of consumer capitalism, Migone suggests that, beginning with Fordism, “The meaning and nature of consumption changed with the emergence of an increasingly hegemonic discourse that equated individual expression

with material possession” (2007:176). According to Migone, the economic sphere’s narrative, “is hegemonic in the Gramscian sense: some of its premises are so commonly accepted that the discourse they underpin not only is seldom challenged, but it often offers the only organizational and legitimizing basis for social structures” (Migone 2007:184). This hegemonic way of thinking appears to be true of neoliberalism within minimalism and is explored in greater detail in the coming chapters. Despite the outward appearance as being ‘anti-stuff’, minimalism is actually firmly entrenched in material culture. Minimalists place great emphasis on owning possessions that are both functional and meaningful to the individual, and then discarding items deemed superfluous¹⁷. They are focused on consuming what they regard as the right items, in the right way. So, while they may have fewer possessions, they are no less subject to, and active in reinforcing, the belief that material items are an important part of identity formation, or that our lives are shaped by consumption.

Prior to the work of scholars such as Douglas and Isherwood (1979), Appadurai (1986), Miller (1987, 1995, 1998), and Featherstone (1990, 1991), research tended to focus on production and labour while consumption was dismissed as “derivative, peripheral and feminine¹⁸” (Featherstone 1991:viii). Countering this characterization of consumption as well as the economic explanation of consumption, Appadurai argues, “... consumption is eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or

¹⁷ A common refrain within the discursive sites I engaged with is that ‘our stuff does not contain our memories, we do’. This was particularly the case for nostalgic items such as heirlooms and souvenirs, as well as pictures, with a common suggestion being that you should keep the most special items, but not everything. In conjunction with their acknowledgement that material possessions are a reflection of their owner this helps to illustrate the complex views of minimalists toward material possessions.

¹⁸ This is still largely the case with consumption, as well as the domestic space, being associated primarily with women. While it is not the primary focus of my analysis, this way of thinking is also present in much of the minimalism discourse under consideration, where there are often clear differences in the ways in which men and women talk about consumption, and how and why they engage in the minimalist lifestyle.

passive” (1986:31). Furthermore, consumption practices are temporal, spatial, and discursive, and they contribute to shaping both our lifestyles and identities (Sasatelli 2007). Importantly, the ways we talk about lifestyle and identity also contribute to shaping consumer practices by emphasizing the individualized search for authenticity, which helps to further connect what we buy to who we are.

As these scholars suggest, there is much to be gained from the study of consumer culture. Looking at society through a consumer culture framework allows for a reformulation of processes that may otherwise seem to be economically driven. While the political economy factors outlined in Chapter 1 are important for understanding the context in which decluttering minimalism has taken shape, focusing on the cultural aspects of consumer society allows for an emphasis on the discursive processes involved in consumption as well as the relationship between consumption and lifestyle. A focus on culture also lends itself well to an engagement with the concept of authenticity.

It is necessary at this stage to parse what is meant by consumer society and consumer culture. A consumer *society* is “one with a strong consumer culture that, to a large extent, associates personal success, happiness, and well being¹⁹ with the purchasing of material possessions” (Pérez and Esposito 2010:88). Building from this, consumer *culture* refers to the norms, values, and meanings we attach to consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). Through culture, a society, “cultivates attitudes and behavior that predispose people to consent to established ways of thought and conduct, thus integrating

¹⁹ Importantly, the notions of happiness and wellbeing are core elements of the rhetoric of authenticity. In particular, rather than taking for granted that happiness and wellbeing result from consumption, as we have come to understand through consumer culture, minimalism discourse posits that they are better attained by focusing our time, money, and attention elsewhere. Nevertheless, happiness and wellbeing feature prominently as motivation for the minimalist lifestyle. I will take up a more in-depth discussion of minimalism discourse later in this chapter and in the empirical chapters to follow.

individuals into a specific socio-economic system” (Kellner and Durham 2006:ix).

Shopping and consuming have become so normalized within North American society that these practices help to naturalize consumption as a fundamental human activity (Zukin 2004). Consumerism brings with it its own set of values, beliefs, and practices that have come to shape our society, and determine how we understand our subjectivity and interact with the world around us. While I am firmly entrenched within North American consumer culture and society, the sites of discourse I am analyzing span different societies, but seem to share a similar orientation to consumer culture, which appears to be shared by much of the industrialized world.

Citizens as Consumers

Understanding what we mean by consumer society and consumer culture leads to exploring how members of society are characterized, and the role they play in its functioning. Increasingly, scholars are grappling with the relationship between ‘citizen’ and ‘consumer’ subjectivities (e.g., Soper 2004; Streeck 2012; White 1999). Citizenship has traditionally been considered the domain of the collective and public, while consumption has been considered individual and private. But, what does this look like in a society structured around consumption? As Sarah Banet-Weiser contends, “According to today’s market logic, consumer citizens can satisfy their individual needs through consumer behavior, thus rendering unnecessary the collective responsibilities that have historically been expected from a citizen” (Banet-Weiser 2012:18). More and more we are thinking about our citizenship in commercial terms. For example, we are thought of as customers of public institutions such as hospitals and universities, and we ‘vote with our dollars’. Duties and responsibilities that were the domain of citizens are increasingly

being enacted through consumption, and even more problematically, the rights of citizens are increasingly being extended only to those with the means to access them.

The notion of the hybrid consumer-citizen is often viewed negatively as an outcome of neoliberal policies and ways of thinking that have resulted in citizens being treated as, and viewing themselves as, consumers first and foremost. According to White (1999), the consumer-citizen is a discursive formation resulting from both the discourses that make and target the consumer. In other words, both ‘consumer’ and ‘citizen’ have been shaped through discourse, which impacts the ways we think about ourselves individually, and in relation to others.

In a discussion of environmentalism Soper (2004) claims the common formulations of consumers as either individuals acting out of self-interest or dupes of advertising, negates the possibility of reflexive consumers who are accountable to broader social concerns. This rules out the possibility for citizen-consumers who prioritize their social roles and exercise their concerns as citizens through their consumer practices. To address this, Soper (2004) proposes the idea of ‘alternative hedonism’ in which consumers rethink the notion of ‘the good life’ to include collective concerns such as sustainability. She contends, “To act in the spirit of ‘alternative hedonism’ is to acknowledge how minimal one’s power is as an individual consumer—and then to use it nonetheless” (Soper 2004:115). Importantly, Soper places citizen *before* consumer, prioritizing it and putting collective concerns ahead of individual concerns, even at the level of personal consumer choice. While it is not necessarily alternative hedonism, minimalism does appear to be an approach to consumption that could prioritize the citizen identity over that of the consumer. The notion of citizen-consumers is returned to

later in this chapter, and is addressed in the following chapter on governmentality and lifestyle, but my discussion now turns to self-help.

Learning Through Self-help

Directly related to the notion of the consumer-citizen is the overwhelming popularity of the self-help²⁰ industry. Self-help today exists in a variety of formats including books, CDs, workshops, 12-step programs, popular media, web-based communities and forums, and even apps. It is a vast industry covering everything from spirituality, to getting a promotion, to managing mental health, to finding love. These resources are prescriptive and pedagogical in nature and are meant to teach users techniques for dealing with their perceived problems or attaining their goals. These resources tend to be developed by ‘experts’, which can be anyone from a licensed psychologist or popular spiritual leader to someone who is a self-developed guru of their given subject. This dissertation engages with the specific subject of minimalism as it exists within the self-help industry. To do this, I am looking at a collection of sites within the self-help industry, including the recent collection of books²¹ written by minimalism gurus, Reddit forums dedicated to discussions of minimalism, print and online media coverage of the minimalist lifestyle, a documentary about the lifestyle, a selection of public talks related to minimalism, and a sample of Instagram posts. Together, these sites

²⁰ The Self-help genre is also, though less commonly, referred to as ‘self-improvement’. There are interesting semantic considerations in the two formulations—‘help’ suggesting some sort of disadvantaged starting point, and ‘improvement’ suggesting a starting point that is good, but could be better—however, for the purposes of this project, I use the term self-help to refer to the genre of prescriptive texts and resources that my research engages with. As discussed in the Introduction, I am framing minimalist books, Reddit forums, media coverage, the documentary, Instagram, and TED Talks all as part of the self-help genre. The term ‘self-improvement’ is only used in reference to the genre in the case of direct quotations.

²¹ See Chapter 4 on methodology and methods for a full list of the books used for my analysis.

represent a collection of pedagogical lifestyle resources and provide a broad overview of the ways in which people can gain access to minimalism discourse.

The recent scholarship on self-help predominantly uses governmentality²² drawing from Foucault. This is the case across disciplines and subject matters including analyses of disability and sexuality (Sothorn 2007), self-help readers in post-Soviet Russia (Salmenniemi and Vorona 2014), depression (Philips 2009), and the Dr. Phil Show (El-Shall 2014). For example, Sothorn argues self-help, “produces citizens capable of living a particular kind of life, one that is compatible with contemporary neoliberal understandings of the (non)relationship between the individual and the social” (2007:153). This is reflective of much of the recent work on self-help and is in keeping with the preceding discussion on consumer-citizens. The self-help industry is becoming one of the primary sites for the “conduct of conduct” (Rose 1998) through which individuals learn to govern themselves and come to know themselves as consumer, or in the case of my research, minimalist, subjects.

Further to this, in their analysis of self-help readers in post-Soviet Russia, Salmenniemi and Vorona (2014) discuss their Foucauldian approach to self-help texts noting the texts govern subjects through processes of normalization that teach users how to conduct themselves in ways compatible with societal and cultural expectations. Salmenniemi and Vorona (2014) found their informants were quite critical and reflexive about self-help and conclude this is due to their informants having grown up in a communist society, which was more concerned with the common good than individual development. Their research highlights the culturally contingent nature of self-help and

²² The concept of governmentality will be addressed in detail in the following two chapters on theory and methodology.

further demonstrates its emphasis on the responsabilized individual. Because self-help is about ‘the self’ it needs to be compatible with the cultural understanding of the individual. This can be seen in the minimalism discourse I am analyzing, which is steeped in the neoliberal language of the individualized, responsabilized, consuming self.

Heidi Rimke (2000) also draws on Foucault, as well as Rose, to highlight the ways in which self-help literature represents a form of governmentality. Specifically, Rimke argues self-help literature works to reinforce the neoliberal emphasis on the individual. Similarly, in an analysis of lifestyle television programs featuring a makeover component, Lewis links the ways viewers are encouraged to alter their lifestyles through consumption and “a neoliberal model of entrepreneurial selfhood” (2008:231). This argument is reiterated by Varga (2011) and Foster (2016). The notion of the enterprising subject (Rose 1998) is central to my understanding of minimalism discourse. Essentially, through discourses of freedom and choice and the mobilization of personal authenticity, minimalists are put to work on themselves.

Focusing on self-help texts from the late 1980s, Rimke notes these texts emphasize autonomy and promote a self-focused notion of citizenship premised on responsabilized individuals, which parallels the preceding discussion on consumer-citizens. Providing a summary of the self-help genre, Rimke notes, “Self-help is an activity presumed to be voluntary and individualistic. Based upon notions such as choice, autonomy and freedom, self-help relies upon the principle of individuality and entails self-modification and ‘improvement’” (2000:62). As its name suggests, self-help takes the self as its starting point, thus negating the “inherent sociality of being” (Rimke 2000: 62). As discussed above, citizenship is a social and collective endeavour, but self-help is

focused on the individual, as is our broader consumer culture. This results in citizens who are instructed to be, and believe they are, acting in their own best interest, but are also shaping themselves, and being shaped, to fit the neoliberal consumer mold.

The negation of the ‘sociality of being’ is in keeping with what Taylor (1991) identified as a primary concern in *Ethics of Authenticity*. Taylor argues we are dialogical beings and we cannot form true understandings of the authentic self if it is a wholly individualized pursuit. Further echoing Taylor (1991), Rimke notes self-help does not account for “horizon[s] of social relations” (2000:65) and instead places the responsibility for both liberation and regulation at the level of the individual. According to Rimke (2000:63) self-help results in citizens who self-govern, which in turn makes them more governable because they have been taught to be, among other things, predictable, calculable, and self-regulating. By looking at the co-dependency trend in self-help literature Rimke’s work highlights, almost two decades later, that while there are structural consistencies throughout the genre, the subject matter of self-help literature is very much culturally and temporally influenced. New resources are constantly emerging to address current perceived anxieties about our culture and society. This is also demonstrated in Gerlach’s (1995) work on the ‘flexibility’ trend in early 1990s management texts, McGee’s (2005) overview of the self-help genre, and part of what I am addressing in my analysis of the current minimalism trend. Minimalism addresses numerous contemporary anxieties such as environmental degradation, health, finances, and authenticity as if they are private domains to be tackled at the level of the individual.

Mikkonen, Vicdan and Markkula (2014) analyzed books on ‘wardrobe self-help’ to look at how these texts present an oppositional ideology and aim to govern the reader

within the fashion realm. Like Rimke's (2000) liberation/regulation paradox, these authors find that while the texts are ostensibly about liberating readers from the confines of fashion rules, they are also designed to normalize specific approaches to fashion, the body, and the self (Mikkonen et al. 2014:255). As I discuss in later chapters, this is not unlike the minimalism discourse under consideration.

In *Self-help, Inc.* sociologist Micki McGee (2005) explores the evolution of the self-help genre over the last quarter of the twentieth century. In particular, she focused on how the genre came to address women and how it could adapt in the future to promote a more collective orientation. Additionally, McGee notes the rise in self-help literature happens alongside the rise of secularism and therapy. Despite this, much of the self-help literature still maintains spiritual or religious undertones. She argues the genre began with an emphasis on the 'self-made man', which necessarily excluded the support and labor of women and unpaid workers²³ (McGee 2005). Essentially, no one is self-made, but this narrative continues to be central to self-help literature. McGee notes the popularity in self-help literature of the 1980s and 1990s parallels a period of precarious employment. Similarly, as discussed in the opening chapter, the rise of minimalism self-help takes place alongside a growing concern with climate change and environmental protection coupled with a period of recession, ballooning personal debt, skyrocketing housing prices, and ongoing precarious labour conditions. Within this context, minimalism can be understood as a reaction to broader social issues that are treated as individual problems.

McGee (2005) goes on to argue that while self-help resources are designed and marketed to address concerns and anxieties, the vastness of the genre and the call for

²³ As with any sociological endeavor, it is important to consider who a discourse is aimed at, but also who is excluded from the discourse, as well as the conditions of their exclusion. This is a feature of my analysis that will be explored later in this chapter.

constant self-betterment may paradoxically lead to increased anxieties and what she calls the 'belabored self'. She equates this to early advertising that created 'problems' such as dandruff and halitosis to sell more shampoo and toothpaste (McGee 2005). Similarly, Marchand (1986) found advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s played a therapeutic role by easing consumers' anxieties about modern society. Based on the variety of subjects covered by self-help there is always a new inadequacy lurking just around the corner (McGee 2005). According to McGee, this is where the search for authenticity comes into play. By focusing on our individual project of authenticity, we can address these anxieties in ways that seem manageable and that keep the emphasis firmly on the self.

Larsson and Sanne (2005) analyzed a number of self-help books on time management and time-saving strategies and found, similar to McGee's (2005) belabored self, the advice presented in these texts often leads to more work and use of time. They also found that a key piece of advice was for the reader to alter their aspirations, particularly in terms of consumption both because of the time consuming can use up and because of the amount of time spent working in order to afford aspirational consumables. Echoing others, Larsson and Sanne (2005) found that by emphasizing time management, the texts they analyzed help to reinforce the idea that selves can and should be managed.

In a later article, McGee (2012) provides four directions for continued critical engagement with self-help. First, she suggests analyses move beyond the West to consider self-help in developing nations. Second, McGee argues the role of religion in the self-help genre needs to be more thoroughly explored. Third, the active participation by audiences in self-help culture also needs to be considered more thoroughly. And fourth, there needs to be increased consideration as to how self-help culture can move beyond

the individual to focus on social and political transformation. While the first two directions are beyond the scope of this project, I do address the third and fourth suggestions. Regarding the third point, I draw on social media in which there is discussion of minimalism from ‘lay’ persons, which might be read as active participation by audience members. Furthermore, because minimalism addresses consumption, which is something nearly all of us participate in, there is potential for this self-help topic to have a more collective orientation.

As McGee notes, a lot of the work on self-help culture focuses on texts²⁴ prior to the economic crisis of the late-2000s, which means the research has not caught up with the changing social, political, and economic climate. While my project is still North America-centric, it is quite current, and engages with a body of literature that in some ways does consider the social and collective good beyond the individual. On this last point McGee states, “spaces of hope are found not in the before and after format of the ambush makeover and the big reveal, but instead, by channeling the desire for a better life into social action that resonates beyond the boundaries of a neoliberal conception of an autonomous individual self” (2012:690). McGee goes on to note the various subjects and anxieties covered by self-help can be thought of as representative of areas of social unrest or discontent that are in need of political outlets, and that if approached this way, self-help could be an opportunity for fostering not only individual change, but also social change (2005:180-81). Larsson and Sanne (2005) also suggest self-help offers a window into what we as a society find problematic at any given time. This seems to be present in the minimalism discourse and also hints at an element of the search for authenticity.

²⁴ Here, texts are broadly defined to include books, but also television shows, magazines, internet forums, and other discursive sites of self-help culture.

Collingsworth (2014), as well as Larsson and Sanne (2005), suggests self-help largely ignores intersectionalities such as class and ethnicity in an attempt to be universal while also problematizing the individual rather than systemic causes for discontent. Along with McGee (2012), I argue these texts often address ‘first world problems’, which is certainly the case of the minimalism texts under consideration in this project. Collingsworth (2014) posits self-help literature is postmodern in nature given it is abundantly diverse and emphasizes choice, yet it paradoxically presents common metanarratives and reinforces the notion of an essential self—two ideas that stand in opposition to postmodernism. Like Bendix (1997) and Jung (2011) in their considerations of authenticity, Collingsworth points to the modern/postmodern tensions present in the concepts with which I am engaging. To further explore these tensions, I now turn to focus on authenticity and its enduring power within contemporary North American society.

What is ‘Authenticity’, Anyway?

The search for authenticity is often understood to be a motivating force for humanity, particularly in modern industrialized societies where ‘authenticity’ has become omnipresent, driving both our desire to consume and our search for self-fulfillment. According to Foster, “Authenticity is an ethical ideal rooted in the history of Romantic expressivism, which has become an important aspect of self-identity in the individualistic forms of life that prosper in advanced modern societies” (2016:100). As Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, “In the US, the 21st century is an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity, that we are governed by superficiality ... Throughout, there is the looming sense that we are not real enough, that our world is becoming more and more inauthentic, despite our endless

efforts to the contrary” (2012:3 original emphasis). She continues by claiming we have a need to believe, “... that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange” (Banet-Weiser 2012:5). This description of the desire for authenticity nicely describes the reasoning behind the minimalist lifestyle’s stated claim that happiness is found outside of consumption. Though often implicit, our preoccupation with authenticity can be seen to impact all aspects of life from how we decide what to buy at the grocery store, to how we evaluate popular culture, to how we shape our identities. It is this simultaneous ubiquity and ambiguity that make authenticity a rich concept for sociological research.

Foundational Theories of Authenticity

Though not necessarily explicit, questions around forms of social solidarity and types of social relations can be looked at through a lens of authenticity. These theories often revolve around formulations of a past/present dichotomy, not unlike many of the theories that deal more directly with authenticity. For example, this underlying engagement with authenticity can be seen in Emile Durkheim’s (1933) mechanical and organic solidarity as well as Ferdinand Tonnies (1926) *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Each of these formulates the close social solidarity of the past as somehow more authentic than the increasingly individualized social orientation of the present which is an idea that continues to have traction today.

One of the most important foundational theories of authenticity is courtesy of Walter Benjamin ([1968]2007) in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in which he considers the role of technology in changing the availability

and originality of works of art. Technology that allows for easy reproduction of art such as photography and film has a democratizing effect, but it also brings into question the originality, and thus the value, of the art. For Benjamin, the authenticity of an object comes from its 'aura'. He writes, "The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (Benjamin [1968]2007:221). Part of what makes objects authentic, and therefore valuable, is their scarcity and originality. However, in the postmodern era where prints, sampling, and remakes are the norm, authenticity becomes harder to establish—and perhaps even more desirable as a result. When everything is mass-produced, authenticity becomes a mark of distinction.

We may be living in the postmodern era, but our current cultural preoccupation with authenticity stems from modernity, though the concern with authenticity reaches back even further. According to many scholars, a concern with authenticity arose out of the de-centralized and alienating conditions of modernity, and continues to be culturally significant because these feelings have not diminished and we continue to value its moral underpinnings (Bendix 1997; Ferrara 1994; Taylor 1991; Shumway 2007). Succinctly describing the changes brought about by modernity and the worldview that came with them, Taylor (1991) identified the "three malaises" of modernity as individualism, instrumental rationality, and a loss of political freedom. Many who work with the concept of authenticity point to these paradigmatic social and cultural changes as the root cause of our continued desire for authenticity.

The seeming inauthenticity of modernity is one of the primary motivations behind the search for authenticity because the changing social conditions precipitated by

industrialization led to feelings of dislocation and isolation. As described by Simmel, there was a growing disconnect between the objective and subjective realm:

The dissonance of modern life—in particular that manifested in the improvement of technique in every area and the simultaneous deep dissatisfaction with technical progress—is caused in large part by the fact that things are becoming more and more cultivated, while men [sic] are less able to gain from the perfection of objects a perfection of the subjective life. (1971a:234)

Prior to modernity, subjective life was more directly connected to the production process insofar as people had to make the objects they needed, or at the very least, knew the person who made them, whereas modernity separated subjective and objective cultivation through technical developments. For Simmel (1997:37), the development of the self is inseparable from the act of producing objects; a process he refers to as ‘cultivation’. To cultivate objects is to “increase their value”, and the same can be said for the cultivation of the self. The separation of the process of objective production from subjective life meant people had to re-imagine how to cultivate their sense of self. From there, it becomes easy to see why the self-help genre has become so popular in our contemporary culture. Through processes of globalization and the expansion of digital technologies we are even further removed from production processes than at the time of Simmel’s writing. If developing our authenticity is part of the human project, then it makes sense that we seek to cultivate our selves through whatever means are made possible in a neoliberal consumer culture, namely consumption including the purchasing of self-help resources.

As I discuss later in this chapter, the primary conceptualization of authenticity is in reference to the self. In this formulation, authenticity is understood as an intangible essence of a person’s inner being. Understanding authenticity in this way presupposes the modernist assumption that a person has one core, or ‘true’ self. In particular, the

increasing individualism, and breakdown of community, placed the onus of authenticity on the individual (Jones 2010). With the dramatic changes that occurred during modernity, the meaning that was once gained from community life had to be sought elsewhere. Along with the many other aspects of life that were individualized, the search for authenticity was turned inward to focus on the core of the self. A lifestyle like minimalism has the potential to re-ignite a communal way of life, yet the lifestyle remains rather firmly entrenched in an individualized worldview²⁵.

The focus on the individual and the changes to social structures meant the conditions of modernity resulted in feelings of alienation from community and from the process of production. In particular, Braman (2008) and Rae (2010) both frame authenticity in relation to alienation. Rae makes the explicit connection between authenticity and alienation noting, “I understand that the concept ‘alienation’ only gains its meaning in contrast to non-alienation or, as I will call it, authenticity” (2010:23). In other words, we are our authentic selves when we are living in such a way that we do not experience alienation. Similar to Lindholm (2008), Rae defines authenticity by placing it in a dialectic relationship with alienation wherein it is valued as the positive opposition of alienation, which is, by definition, undesirable.

Language and Meaning

This leads to the issue of the mutability of authenticity. As discussed by Vannini and Williams, “Authenticity ... refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar. As culture changes—and with it, tastes, beliefs, values, and practices—so too do definitions of what constitutes

²⁵ Within minimalism discourse there is some hinting at the potential for the lifestyle to foster community which will be addressed in later chapters.

authenticity” (2009:3). This makes authenticity challenging to engage with from a research perspective, but perhaps all the more important given its prevalence within contemporary culture, where it is manifested everywhere from grocery aisles, to self-help, to Politics. In terms of the minimalism discourse under consideration, it rarely expressly addresses authenticity, but rather is steeped in the rhetoric of authenticity with a particular emphasis on freedom, happiness, and fulfillment.

In his critique of the ‘jargon of authenticity’, Adorno noted, “In many cases the distance between essential and inessential, between authentic and inauthentic, lies with the arbitrariness of definition, without in the least implying the relativity of truth. The reason for this situation lies in language. Language uses the term ‘authentic’ in a floating manner” (Adorno 1973:123). This floating manner explains the varying meanings and applications of authenticity. In some ways, it is this openness that gives authenticity its heft—it is something indefinable, not unlike happiness or love. Conversely, it can also lead to the watering-down of its meaning. There is an underlying assumption or understanding about the general meaning of authenticity such that describing something, or someone, as authentic carries a certain weight with it because language has established ‘authentic’ as the positive opposition to ‘inauthentic’ or ‘alienated’. Authenticity is valued because inauthenticity, and its rhetorical stand-ins—fake, dishonest, artificial—are established as being undesirable, yet neither is typically defined clearly. Furthermore, authenticity carries a moral judgment with it, such that objects or experiences deemed ‘authentic’ are situated as inherently better and more desirable than those that are not.

As Bendix asserts, “The notion of authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes

authenticity problematic” (1997:9). There are parallels between the authentic/inauthentic dichotomy and Goffman’s (1959) back stage/front stage, as well as Durkheim’s ([1912]2001) sacred/profane. In all three, the concepts work off of each other to create meaning. In addition to being defined by its relationship to the inauthentic, authenticity also tends to be defined by a number of concepts treated as its synonyms such as ‘real’, ‘genuine’, ‘original’, ‘true’, ‘natural’, and ‘organic’, with the understanding that these concepts have more established meanings. However, saying something is authentic because it is genuine and/or organic does not necessarily clarify what is meant by ‘authentic’, especially when talking about the self.

Furthermore, Trilling brings to light the possible futility of attempting to define authenticity when he notes, “Irony is one of those words, like love, which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning—other such words are sincerity and authenticity ...” (Trilling 1972:120). For Trilling, authenticity’s strength lies in its openness and resistance to being defined. The goal then, is to interrogate its many uses and applications in an effort to understand the value of ‘authenticity’ as a cultural concept. In many ways, authenticity’s meaning is context specific, yet there also appears to be some core elements to the concept of authenticity giving it its value such as an inherent, shared understanding that ‘authenticity’ is a quality of a person, experience, or object to be sought out and cultivated for its moral superiority.

Identifying Authenticity in Objects, Experiences, and Selves

Authenticity is conceptual, so it can never truly be physically located, but it tends to be engaged with in three interrelated fields—objects, experiences, and the self. In the search for authenticity, as it is commonly structured, we are generally seeking a sense of

an authentic self but we tend to look for this through experiences and objects. When we locate it in these external sources, it is often then believed to contribute back to attaining an authentic self.

Authenticating Objects

It is often believed there is something inherent in an object that serves as proof of authenticity. Rather than a feeling, or a sense of being, objects are thought to contain physical evidence of their authenticity. This is the case for everything from classic artwork, to contemporary handbags. Speaking about the heritage industry, Jones notes, “authenticity is seen as an objective and measurable attribute inherent in the material fabric, form and function of artefacts and monuments, and a positivist set of research methods and criteria have evolved to test their genuineness.” (2010:182). Whether it is identifying a particular production technique, carbon dating an artifact, or verifying a brand logo, a series of criteria exist for determining the authenticity of material objects.

Pointing to the 1960s counterculture, but equally valid today, Orvell notes the pursuit for authenticity was manifested in, “a taste for crafts, house plants, natural foods, earth shoes, fringed leather jackets, camping, flea markets and collectables, and the other means whereby the factitiousness of the industrial world is at least partially mitigated” (1989:299). These products feel disconnected from mass-production in some way and contain a sense of being organic or somehow connected to nature which is one of the most crucial elements of the contemporary formulation of authenticity, especially when trying to locate authenticity in everyday objects. As discussed later in this chapter, the counterculture of the 1960s is also influential in much of the contemporary pushback against, or rejection of, consumerism.

Two of the ways objects are deemed to be authentic is if they are handmade, or it is known who produced them. Handmade objects are understood to be more authentic than mass-produced objects because of their singularity and uniqueness. In an eloquent formulation of this, Simmel notes, “there is more in human products, perhaps in every single one which derives fully from the creative power of the spirit, than is contained in its forms. This marks off everything that has soul from all that is produced mechanically” (1971b:383-84). With this understanding, when making things by hand, the person not only cultivates their self, but also puts an element of their soul into the object they are producing thus making not only the object, but also the producer more authentic in the process. This valuing of handmade items is present in minimalism discourse.

Furthermore, Lindholm argues the desire for authentic objects can also be seen in the increasing popularity of ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) projects. He notes the growing belief that “... despite any rough edges and uneven legs, a table hammered together in a garage workshop is better (that is, more authentic) than a mass-produced version because it has been produced at home (where a man [sic] can be himself) by a specific (read, genuine) individual” (Lindholm 2008:58-59). Much like art and heritage items, the authenticity of DIY²⁶ objects comes from their connection to the person making them, and the experience of this process, which is the next element in the authenticity trio.

Experiencing Authenticity

Following from the discussion of objects, authenticity is also often conceptualized in relation to experiences. We can experience authenticity, through travel for instance,

²⁶ Notably, the DIY trend and minimalism come together in the tiny house movement, which has become the basis for television shows such as *Tiny House*, *Big Living* (2015), *Tiny House Hunters* (2015), and *Tiny Luxury* (2017) on HGTV Canada. In these shows, people shop for or build small, typically mobile, homes in an effort to live with less.

and an experience can feel authentic, for example seeing your favourite musician perform live. In this way, there is a felt or emotional component to authenticity. Whereas identifying objects as authentic tends to be a positivist endeavour, the experience of authenticity is more of an intangible, emotional endeavour. Having an authentic experience is understood to somehow contribute to the development of the authentic self.

Numerous scholars argue authenticity can come from experiences resulting in strong, though fleeting, emotional responses such as elation (e.g., Bendix 1997; Lindholm 2008; Scannell 2001). The emotional response to an experience is momentarily tangible evidence of authenticity such that experiencing authenticity somehow reaffirms one's humanity—emotions make us human. Whereas the authentic self can, in theory, be a permanent state of being, authentic experiences are not typically long lasting, though they may have an enduring effect on the individual. Authenticity seems to be tied to aesthetic experiences and encounters with other people that somehow feel real or genuine such that there is something transformative about authentic experiences that appear to contribute to cultivating the authentic self. This way of thinking about experiences is common within minimalism discourse and is explored in later chapters.

The Authentic Self

Building from authenticating objects and experiencing authenticity, the ultimate goal in the search for authenticity seems to be attaining the sense of an authentic self (e.g., Bendix 1997; Braman 2008; Lindholm 2008; Rae 2010; Taylor 1991; Trilling 1972). Like experience, this essentially comes down to an individual feeling of 'being true to myself', and can take two forms. Either, it can take the form of 'I'm authentic

because I do whatever I want' which is a potentially problematic way of existing in the world, or it can be based in a shared notion of what it means to be human.

In *Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor argued that despite the many advances of modernity, there is also a general sense of decline²⁷. In spite of the idea that authenticity means 'being true to myself', Taylor contends this cannot be a completely subjective idea. Instead, it has to come from a shared set of values and ideals because being human is a dialogical endeavor. He posits, "The agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions. That is what is self-defeating in modes of contemporary culture that concentrate on self-fulfilment *in opposition* to the demands of society, or nature, which *shut out* history and the bonds of solidarity" (Taylor 1991:40 original emphasis). So, while authenticity is an element of the self, and cultivating authenticity has become an increasingly individual pursuit, it is ultimately a dialogical concept reliant on a shared understanding.

The conditions of modernity both motivate and thwart the search for an authentic self. The emphasis on the individual simultaneously places the onus to be authentic on the self while also making this more difficult to attain by isolating individuals. The individualizing of authenticity means we are left to our own devices to determine what it means to live authentically, and not pursuing the development of the authentic self means failing to reach a fundamental level of humanity. We can think of the self as being authentic if we first conceptualize the self as something singular and constant (Van Leeuwen 2001). It is no coincidence then that our contemporary approach to authenticity aligns with modernity when this formulation of the self was predominant.

Bendix clearly articulates the connection between the authentic self, authentic

²⁷ See Taylor's (1991) "three malaises" in the earlier discussion on modernity.

experience and authentic objects. Her description is worth quoting at length:

The search for authenticity is fundamentally an emotional and moral quest. But this experiential dimension does not provide lasting satisfaction, and authenticity needs to be augmented with pragmatic and evaluative dimensions. ... Processes of authentication bring about material representations by elevating the authenticated into the category of the noteworthy. In the last decades of the twentieth century this process has accelerated exponentially, and so much has been declared authentic that the scarcity value is evaporating: once tomato sauce carries the label 'authentic', the designation loses its special significance. The question of internalized authenticity—the authentic human experience, the exuberant search for the 'soul of the people', as Herder called it—is a much more complex temptation, an attractive, troubling series of attempts to pinpoint the ineffable. (1997:7)

Here, Bendix identifies the paradox of authenticity—the more we look for it, and the more things we declare to be authentic, the less meaning authenticity actually holds, which only serves to further motivate the search. This is why Potter (2010) says authenticity is a hoax. Once authenticity is identified, it can be commodified, which in turn makes it less authentic than it was before being discovered and labeled. Thus, the search moves on to the next object, or the next experience, or the next method for developing the authentic self, *ad infinitum*. Bendix also points to a hierarchy within which authenticity has not lost its value, but where some things are more authentic than others, and some things are more deserving of the designation than others—for example, an original work of art as opposed to tomato sauce. As will be seen in later chapters, this hierarchy of authenticity seems to be present within minimalism discourse.

Contemporary Approaches to Authenticity

Much of the work discussed thus far engages with authenticity at the conceptual and philosophical level, but there is a growing body of academic literature tackling considerations of authenticity in more concrete ways. The majority of the substantive

social science research on authenticity has been focused on three subjects—tourism, music, and food. It seems these three subjects are ripe for studying authenticity because they incorporate both objects and experiences and are also, for the most part, personal forms of consumption. Each of these substantive areas offers authenticity indicators such as being locally sourced and organic (food), traditional ceremonies and historic locations (tourism), or live and acoustic performances (music).

In an effort to bring together some of the discussions of authenticity in various areas of cultural studies such as music, food, and travel, Koontz (2010) identified two ways authenticity is used by producers and consumers to evaluate commodities: “otherizing” and “traditionalizing”. Otherizing is used to emphasize the exoticism of a product and traditionalizing is based on nostalgia and an understanding of the past (Koontz 2010:986). Koontz argues constructions of authenticity are especially prevalent in arts and leisure activities, which helps explain why food, tourism, and music are such fruitful locations for the study of authenticity.

Relating the contemporary concern with authenticity in rock music to earlier concerns with the culture industry, Firth (1986) argues technology makes the concern with authenticity in rock music possible. In other words, without the technological developments in the first place, the concern with authenticity is moot because it is based on a pre-technology past. This is reflective of the earlier discussion of modernity wherein authenticity became a concern based on the perceived loss of a prior authentic state. Shumway (2007) similarly uses Benjamin’s notion of mechanical reproduction to consider the authenticity of recorded music noting it should be judged on what it represents and not on the fidelity to the original performance. Reiterating the role of

technology in considerations of the authenticity of music, Shumway notes, “What has historically been deemed authentic in rock is associated with the primitive, the rustic, the rough, and the wild” (2007:529). Of course, this is not isolated to music, as closeness to nature and its related concepts are one of the primary ways of evaluating authenticity regardless of the subject. Similarly, using a culinary analogy, Firth notes, “The continuing core of rock ideology is that raw sounds are more authentic than cooked sounds” (1986:266), which leads nicely into a discussion of food and authenticity.

In an analysis of television cooking shows, Hansen expands the desire for authenticity beyond the realm of food when she observes, “It is true that fakeness has become so naturalized as to ironically fuel the contemporary search for the ‘authentic’, and the manufactured authentic has become a new best-selling commodity” (2008:62). Hansen suggests that beyond food, and due to the prevalence of things such as ‘reality’ shows, people are searching for something *really* real. In this way, the desire for authenticity can be seen as a reaction to a culture full of Photoshopped images, processed food, and mass consumption. However, as suggested by Hansen, searching for authenticity does not necessarily lead to an authentic destination. Rather, it often leads to objects and experiences manufactured to *appear* authentic.

Additionally, in their content analysis of beer advertisements from around the world, O’Neill, Houtman and Aupers argue the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s has been integrated into the mainstream consumer culture such that “the cultural logic of conformist mass consumption is largely replaced by an emphasis on individual liberty, nonconformity and personal authenticity” (2014:587). What these authors found was that many of the advertisements simultaneously created an aura of authenticity and mocked

this creation resulting in ‘meta’ ads that let the consumer know they are in on the joke. The ads simultaneously acknowledged consumers’ desire for authenticity and their knowledge that it cannot be acquired by drinking a particular beer. Furthermore, these authors noted that by defining authenticity through terms such as ‘simple’ and ‘natural’—features many do not consider to be part of contemporary society—what we are doing is suggesting our current culture is inauthentic and thus, judgments of authenticity necessarily contain social critique (O’Neill et al. 2014:587). In other words, when we think of authenticity in these terms, we are negating the possibility that our complex, digitally-mediated consumer society can also be thought of as authentic. Nevertheless, terms such as simple, natural, and organic continue to feature prominently in the rhetoric of authenticity, and indeed, are very much present in minimalism discourse.

In their exploration of foodie discourse, Johnston and Baumann (2010) argue authenticity is one of the key frames foodies use to distinguish themselves. For these authors, authenticity is both socially constructed and relational. They argue this discourse is demonstrative of our broader cultural concern with authenticity. Like O’Neill et al. (2014) these authors note the cultural criticism present in foodie discourses of authenticity, especially in respect to the manufacturing and industrial production of food. One of the strengths of Johnston and Baumann’s work is that they make sure to consider those who are excluded, largely by lack of financial means, from participating or being considered in foodie discourse. This is important to my work as well, and, I believe, is essential to the study of consumption discourses and practices more generally. Johnston and Baumann suggest, “... the contemporary method for meeting the demands of both democracy and distinction is omnivorousness, which defines quality in culture not by

genre but by a focus on authenticity” (2010:95). The use of ‘authenticity’ as an appraisal of food’s quality and value serves as a palatable way to demonstrate that the foodie is both democratic and distinct—which Johnston and Baumann say distinguish foodies from the broader population. Authenticity contains an element of critique and is a mark of distinction that at the very least requires cultural capital, but also increasingly requires time and financial capital.

David Boyle also frames authenticity as a critique of contemporary society noting we want both our current conveniences and pleasures, but also some of the features of a romanticized past. He contends our discontent stems mostly from our increasingly digital and virtual world, but is quick to note that the past we imagine was not without its problems, and was in fact quite bad for many people (Boyle 2004). Boyle strives to remind us contemporary society is not as bad or inauthentic as we might think, while highlighting some of the contradictions of contemporary culture and our nostalgic orientation towards authenticity. Grazian also points to the elements of nostalgia and critique within our current desire for authenticity, stating we tend to think of authenticity as existing outside of “our postindustrial age of high-tech frivolity” and instead seek it in places, objects, and experiences we associate with the past or the working class (2012:191). Again, for those seeking authenticity, it is something that exists outside of their current conditions²⁸. This was also demonstrated by McGee (2005) in the preceding section on the self-help genre where she noted there seems to be an element of social discontent present in much of the self-help literature on offer.

²⁸ If they felt they had achieved a sense of authenticity, they wouldn’t be looking, but since authenticity seems to be a moving target, the search goes on.

Meanwhile, Pooley (2010) looked at authenticity within a context of the ‘therapeutic ethos’ and mass consumption, and identified what he sees as an ‘authenticity bind’. He argues, “the tension between the self-fulfillment ideal and the injunction to work on oneself as an object is a *productive contradiction*. That tension ... yields a calculated authenticity that is then amplified by the market, in advertising and self-help culture. The felt need for authenticity remains unmet and leads at least some of us to go deeper in search of the real thing” (Pooley 2010:82 original emphasis). Authenticity is an enduring idea in contemporary consumer cultures. With roots in Romanticism, it was reworked during modernity and has since been appropriated to suit postmodern sensibilities and our consumer society. One of the ways this is most evident is that authenticity increasingly comes with a qualifier such as ‘identifiable’ (Bendix 1997), ‘manufactured’ (Duffy 2013; Hansen 2008), ‘calculated’ (Pooley 2010), and ‘performative’ (Grazian 2012; Varga 2011). Though, as is apparent in self-help literature, we have very much held onto the notion of the ‘true inner self’; we see this as a project that looks different for each of us. The same can be said for authenticity. What makes me feel authentic might not be the same for you, but what remains is a shared valuing of the moral virtue of authenticity. My attention now turns to how authenticity is taken up in terms of consumerism and the self-help industry (itself part of our broader consumer culture) and how we increasingly rely on these fields to shape our authentic selves.

We are What We Buy?

Mass-production and consumption bring the question of authenticity to the fore because authenticity becomes all the more valuable in a culture of sameness. This is echoed by Debord who states, “It is doubtless impossible to contrast the pseudo-need

imposed by the reign of modern consumerism with any authentic need or desire that is not itself equally determined by society and its history. But the commodity in the stage of its abundance attests to an absolute break in the organic development of social needs.” (Debord 1994:44-45). Here, Debord highlights that while needs have always been socially determined to an extent, there is an increasing disconnect between our modern consumer needs and our ‘authentic’ needs as humans. This is echoed in the minimalism discourse under consideration through a distinction between ‘real’ and ‘artificial’ needs²⁹.

Wants and needs have long been a topic of concern for consumer culture scholars with many tracing the trajectory of our consumption habits from the introduction of post-war mass consumption to the more identity-driven consumption of today (e.g., Zukin 2004, 2008). The argument being that many (but not all) of us have long passed the point of meeting our basic needs, but we continue to consume to satisfy our wants. Of course, needs and wants change over time. More and more, what we need from consumption are objects that contribute to our identity formation. This is where marketing, advertising, and branding come in. The rhetoric of authenticity consists of its most commonly used synonyms such as ‘real’, ‘genuine’, and ‘true’ as well as more abstract concepts such as ‘fulfillment’, ‘self-actualization’, and ‘contentment’. Advertising works to associate these and other desirable ideas to whatever is being marketed to consumers (Andersen and Strate 2000; Miller 1991). These terms allude to the authenticity of the product being advertised and imply consuming said product will lead to developing an authentic self.

Botterill (2007), through an analysis of jean and sneaker advertisements, and Frosh (2001), through an analysis of the stock photography industry, both looked at how

²⁹ See Chapter 7: Meeting Needs in Pursuit of Wants.

authenticity permeates contemporary consumer culture. They argue that despite the seeming incompatibility of authenticity with mass-consumption, it has been easily absorbed into consumer culture. Botterill notes, “While authenticity once served as an antidote to mass society, today advertisers use it to soothe their young audiences’ anxiety that authenticity is no longer possible. They do so by suggesting to audiences that genuine moments of humanity can still be contemplated, even in contrived and commercialized texts” (2007:106). Similarly, as discussed above by McGee (2005), self-help topics point to and address our anxieties about contemporary culture. Furthermore, Frosh (2001) notes authenticity is used by the system of mass cultural production to perpetuate itself. Like other countercultural ideals or attitudes before it, authenticity has been subsumed into consumer culture in such a way that it often seems natural to seek authenticity through consumption. And, while we are buying objects or experiences associated with authenticity, what we are seeking is an authentic self.

In *The Authenticity Hoax: How We Get Lost Finding Ourselves*, Potter argues our search for authenticity is misguided because authenticity simply does not exist. He posits, “Authenticity is a way of talking about things in the world, a way of making judgments, staking claims, and expressing preferences about our relationships to one another, to the world, and to things” (Potter 2010:13). He says our discontent comes from desiring something unattainable, and because of this, we are better off not looking for authenticity in the first place. However, I argue that rather than dismissing authenticity as a ‘hoax’, there is value in seeking to understand our cultural preoccupation with it.

Potter further contends that rather than our misguided notion locating authenticity in an imagined past, we need to develop a notion of authenticity compatible with our

current conditions. In particular he points to the market economy, which is something that, when faced with the alternative, we actually do not want to do away with. For Potter, the search for authenticity is very much tied up in consumerism. He notes, "... what is really driving the quicksilver character of the search for authenticity is the underlying competitive structure of the quest. That is, we should not blame those who are selling the authentic, but rather those who are buying" (Potter 2010:115). However, rather than being concerned with placing blame, I am more interested in understanding the ways in which authenticity is used to come to terms with, or to challenge, consumerism and the assumptions of consumer culture.

Furthermore, Potter is critical of the use of alienation as an explanation for the search for authenticity because, he says, it also often goes undefined in the same ambiguous ways as authenticity. Identifying a further problem with authenticity, he notes that using 'genuine' and 'real' as synonyms for authentic overlooks the fact that everything that exists is real by virtue of its existence, making these supposed synonyms rather useless in attempting to define authenticity in any concrete way (Potter 2010). Finally, Potter argues modernity provided the luxury of time to concern ourselves with authenticity in the first place, but we should instead stop looking for authenticity and just live our lives, because we would more likely find authenticity if we stopped looking backwards and instead embraced the present.

Consumerism as Pathology

We shop for many reasons, but what happens when consumption is deemed problematic? Some scholars have looked at the links between consumerism and self-help and have found, like the self-help studies discussed above, that there is a strong

connection to our neoliberal approaches to self-governance. For example, shopping addiction, commonly referred to as being a ‘shopaholic’, was considered for the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (Demerling 2011), but ultimately was not included. Moreover, consumption is often treated as a salve in the form of ‘retail therapy’ wherein we are encouraged to consume in an effort to feel better about some aspect of our lives. What this demonstrates is that consumption is highly personal and emotional, but also shaped by society and culture.

Pérez and Esposito (2010) directly compare consumerism to drug addiction³⁰, forming the basis for their argument that a paradigm shift away from neoliberalism is needed if we are to change our consumption patterns. They proffer that simply shifting to individual ‘frugality’ is not sufficient to address the recent economic crisis in the United States as it does not get at the underlying structures promoting and maintaining what they see as a collective addiction to consumerism. They argue, “consumer addiction and other problems associated with neoliberal capitalism will not likely be challenged if people continue to associate human nature with competition, personal ambition with getting rich, freedom with consumer choice, and success and desirability with material wealth” (Pérez and Esposito 2010:97). Addressing systemic problems with individualized solutions is not likely to work, yet self-help and authenticity continue to be presented as answers to collective challenges, as is the case with minimalism discourse.

Cultivating a Core Self

The goal of the search for authenticity is to develop the sense of an authentic self, and nowhere is this more prevalent than in the self-help industry. Here, the desire for

³⁰ This comparison is also present in minimalism discourse and is discussed in Chapter 7.

authenticity is packaged and sold in easy to access and (supposedly) easy to follow resources promising authenticity is only a few steps (and dollars) away. Self-help exists at the nexus of consumerism and our desire for authenticity. There is always a new anxiety to address, guru to follow, technique to master, diet to try, or book to buy.

Related to this, Varga (2011) connects authenticity, self-help, and the increasing prevalence of depression. Within the self-help genre, Varga identified three models of authenticity: ‘qualitative’, ‘quantitative’, and ‘performative’ (2001:115). The quantitative model is seen in Victorian self-help that promoted the internalization of a set of shared societal values. The qualitative model refers to the self-help designed to teach the reader how to discover their true inner self and links this to achieving success (in broadly capitalist terms). Finally, the performative model, which emerged in the 1990s, refers to self-help that teaches personal branding for demonstrating one’s uniqueness. Varga (2011) argues the performative model of authenticity works because it is best suited to capitalism with its emphasis on flexibility, and because it addresses our suspicions about originality. Varga, like Bendix (1997), contends authenticity is a paradox, stating, “authenticity has become an institutionalized demand toward subjects; the very attempt to realize it creates conditions under which the probability of its realization is reduced” (2011:125). Varga then takes this a step further to argue the paradox of performative authenticity is exhausting and contributes to the current rise in depression rates.

Meanwhile, Foster (2016) explores the connections between authenticity, neoliberalism, and the therapeutic ethos and, like Varga, places its roots in Romanticism. Foster defines neoliberalism as “a political rationality that seeks to generalize the notion of self-governed freedom throughout society, transforming sites of solidarity and

collectivism into forms of structured competition”, and claims the concept of authenticity, specifically ‘the authentic self’, has been taken up in service of this project (2016:101). Foster situates the rise in therapy as taking place parallel to the rise of mass consumption, both of which place an emphasis on the individual. Foster argues authenticity has lost its moral grounding because of the ways in which it has become commodified. He contends that in order for authenticity to regain its social relevance we need to establish political outlets for collective action against marketization and re-implement a sense of shared responsibility (Foster 2016). This in many ways echoes Taylor’s (1991) concerns about how the idea of authenticity has been stripped of its social underpinning through the ways it has been taken up in contemporary culture.

Similar to Hansen (2008) above, in an exploration of authenticity in women’s magazines, Duffy (2013) noted the *manufactured* authenticity prevalent in many of the culture industries. In her study, Duffy found the concept of authenticity was present in women’s magazines in three key ways: reference to organic and natural products; praise for ‘real’ women; and discussions of a true inner self. Duffy highlights one of the major contradictions of the use of authenticity in advertising by noting much of the advertising she analyzed claimed products were ‘organic’, ‘pure’, and ‘natural’. Such advertising suggests buying these products is eco-friendly, but participating in mass-consumption is anything but (Duffy 2013). The relationship between authenticity, consumption, and the environment is a tension that runs throughout minimalism discourse³¹. Furthermore, one of Taylor’s (1991) concerns with how authenticity has been taken up in contemporary society is what our emphasis on individualism might mean for the environment.

³¹ The minimalist concern for the environment is discussed in Chapter 7.

Looking at a different form of self-help, Jung (2011) conducted in-depth interviews with white middle-class American baby boomer members of a Methodist church to explore the modern and postmodern elements of what he refers to as the culture of authenticity, which he describes as “a master schema for imagining a good life whether one is in love, in worship, in psychotherapy, bowling alone, caught in play, or undergoing plastic surgery” (Jung 2011:279). Jung found even though many of his informants shunned consumerism and the dominant ideal of individualism, they were more than willing to pay for therapy and therapeutic resources to work on themselves. He posited, “despite the apparent difference in end points, ‘authentic self’ for one and profit for the other, the culture of authenticity and the market have a close affinity with each other in the emphasis on ‘feelings’ and individual agency” (Jung 2011:287). This highlights the complex ways self-help and the broader therapeutic ethos have been bound to the contradictory relationship between authenticity and consumerism. Jung’s (2011) research also highlights some of the tensions between modernity and postmodernity in terms of our conceptualizations of the self, our search for authenticity, and how we reconcile them within our contemporary society. We are very much a consumer culture that believes in plurality, choice, and reinvention when it comes to the self, but we also hold fast to the idea of a core self that can be accessed and worked on. We increasingly conduct this work through consumption whether it is attending luxury retreats, renewing our wardrobes, or buying the latest self-help guide.

Situating Minimalism Discourse

Thus far I have explored the complexity of the relationship between authenticity, consumerism, and self-help. These are three fields, which on the surface are concerned

with the individual, yet nevertheless are also political in nature. These tensions come to the fore in anti-consumerist discourses, which encompass many issues including globalization, the actions of transnational corporations, and the broader capitalist system (Zamwel, Sasson-Levy and Ben-Porat 2014). Increasingly, these concerns are addressed by people at the individual level through consumption and lifestyle choices. According to Ward and de Vreese, “Political consumerism represents a shift in focus from the government to the market. This results in a change in the balance of power between producer and consumer, but also between the citizen and the government” (2011:401). Wahlen and Laamanen (2015) note that while lifestyle is most often thought of in relation to consumption and is used for advertising and branding purposes, it is also political. Additionally, Newman and Bartels define lifestyle politics as “the movements away from institutionalized modes of political participation toward modes of political expression and engagement that are more individually based, informal, and available for day-to-day implementation” (2011:806). In this way, lifestyle politics are a link between authenticity, self-help, and consumerism.

Rimke (2000) argues partaking in self-help, with its inherent focus on the *self*, negates the social and collective possibilities and obligations of citizenship. Further to this, McGee (2005) advocates for self-help that takes the greater good into account. She believes self-help needs to be reoriented so that ‘being all one can be’ is framed through a societal lens such that self-betterment means becoming a citizen focused on social responsibility (McGee 2005). This is similar to Soper’s (2004) alternative hedonism discussed above wherein *citizen* takes priority over *consumer*. However, while there is

potential for minimalism to be a collective-oriented lifestyle, at the present it is very much focused on individual self-improvement in the forms of happiness and freedom.

Cherrier (2010), meanwhile, spoke to non-clinical hoarders to understand their custodial approach to collecting and preserving material objects as a form of anti-consumerism. She found her informants' subjectivity was inherently linked to the objects they surround themselves with, and that their 'custodial' behaviour was in response to contemporary consumerism and our 'throwaway'³² culture, which they saw as wasteful and inauthentic. Cherrier (2010:261) comments that although her informants seem to be acting out of personal interest rather than explicit anti-capitalist motivations, what they demonstrate is the multiplicity of manifestations of anti-consumerist sentiment as well as the reflexivity of consumers. The same might be said for those who practice minimalism. Of course, minimalism is very much about the role of material objects in forming identity and subjectivity (even minimalist guru Marie Kondo thanks her handbags for their service and keeps her favourite old t-shirt). In this way, practicing decluttering minimalism is not about completely abstaining from consumption, but rather altering one's consumption practices, which is why I frame it as alt-consumption.

In another study, Cherrier (2009) looked at simple living and culture jamming as discursive sites that challenge mass-consumerism noting these represent a creative consumption approach. She states, "When practicing creative consumption, consumers no longer acquire, consume and dispose of material objects in response to others' expectations. They consume according to their individual values and concerns" (Cherrier 2009:187). Cherrier also notes creative consumption is focused on individual lifestyle and

³² 'Buy Nothing' groups, such as those found on Facebook, are another example of anti-consumerism activities standing in opposition to wasteful practices wherein people still get to acquire new (to them) items without directly participating in the market.

identity formation as opposed to political consumption, which has the aim of social change. All of these features of creative consumption seem to apply to minimalism discourse wherein proponents alter their consumption habits, but do not withdraw from consumption altogether and act out of personal rather than collective interest.

Relatedly, Portwood-Stacer (2012) describes Facebook non-use or refusal as a form of ‘conspicuous non-consumption’³³ in a play off Veblen’s theory of leisure class consumption practices. Furthermore, Portwood-Stacer notes refusal can be understood as a “tactic of critique” (2012:1043), which is similar to those discussed above who argue that judgments of authenticity contain an element of critique (Johnston and Baumann 2010; O’Neill et al. 2014). Drawing from Giddens, Portwood-Stacer posits non-consumption is compatible with neoliberalism because of its emphasis on individual free choice. She says this is because, “The use of personal lifestyle choices as a means of resistance is a thinkable practice because of an ideological context that encourages self-reflexivity and personal responsabilization for social and political change” (2012:1048). As I discuss in the following chapter, neoliberalism often shapes and limits what is considered possible as resistance to neoliberal practices. Finally, Portwood-Stacer (2012) discusses refusal as a form of elitism that may only be available to those with enough social capital to withstand withdrawing from Facebook. Similarly, minimalism is a form of withdrawal from consumerism that is not available to everyone.

Like Portwood-Stacer (2012), McNaughtan (2012) notes consumer capitalism easily integrates counter discourses and counter cultures in order to perpetuate itself. He does this by exploring the ways in which ‘green’ discourses have been subsumed under

³³ ‘Conspicuous non-consumption’ is also used in passing by Brooks (2000:78) in *Bobos in Paradise* to describe the 1960s countercultural pushback against bourgeois consumption practices. I feel this term also applies to contemporary minimalism.

consumerism through an analysis of the film *Wall*E*, which he says is a meta example in that it is a mass-produced consumer industry product with a message critical of mass consumption. McNaughtan reasons, “Once the ‘enemy’ is loosely identified as mass society, and ‘authentic’ individual life tightly identified with practices of distinctive consumption, any threat posed to our consumerist appetites by the widespread fear of imminent environmental collapse is substantially reduced” (McNaughtan 2012:764). By placing its emphasis on individual behaviour, minimalism acts in a similar way to McNaughtan’s reading of *Wall*E* in that it actually serves to reinforce some of what it is supposedly critiquing. The integration of ‘green’ discourses, which tend to be critical of consumerism, into mainstream consumer culture is not unlike the ways in which authenticity (and other critiques before it) has been incorporated into consumerism, particularly through branding and advertising.

Additionally, Lewis (2008, 2012) looked at the ways in which lifestyle television programs are increasingly incorporating ‘green consumption’ into their narratives, not unlike McNaughtan’s (2012) findings in *Wall*E*. Lewis sees everyday consumption practices as being entrenched in public concerns, citizenship, and politics. Moreover, Lewis argues the growing popularity of lifestyle-oriented cooking shows is a demonstration of “a broader sense of discontent with the instrumental culture of late modernity, a concern with re-enchanting the contemporary everyday through promoting less alienated, more engaged modes of consumption³⁴” (2008:232). In line with the earlier discussion of the ways in which self-help promotes individual responsabilization, Lewis (2008) contends ethical consumption places the onus on the individual consumer

³⁴ In addition to cooking shows, the growing popularity of crafting as well as purchasing hand-made products can be read in the same way.

and takes responsibility for sustainability concerns away from government and corporations. This is seen in the minimalism discourse which links consumption practices and lifestyle choices with personal responsibility and enterprise, but also with freedom and choice. Lewis argues that while it may be true that lifestyle television and the broader lifestyle culture are demonstrative of neoliberal responsabilization, it may also be the case that these programs and resources are indicative of a resurgence of romanticism in that they are renewing “a focus on creativity and the art of everyday life” (2012:317). This romanticism can be seen in the voluntary simplicity movement.

Voluntary Simplicity

Etzioni contends voluntary simplicity, “refers to people choosing—out of free will—to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning” (2004:408). Etzioni also says voluntary simplicity has varying degrees of intensity from “downshifting” wherein people who can afford luxuries go without them, to “strong simplifiers” who leave lucrative jobs to live on smaller incomes, to “holistic simplification” which usually entails leaving an urban setting for rural “simple living”. Furthermore, Alexander and Ussher, who are the directors of the Simplicity Institute at the University of Melbourne, argue voluntary simplicity, “can be understood broadly as a diverse social movement made up of people who are resisting high consumption lifestyles and who are seeking, in various ways, a lower consumption but higher quality of life alternative” (2012:66-67). Additionally, Shi contends, “... voluntary simplicity has been and remains an ethic professed and practiced primarily by those free to choose their standard of living” (2001:7). Also discussing simple-livers, Schor notes, “Unlike the traditional poor, they have *options*—including the

option of jumping back into mainstream culture” due to the cultural capital gained from their middle class lives prior to simple living or downshifting (Schor 1998:137 original emphasis). The element of choice or ‘volunteering’ is crucial for understanding any of the voluntary simplicity lifestyles. I address the notion of freedom as it relates to governmentality in the following chapter, however it is important to note here that voluntary simplicity, in its various forms, is a privileged lifestyle not available to everyone. ‘Simple’ living is often anything but, instead involving a great deal of time and money, as well as social and cultural capital.

Though he does not label it as such, David Shi’s *The Simple Life* is, in essence, a genealogy of the ideal of simplicity in America from its origins with the Puritans and Quakers, through the Revolution and the Depression, up to the affluent 1980s. He traces many key figures and the numerous ways in which the desire for simplicity has coincided with America’s industrial and economic development, positing that America is built on the contradictory desires for tradition and progress (Shi 2001). Shi contends, “As a myth of national purpose and as a program for individual conduct, the simple life has been a perennial dream and a rhetorical challenge ... reminding Americans of what the founders had hoped they would be and thereby providing a vivifying counterpoint to the excesses of materialist individualism” (2001:278). The version of simplicity that was sought by advocates at the turn of the 20th century is quite similar to contemporary simplicity. Shi argues simple living, in its various iterations:

has always represented a shifting cluster of ideas, sentiments, and activities. These have included a hostility toward luxury and a suspicion of riches, a reverence for nature and a preference for rural over urban ways of life and work, a desire for personal self-reliance through frugality and diligence, a nostalgia for the past and a skepticism toward the claims of

modernity, conscientious rather than conspicuous consumption, and an aesthetic taste for the plain and functional. (2001:3)

Some of these features are present in the minimalism discourse I am engaging with, particularly the emphasis on conscientious consumption, preference for a functional aesthetic, and nostalgia for the past. However, minimalism is not necessarily hostile toward luxury—in many cases it actually advocates for it (e.g., Loreau 2016).

Decluttering minimalism also tends to be fond of urban settings because of the wealth of activities and cultural experiences it can offer (e.g., Jay 2016; Sasaki 2017). Most importantly, minimalism prioritizes personal self-reliance and diligence.

In a collection of works on ‘plenitude practitioners’ Schor and Thompson argue, “many share a lack of faith in the ability of large institutions, be they governments or corporations, to successfully address the ecological and economic challenges we face. Instead they are taking on the task of building another kind of economy in the shadow of what increasingly looks like a declining system” (2014:3). They outline four principles of plenitude including reduced participation in paid labour; self-provisioning and do-it-yourself practices, often with the aid of technology; true materialism wherein the quality and provenance of items matters; and investing in community (Schor and Thompson 2014). Alexander and Ussher also find, “In terms of possessions, many also acknowledged that while decluttering life can secure ‘the energy to focus on what is important’ it is ‘the type of possessions’ that matters most and the ‘attitude’ one has toward them, ‘not the number’” (2012:74). This ‘true materialism’ wherein possessions are carefully curated and cared for is certainly evident in my data while the other principles are lacking, save for some discussion of community involvement, suggesting decluttering does not meet the criteria of plenitude. However, as Thompson and Schor

later note, “Rather than look to top-down government solutions, the plenitude paradigm suggests that at the current moment, the diversified actions of entrepreneurial agents generating new assemblages of technology, human capital, lifestyle practices, and market-mediated social relationships are the more likely impetuses for a more sustainable and emotionally rewarding economy” (2014:234). This is in line with decluttering minimalism wherein practitioners alter their behaviour within the consumer capitalist system while seeking meaning and fulfillment elsewhere, and is in keeping with the enterprising and self-governing neoliberal individual. However, decluttering minimalism does not go as far as plenitude practitioners in attempting to disengage from capitalism by setting up alternative markets³⁵.

In an earlier work, Schor (1998) looked at people referred to as ‘downshifTERS’ who opt out of, or significantly reduce their participation in, wage labour as a reaction to feeling overworked and stressed by the work-and-spend cycle. According to Schor, “DownshifTERS are opting out of excessive consumerism, choosing to have more leisure and balance in their schedules, a slower pace of life, more time with their kids, more meaningful work, and daily lives that line up squarely with their deepest values” (1998:22). Schor claims that between 1990 and 1996, 19 percent of adult Americans made a lifestyle choice to earn less money by downshifTING (1998:113). DownshifTERS, differing from other simple-livers who more fully disengage from society, are “smack in the middle of the American mainstream. But they are swimming against a long-standing current of ‘economic progress” (Schor 1998:115). DownshifTING from high-paid employment is an element of the minimalist lifestyle for some of the gurus whose work I

³⁵ Within minimalism discourse there is some mention of sharing, particularly through paid services such as Uber, but this does not yet seem to be a core element of the lifestyle. Sharing is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

am engaged with (e.g., Millburn and Nicodemus 2014, 2015a, 2015b), but it does not appear to be a universal element of decluttering minimalism.

Like Albinsson and Perera (2012) who looked at ‘Really Really Free Markets’, Nelson, Rademacher and Paek (2007) looked at alternative consumption practices through sharing and exchanging. They found, “... the primary motivations for these people are, first, to gain time by working less and, second, to escape from the work-and-spend cycle” (Nelson et al. 2007:144). They go on to assert downshifting can take two forms, either from work or from consuming. These authors also found one of the primary motivations for participating in the ‘freecycle community’ was to declutter.

Housel (2006), meanwhile, looked at contemporary homesteaders’ uses of technology such as solar panels and the Internet, and demonstrated the complex nature of anti-consumerism lifestyles. Homesteading is rooted in the voluntary simplicity lifestyle and often takes an extreme form in which practitioners live ‘off the grid’, typically in rural settings. Housel found, “their selective uses of technology reflect choices that are often contradictory and yet intensely political” (2006:198). Housel’s research demonstrates the challenges of attempting to disengage from mainstream society while also being reliant on aspects of it in order to make an alternative lifestyle feasible.

Parker and Morrow (2017) also looked at homesteading but focused on what it means for discourses on mothering. They found urban homesteading, in which practitioners live in urban settings and work at provisioning their own food, has grown in popularity over the last decade in the United States alongside concerns about food safety. According to these authors, “Homesteading offers a utopian vision of reclaiming domesticity from consumer culture so that we can all work less, live more lightly on the

earth, and spend more time with family and friends” (Parker and Morrow 2017:248). Similar to what I find in the minimalism discourse, these authors found, “Discursively, urban homesteading reinforces the individualization of environmental responsibility, and leaves broader food systems, environmental regulations, and gender relations untouched” (Parker and Morrow 2017:257). These authors highlight the exclusivity of many voluntary simplicity practices noting that urban homesteading is reliant on cultural, social, and temporal capital, not unlike the decluttering minimalism I am exploring.

Furthermore, drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of liquid modernity, Binkley (2008) suggests ‘liquid consumption’ through a brief exploration of Feng Shui³⁶ and Slow Food discourses. He argues these lifestyle trends or movements are indicative of a growing anti-consumerist mentality consisting of a set of ethical and political stances toward the market as well as everyday consumer choices. Anti-consumerism, according to Binkley (2008:601-602) contains elements of new social movements and combines these with individual consumption practices to shape lifestyles and identities based on altering everything from food provisioning, to personal hygiene, to transportation use. Binkley states anti-consumerist discourses serve to unite the individual with the sense of belonging to a broader collective (even if they only act individually), thus mitigating some of the overwhelming responsibility of acting against the established consumer norm. Moreover, Binkley (2008:603) claims anti-consumerist discourses serve a mediating purpose and that they are a reaction to the fast-paced, individualized conditions

³⁶ Binkley points to Feng Shui as an example of the broad cultural desire for ‘simplicity’ and ties it to decluttering. However, I am separating Feng Shui³⁶ and minimalism for my purposes because I see them as distinct approaches to decluttering and to the ownership and organization of possessions. While Kondo (2014, 2016) refers to Feng Shui occasionally to support her arguments about the benefits of decluttering and Loreau (2016) makes passing reference to it, it does not come up in other sources, and therefore does not seem to be pertinent to the minimalist lifestyle as I have come to understand it.

of contemporary life. This is similar to what Dobernig and Stagl (2015) refer to as ‘collective individualism’. Ultimately, these lifestyles that purport to provide some sense of sociability and collectivity are transitory and do not provide the stability practitioners think they want from them. In other words, like our postmodern identities, they too are liquid (Binkley 2008). The Reddit forums and Instagram posts I engaged with seem to point to the presence of a social or collective element of the minimalist lifestyle, however the threads and posts I analyzed do not discuss collective action or anything political in nature. Rather, they seem to act more as a community space where minimalists can seek advice or share their personal experiences.

Cohen, Comrov and Hoffner (2005) investigated some of the ways consumers are pushing back against consumerism and how this compares to sustainability policies at the federal and state levels in the United States. They found that while there are numerous activities at the individual or small collective level, there is not yet a cohesive anti-consumerist movement. These authors looked at examples they refer to as ‘lifestyle reinventions’ such as the Slow Food movement, ethical consumption, and voluntary simplicity. Despite the variety of anti-consumerist practices found by these authors, they comment, “activists view their goals as entirely practicable, because unchecked materialism is, by this view, a constructed social phenomenon rather than an indomitable feature of the human condition” (Cohen et al. 2005:60). According to these authors, voluntary simplicity is about sufficiency, not deprivation³⁷, and can cover everything from consumption, to work, to spirituality. It is attractive to adherents because the lifestyle seems to offer a path to authenticity and personal growth (Cohen et al. 2005).

³⁷ The question of deprivation features in one of the Reddit threads I engaged with and is returned to in later chapters.

Vannini and Taggart (2016) developed the concept of ‘onerous consumption’ through their engagement with Canadian ‘off-gridders’, by looking at the ways in which they use water within their homes. They contend off-grid living is a form of voluntary simplicity, and find that people living off the grid take both pride and pleasure in the work it takes to live without modern conveniences such as municipal water services. They define onerous consumption as alternative consumption practices that prioritize environmental sustainability considerations and take a moral stance against mass consumption (Vannini and Taggart 2016:84). Like Salmenniemi and Vorona (2014) and Cherrier (2010), Vannini and Taggart (2016) find there is a great deal of consumer reflexivity present amongst off-gridders’ consumption practices because they turn everyday sites of consumption into meaningful acts, thereby making them conspicuous sites of individual political action. Despite its name suggesting low-budget living akin to camping, living off-grid can often entail large investments of time and money and therefore is not accessible to many. Similarly, Zamwel et al. (2014) interviewed voluntary simplifiers in Israel and found that while simplifiers act at the personal and private level, their actions are not apolitical but rather are taking place in alternative sites.

In a study directly dealing with minimalism discourse, Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska (2016) analyzed the blogs of post-Soviet Polish minimalists to understand their approaches to alternative consumption. Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska posit that for the minimalists they researched, their choices were very much determined by the socio-historical context in which they grew up. Having been children in a time of austerity, and then young working adults in a post-Soviet economy, their informants struggled to carve out a lifestyle that reconciled their complex relationship to consumerism. These authors

found that minimalism was an individual choice with personal motives to ‘live a good life’ and assert this is in contrast to Western ethical consumption practices that tend to have a social and moral motivation. Drawing on Weber’s conceptualization of rationalization, they also found that for these minimalist bloggers, it was a full-scale lifestyle of self-control extending from their closets to their relationships and everything in between (Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska 2016).

Meanwhile, Rodriguez (2017) engaged with the work of four popular minimalists in order to assess their critical engagement with capitalism. Ultimately, Rodriguez concludes contemporary minimalism cannot be read as radical political action because it lacks collective actions aimed at policy change, but that it serves the important function of bringing a critique of consumer capitalism to the attention of a broader audience. Instead, the author argues minimalism is, “a counter-rationale and set of counter-practices to the consumer capitalist status quo” achieved by rejecting commonly believed ‘needs’ (Rodriguez 2017:8). Furthermore, Rodriguez (2017:2) found minimalists frame their lifestyle in terms of ‘dissatisfaction and disillusionment’ with the American Dream, particularly as it relates to participating in wage labour and seemingly mandatory consumption. While I am not explicitly concerned with the narrative trajectory of minimalists, this dissatisfaction with the American Dream is present in my data.

Rodriguez also contends, “Minimalist lifestyles in the United States rely on domestic and international inequalities” particularly exploitative labour practices by pointing to the example of e-readers which many minimalists promote as a means of decluttering one’s book collection. (Rodriguez 2017:8). Indeed, within my own research, Apple products are particularly popular because of their multi-functionality as well as

their minimalist design aesthetic, but are not discussed in terms of their destructive and exploitative production (e.g., Saskai 2017). By looking at minimalist gurus, Rodriguez finds many of them are working within, not against, dominant capitalist relations insofar as “many are invested in benefiting from and/or engaging in consumer capitalist relations and are focused on gaining financial independence” instead of advocating for social change such as resource equality (Rodriguez 2017:9). It is true many minimalist gurus are profiting from their lifestyles through various means including blogs, books, talking tours, and consulting, but what I add to this discussion is an engagement with lay persons’ approaches to minimalism, which, while sometimes motivated by financial independence (i.e., living debt-free), are not profit-driven and tend to be more mundane.

Moreover, Etzioni (2004:418) suggests voluntary simplicity as a possible model for wealth redistribution because if the wealthy and those engaged in conspicuous consumption could find value in non-economic pursuits, they may be more willing to part with some of their resources. Similarly, Alexander and Ussher advocate for voluntary simplicity as a means of addressing environmental degradation, arguing, “... we see the mainstreaming of its ethos into the global consumer class as being an absolutely necessary part of any effective response to the ecological crisis” (2012:68). Like Etzioni (2004), Alexander and Ussher (2012) are concerned with overpopulation as well as global inequality and believe voluntary simplicity could help to address these issues by decreasing the level of consumption in affluent societies to account for the increase in material standards for the global poor. They advocate for ‘steady state’ economies wherein the most affluent nations of the world pursue qualitative rather than quantitative growth. Ultimately, they argue, “When one recognizes the multi-faceted problem of

overconsumption for what it is—the root or contributing cause of environmental degradation; global poverty; uneconomic growth; peak oil; and consumer malaise—voluntary simplicity presents itself as an approach to life that has the potential to respond to all of those great problems” (Alexander and Ussher 2012:82-83). While contemporary minimalism is related to voluntary simplicity, it does not seem to share this collective approach to addressing these shared concerns.

The minimalism discourse under consideration in my research fits within these broader anti- and alt-consumerist desires and practices, as well as the overarching concern with authenticity. Minimalism is a private, individual practice that may have social and collective motivations and implications. In this way, it can be understood as a form of lifestyle politics. And, not unlike the foodies under consideration by Johnston and Baumann (2010), minimalism may be a path to distinction insofar as it demonstrates the practitioner’s ability to overcome consumerism by consuming differently. Minimalism as a source of authenticity contains the element of critique identified by O’Neill et al. (2014) and Johnston and Baumann (2010), as well as the general critique present in other approaches to anti-consumerism.

Summary

The desire for authenticity is pervasive in contemporary North American society. The element of critique present within the use of authenticity appears to be aimed at consumer capitalism and, indirectly, those who continue to participate in it. However, because we are so firmly entrenched in consumer culture, the search for authenticity tends to lead to the mall (or Amazon). In other words, the contemporary search for

authenticity is driven by the feeling that we are not living authentically, yet the answer to the problem seems to be more of the same—authenticity is just one purchase away.

The prevailing formulation of authenticity as being ‘true to myself’ is a holdover from modernity that has been worked into forms of neoliberal self-governance (Varga 2011; Foster 2016). This was the concern of Taylor (1991) who worried that by placing it at the level of the individual, authenticity would lose its collective undercurrent. Even though it may appear to be meaningless, authenticity is a rich cultural concept with which to work because there is value in understanding how and why authenticity is used in so many different contexts. Bendix notes the search for authenticity, “arises out of a profound human longing, be it religious-spiritual or existential, and declaring the object of such longing nonexistent may violate the very core around which people build meaningful lives” (1997:17). Living in a culture where anything and everything can be ‘authentic’ does not mean we can overlook the reasons for valuing authenticity. Instead, the pervasiveness of the concept makes critical engagement even more important.

The remainder of this project explores the use of authenticity in relation to consumerism. Like the substantive research discussed above (e.g., Duffy 2013; Johnston and Baumann 2010; O’Neill et al. 2014), I am interested in how authenticity is formulated within a specific cultural location and what can be drawn from this to consider the broader cultural significance of authenticity. This is achieved by looking at how the concept of authenticity runs through minimalism discourse. However, before getting into the details of these strategies, the following two chapters establish the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological frameworks for this project.

Chapter 3: Learning to Self-govern Through Lifestyle

As discussed in the preceding chapter, a Foucault-inspired analysis is quite compatible with explorations of the role of self-help in contemporary society (e.g., El-Shall 2014; Philip 2009; Sothern 2007). Speaking about the use of governmentality for analyses outside of and beyond state policy, Walters argues, “if power really is diffuse and pervasive, if conduct of conduct is to be meaningful as an analytical principle, then there is no reason why these studies should not start in other places, with other agents” (2012:145). Such is the case for my analysis, which looks at lifestyle as a site for the conduct of conduct, and consumerism as a site of resistance and negotiation.

In line with this, Lewis asserts, “The resurgence of interest in Foucault’s writing on governmentality, biopolitics and ethics clearly does speak to the fact that the management of populations in late liberal societies is increasingly occurring at the level of everyday life and consumption through a focus on the conduct and lifestyles of individuals” (2012:324). As an example, this can be seen in the growing ‘wellness’ industry in which consumers are called upon to take control of their health by buying into numerous products and services. As discussed in the previous chapter, governmentality, when viewed as taking place at the level of everyday life, is also present in many of the voluntary simplicity lifestyles in which practitioners feel they are taking control of their lives by disengaging from mainstream consumerism. The presence of neoliberal governmentality discourse is particularly evident in contemporary minimalism, which, while critical of status quo consumer culture, is not as far removed from the mainstream as other forms of voluntary simplicity. As will be seen in later chapters, minimalism’s opposition to consumerism is couched in the language and rationalities of neoliberalism.

The goal of this chapter is to link my core concepts of consumption, lifestyle, authenticity, and governmentality in a coherent and actionable way. As outlined in the introductory chapter, my project has been guided by two questions: (1) how is the concept of authenticity mobilized within minimalism discourse?, and (2) how does the notion of authenticity contribute to governing the minimalist lifestyle and shaping the minimalist subject? Using the work of Nikolas Rose (1996, 1998, 1999a, 1999b), and Anthony Giddens (1991), as well as more current works on lifestyle and governmentality, my tactic for addressing these questions is based on these scholars' approaches to governmentality and lifestyle, respectively. Though Giddens is not a Foucauldian scholar, and Rose (1999a) is at times critical of Giddens' approach to situating the self, which he sees as being too linear, I feel their emphases on the impact of lifestyle on contemporary subjectivity are compatible. Throughout this chapter and the next, I endeavour to establish my use of the language of Foucault and others who have taken up his work. Thus, my theoretical and methodological approach makes up a Foucault-inspired analysis by emphasizing processes of knowledge and subject formation through discourse³⁸. Governmentality³⁹ offers a constructive way to think about the relationships between authenticity, lifestyle, consumerism, and minimalism within a contemporary context.

I am utilizing Giddens' and Rose's works as foundational approaches to exploring lifestyle and governmentality. And, while these are the primary focus of this chapter, they are expanded on throughout my project. Their writings continue to be influential within the body of literature I am utilizing and are often used together to explore elements of contemporary lifestyle (e.g., Binkley 2008; Hazelden 2003; Lewis 2008; Lunt and Lewis

³⁸ My approach to analyzing discourse is outlined in detail in the following chapter.

³⁹ This chapter focuses on the use of governmentality as a theoretical concept, while the next chapter looks at its use as a methodological approach.

2008; Phillip 2009; Rimke 2000). Furthermore, though Giddens' and Rose's work was conducted more than twenty years ago, it feels as timely as ever. As discussed below, consumption is not the only thing that shapes a lifestyle, but it is essential to lifestyle formation, and this is likely truer now than it was at the time of their writing.

Additionally, both discuss risk in a way that is eerily relevant to contemporary society, especially Giddens' (1991) mentions of environmental catastrophe and the threat of nuclear war. Therefore, I feel that with support from more contemporary research using the work of these scholars, their approaches to the role of lifestyle in contemporary life are as relevant now as ever and offer a useful starting point for conceptualizing my approach to engaging with contemporary minimalism.

Binkley, using the works of both Giddens and Rose, argues people are, “simultaneously seduced and governed as they go about the business of shaping their own personal identities” (2007:120) and identifies two approaches to lifestyle—sociological and governmentality—asserting they are compatible ways to approach the study of everyday life. I have shared this approach from the outset of my focus on minimalism. According to Binkley, the first looks at the ways everyday practices shape personal identity and the second looks at how various authorities shape individuals' lives. Importantly, combining these approaches allows one to look at both agency and power, the former of which is often thought to be overlooked in Foucauldian analyses.

This chapter begins by briefly extending the previous one through looking at how the idea of authenticity is present within the works of Giddens and Rose. I then establish the theory of lifestyle as it is used for my project. Following this, I establish my approach to governmentality. I next look at how lifestyle and governmentality come together

through Rose's (1998) use of 'enterprise' wherein individuals are compelled to govern themselves through the project of lifestyle formation. Finally, I circle back to authenticity to establish how I am theorizing it for the purposes of my project.

Authenticity as Motivation

While it is not their primary focus, both Giddens (1991) and Rose (1998, 1999a) discuss the idea of authenticity and how it pertains to their understanding of lifestyle. For each, the desire for 'authenticity', vague as it may be, undergirds the lifestyle project. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is not a matter of whether 'authenticity' can ever be achieved, but rather, how the *idea* of authenticity permeates contemporary culture and what it means for the formation of lifestyles.

Both Giddens and Rose acknowledge 'authenticity' as a concept circulating in contemporary culture that influences the way people think about themselves and their conduct. Giddens suggests one of the defining features of modernity is its reflexivity and that through this the self has become a "reflexive project" (1991:32). The search for authenticity is a feature of this project and one of the ways this is pursued is through the creation of a lifestyle. While neither provide a concrete definition of authenticity, likely because the nature of the concept eludes definition, Giddens does reference an 'inner authenticity' which is, "a framework of basic trust by means of which the lifespan can be understood as a unity against the backdrop of shifting social events" (1991:215). Put differently, authenticity is here understood as the individual having a consistent sense of self. Based on his other references to the concept, Giddens' conceptualization of authenticity has to do with integrity, reliability, and self-actualization. Again, Giddens is

not saying authenticity is something achievable, but that the idea of authenticity is central to the modern conceptualization of the self.

Similarly for Rose (1999a), authenticity exists in opposition to hypocrisy and is ever-important to the project of self-formation. According to Rose, “in the choice one makes, and in the obligation to render one’s everyday existence meaningful as an outcome of choices made, one’s relation with oneself is tied ever more firmly to the ethics of individual autonomy and personal authenticity” (1999a:272). This is in line with Giddens (1991:80) who asserts the development of the self is “internally referential” and developing an authentic self is based on personal integrity and the construction of a coherent narrative of the self through incorporating experiences into a life story. For both, authenticity is a motivating force behind the ongoing project of self-formation.

Although Rose does not focus on the concept of authenticity, he does talk at length about the formation of the modern conceptualization of the self and through this, the formation of the contemporary conceptualization of authenticity. Rose looks at how forms of expertise, particularly the ‘psy’ disciplines (psychology, psychotherapy, etc.) have come to shape and govern a particular understanding of ‘the self’. The result is that we have come to think of our self as a project within which we are to achieve happiness and fulfillment (Rose 1998). This self is “suffused with an individualized subjectivity, motivated by anxieties and aspirations concerning their self-fulfillment, committed to finding their true identities and maximizing their authentic expression in their life-styles” (Rose 1998:169-70). As I discuss in later chapters, the desire for happiness and fulfillment—both of which are directly related to authenticity—are core values touted throughout minimalism discourse, and self-help more broadly.

Rose goes on to argue, “The ethical valorization of certain features of the person—autonomy, freedom, choice, authenticity, enterprise—needs to be understood in terms of new rationalities of government and new technologies for the conduct of conduct” (Rose 1998:20). He adds, “human beings have come to ... interrogate and narrate themselves in terms of a psychological ‘inner life’ that holds the secrets of their identity, which they are to discover and fulfill, which is the standard against which the living of an ‘authentic’ life is to be judged” (Rose 1998:22). Here, Rose identifies authenticity as a technology of governmentality used to shape how people think about and act upon the self. Importantly, both the self and authenticity are discursive formations shaped by various sources for various purposes, culminating, in one regard, in the search for authenticity we see taking place through the project of lifestyle formation.

Furthermore, Giddens (1991:9) says that through modernity we have become separated from “moral resources” and as a result, while we engage in efforts of self-mastery, this process is left wanting because it lacks necessary moral grounding. In other words, despite its importance as a guiding moral concept, authenticity is essentially hollow. Because of this, authenticity “becomes both a pre-eminent value and a framework for self-actualisation, but represents a morally stunted process.” (Giddens 1991:9). This echoes Taylor (1991) who, as previously discussed, posits that as dialogical beings, conceptualizing authenticity is reliant on a shared understanding with others. Similarly, in their discussion of lifestyle movements, Haenfler, Johnson and Jones (2012) assert people who participate in lifestyle movements do so out of a desire for personal integrity and authenticity premised on the sense of a unified self, enacted and formed through everyday practices. It is these everyday practices that make up our lifestyles.

Lifestyles of the Autonomous and Disciplined

Lifestyle has long been of interest to sociologists including Bourdieu's (1984) seminal work on distinction and Veblen's (1953) on conspicuous consumption. Both of these works demonstrate the central role class plays in shaping lifestyles. And, while my analysis is not as structural as theirs were, class is an important consideration within my analysis. In common speech, lifestyle tends to be associated with consumption, particularly luxury consumption, such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, or Gwyneth Paltrow's goop brand. Importantly, lifestyle can also be used as a negative judgment as is the case when, for example, homosexuality is referred to as such, with the implication being it somehow goes against the norm. In this way, lifestyles are often identified when they appear to be different from the status quo—consumerism is normal, minimalism is a lifestyle. As Binkley observes, "Typically, sociologists have considered lifestyles as accomplishing two things: they affirm a sense of self or identity, but they also differentiate individuals from others" (2007:112). Lifestyle, not unlike authenticity, has become such a pervasive term within North American culture that its meaning, as used for this project, needs to be established.

Defining Lifestyle

As mentioned above, Giddens (1991) sees the self as a reflexive project wherein everything from what one wears to what one eats becomes part of the process of identity formation. He contrasts this with traditional societies in which 'the self' did not take on the meaning or form it has in late modernity⁴⁰. Giddens argues late modernity presents the individual with infinite choice, but very little in the way of guidance regarding which

⁴⁰ Giddens (1991) refers to the time period in which he was writing, roughly the late 1980s and early 1990s, as late, or high, modernity.

choice to make. Giddens notes that while lifestyle is often thought of in terms of advertising and consumption, there is more at stake asserting, "... in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so—we have no choice but to choose". He goes on to define lifestyle as, "a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens 1991:80-81). This is in line with Rose who says we are 'obliged to be free' and to govern ourselves through the choices we make.

As outlined above, Giddens associates authenticity with the notion of integrity, which is present in his definition of lifestyle through routine habits. For Giddens:

Lifestyles are routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favoured milieu for encountering others; but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity ... All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be. The more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking. (1991:81)

Giddens' definitions of lifestyle continues to be a go-to for social scientists working with the concept (e.g., Collingsworth 2014; Portwood-Stacer 2012; Wahlen and Laamannen 2015). Similarly, Featherstone outlines both the elements and functions of lifestyle stating, "Within contemporary consumer culture [lifestyle] connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer" (1987:55). Part of establishing an identity coherent both to the self and others is making choices consistent with what one thinks of oneself in terms of a broader

life narrative. In other words, our small, everyday practices take on significant meaning for the reflexive project of self-formation. As such, some choices are considered “out of character” if they are deemed inconsistent with one’s narrative (Giddens 1991:82). The notion of something being ‘out of character’ is clearly evident in minimalism discourse due to the nature of my particular data sites which are pedagogical and self-reflexive, therefore often taking the form of ‘a minimalist does x, not y’.

Importantly, Giddens (1991:82) points to external factors that influence lifestyle such as socioeconomic circumstances and role models. As previously stated, socioeconomic circumstances are an important consideration when dealing with lifestyle because something like minimalism is not available to everyone, even if it is desirable or in line with their self-image. Giddens is careful to note, “‘Lifestyle’ refers also to decisions taken and courses of action followed under conditions of severe material constraint; such lifestyle patterns may sometimes also involve the more or less deliberate rejection of more widely diffused forms of behaviour and consumption” (Giddens 1991:6). In other words, lifestyles can also be counter-cultural. As I discuss in more detail later, minimalism seems to require some level of financial security, though some minimalists claim this is not the case. However, it would appear there is a difference between having few possessions out of a lack of resources, instead of as a choice, though some minimalists seem to frame their lack of resources as a choice.

Lifestyle, therefore, is the set of everyday practices through which we make sense of our identity and cultivate a coherent sense of self. Lifestyle is not only available to those with means, nor is it only about consumption. It is the process through which we come to know and govern ourselves. Within contemporary North American culture,

lifestyle is an ongoing “reflexive project” (Giddens 1991), which everyone engages in as a way to make sense of their life and the choices they make. It is intimately tied to authenticity through notions of unity, integrity, and consistency, which are concerns at both the individual and social level.

The Role of Consumption in Lifestyle Formation

In line with the idea that lifestyles provide guidelines and draw boundaries, Binkley asserts, “With the expansion of market values and the ever more persuasive pull of consumer cultures, lifestyles help us sort through these choices and choose those things that feel right for us as individuals” (Binkley 2007:114). Related to this, Giddens (1991) notes the association of lifestyle with luxury and affluence is likely the result of advertising, and that this generalization has corrupted the notion of lifestyle such that “To a greater or lesser degree, the project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life.” He continues that as a consequence, “The consumption of ever-novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of the self; appearance replaces essence as the visible signs of successful consumption come actually to outweigh the use-values of the goods and services in question themselves” (Giddens 1991:197-98). Here, Giddens points to how many of us no longer consume based on use-value or function, but instead consume based on status and what an item telegraphs about us to others (and to ourselves). In this assessment he seems to suggest consuming in this way is inauthentic. As discussed above, Giddens is critical of the notion of authenticity, yet here he can be seen to use the rhetoric of authenticity when he references “*artificially* framed styles of life”, the “*genuine* development of the self”, and when he claims “appearance replaces

essence”. He also discusses the ‘self’ as historically contingent, and then goes on to use it unchallenged in his work. This is a case, unintended on Giddens’ part, which highlights the pervasive, and at times unavoidably fraught, nature of authenticity within contemporary culture. It also serves to highlight the connection between authenticity and lifestyle that takes place through, or in the case of minimalism, in seeming opposition to, consumption. In place of cultivating our genuine self in other ways, we attempt to buy it.

Related to consumption and the self, Miller and Rose (1997) explore the ways in which ‘the consumer’, as a subject, was formed in post-WWII England, as an example of how this subjectivity came to be utilized more generally. They found that through numerous ‘psy’ disciplines, among other forms of expertise, the consumer became something that could be studied and acted upon. In other words, through various discursive formations ‘the consumer’ became knowable, and by extension, governable. They found, “At issue here was not so much the invention and imposition of ‘false needs’, but a delicate process of identification of the ‘real needs’ of consumers, of affiliating these needs with particular products, and in turn of linking these with the habits of their utilization” (Miller and Rose 1997:6). Here Miller and Rose, like Giddens, suggest there are layers to our understanding of consumption, particularly when it comes to distinguishing between needs and wants. Giddens points to use-value, or the intended function of an item designed to address a particular need, while Miller and Rose point to ‘real needs’ in reference to the emotional or social value of a given product or service. Interestingly, a distinction between real and artificial needs is also present in minimalism discourse. It is likely that as consumerism has progressed, the use-value of much of what we consume has gone beyond function to actually be about fulfilling these ‘real needs’.

An example of this is purchasing a luxury vehicle over a basic model, both provide the same use-value in terms of intended function, but both are also highly symbolic and communicate something about the values and lifestyle of the owner. Determining between needs and wants is also a core principle of the minimalist lifestyle and is explored in detail in Chapter 7.

Further outlining the connections between consumption and lifestyle, Rose (1999a), like White (1999), Soper (2004), and Streeck (2012) in the previous chapter, discusses consumption as it relates to the conceptualization of what it means to be a citizen in the context of contemporary neoliberal societies. Rose notes how consumption, like other areas of life, has come to be shaped and governed through notions of autonomy, freedom, and choice. He states ‘consumer’ rather than ‘producer’ is now the paramount formulation of the economic subject⁴¹. Through consumption, “We are obliged to make our lives meaningful by selecting our personal lifestyle from those offered to us in advertising, soap operas, and films⁴², to make sense of our existence by exercising our freedom to choose in a market in which one simultaneously purchases products and services, and assembles, manages, and markets oneself” (Rose 1999a:103). Rose (1999a:230) goes on to argue that the notion of citizen has become individual rather than social through this process, and that we increasingly understand citizenship as it relates to our ability to make personal choices. Rose (1999b) refers to the realm of consumption as a field in which the consumer subject encounters various techniques of

⁴¹ Interestingly, the hybrid ‘prosumer’ subjectivity seems to be gaining traction as a way to identify contemporary consumers who are seen to desire design input or experiential elements in their purchasing decisions (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Comor 2011), further demonstrating the mutability of subjectivities and identities, as well as the enduring hold consumption has on how we think about ourselves.

⁴² To advertising, soap operas, and films, I would add social media sites such as Pinterest, Facebook, and Instagram, which are contemporary sources of lifestyle consumption and act, like other forms of self-help, as pedagogical lifestyle resources.

government through which they must shape their lifestyles, and come to understand citizenship, and its rights and obligations, in terms of consumption.

Rose (1998) also notes how the consumer subjectivity means an individual's choices become tied to their personality and their project of lifestyle formation. As discussed in Chapter 2, consumption is a highly symbolic act and has become intrinsically linked to identity. Further to this, Rose (1999a) asserts that even though lifestyles and consumption are often presented to the consumer through various forms of advertising, ultimately, the choices made need to be justified as the personal preference of the individual so as to contribute to their formation of self. In other words, when thinking about our own consumption, we do not buy something because we saw an advertisement for it, or because someone we admire has it, we buy something because we choose it out of a vast selection as being the right car, t-shirt, cereal, etc., for how we see our self and our lifestyle. Below, the ways in which the individual becomes self-governing through the obligation to choose is discussed in greater detail.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, self-help is a commercial industry, which therefore means that while it is ostensibly about helping people, it is also profit-driven and designed to be consumed. Rose (1998) discusses self-help as an alliance that takes shape in the marketplace between professionals who claim to be able to offer guidance on how to live a life of meaning, and individuals seeking such guidance. In this way, self-help is not unlike fashion or housewares, in that it is simply another item that can be purchased in the on-going process of lifestyle formation. However, it differs from these other commodities because it is prescriptive and pedagogical in design. Overall,

consumption is a crucial element of lifestyle, particularly for minimalists because their lifestyle is shaped in opposition to mainstream consumerism.

Lifestyle and Governmentality

Pointing to the ways in which lifestyle relates to governmentality through the incorporation of expert knowledges, Rose contends ‘psy’ discourses, “have enabled both political authorities and individuals to reinterpret the mundane elements of everyday life—conduct—shopping, working, cooking—as dimensions of ‘life-style choice’: activities *in which* people invest themselves and *through which* they both express and manifest their worth and value as selves” (1998:98 original emphasis). In other words, and in line with Giddens’ (1991) ‘reflexive project’, Rose sees lifestyle as the site(s) in which individuals put in the work of shaping the self. Furthermore, Rose links lifestyle and governmentality to self-help through the practices of behavior modification which are “entirely consonant with a secular ethic of the technical perfection of lifestyle by the autonomous and responsible self” (Rose 1999a:241). This linking of neoliberal governmentality and lifestyle choice is evident in minimalism discourse and is examined in later chapters.

Lifestyle is a site of identity formation and authenticity cultivation, and according to Rose (1996, 1999b) and Giddens (1991) it is also a site for risk management. Both describe risk as one of the key features of contemporary society and note the integral role it plays in lifestyle formation and decision-making. As Rose argues, through ongoing lifestyle negotiation, “The ethics of lifestyle maximization, coupled with a logic in which someone must be held to blame for any event that threatens an individual’s ‘quality of life’, generates a relentless imperative of risk management” (Rose 1996:342). The notion of risk is not overtly prevalent in minimalism discourse—though it does appear in the

form of discussions about keeping things ‘just in case’ (which minimalists say is not necessary) (e.g., Becker 2016; Millburn and Nicodemus 2014; Sasaki 2017⁴³)—but this observation from Rose is more broadly demonstrative of the ways in which individuals engage in self-governing through their daily lifestyle choices, which is very much present in minimalism discourse. Moreover, Banet-Weiser claims:

Though it is clear that not all corporations will take risks, the discourse of ‘freedom’ within advanced capitalism romanticizes risk itself and thus obscures the varied sorts of productions that emerge from its context. The mantra of advanced capitalist freedom ... —everyone is creative, everyone is entrepreneurial, everyone is an activist—is a crucial dynamic in the contemporary era of brand cultures. (2012:217)

Risk is also linked to consumption insofar as we have been taught to mitigate risks, both big and small, through the purchase of various products or services. This can be something obvious like home insurance, or something more mundane such as buying duplicates of a favourite item that may wear out or be discontinued.

Ultimately, lifestyle and governmentality are linked through the notions of freedom, autonomy, and choice. According to Rose (1999b) freedom has become melded with our understanding of autonomy and is thought to exist at the level of individual choice and behaviour. And, as discussed above, in contemporary society we are “obliged to be free” such that making choices becomes a mandatory part of the everyday project of identity formation. Through this obligation to choose, we are also required to make the *right* choices as both autonomous individuals and citizens. Further to this, Giddens asserts, “individualism becomes extended to the sphere of consumption, the designation of individual wants becoming basic to the continuity of the system. *Market-governed*

⁴³ Interestingly, Sasaki (2017) sites the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 as one of the reasons for the rise in the popularity of minimalism. According to him, having fewer things, not more, is a way of mitigating risk in the event of future earthquakes.

freedom of individual choice becomes an enveloping framework of individual self-expression” (1991:197 emphasis added). That our freedom of choice is market-governed is a crucial point in tying the threads of my theoretical argument—lifestyle, governmentality, and consumerism—together. This is also where authenticity comes into play from two sides. First, through the framing of the individual as having a core authentic self that it can, and should, express through participation in the market. And second, as a critique of this hegemonic understanding of the market as the de facto space for expressing individual authenticity.

Building from this, one of the ways in which personal authenticity is connected to market participation and self-governing is through lifestyle media and experts. In their analysis of the *oprah.com* website, Lund and Lewis (2008) looked at how lifestyle media is increasingly couched in the language of governmentality, particularly in terms of choice and self-responsibilization. Lund and Lewis argue access to expertise has been democratized through the ways expert knowledge is presented in easy how-to formats that are, ostensibly, available to everyone. While the authors focus on television and the Internet and what they refer to as “mediated expertise”, this can also be seen in the self-help books on minimalism, which are primarily written by people who partake in the lifestyle and are sharing their personal experience and tips, rather than by credentialed professionals or experts. This democratizing of expertise is noteworthy because it points to the entrepreneurialization of individual experience, which is part of the project of neoliberalism and the aim of governmentality.

Lund and Lewis go on to argue that the popularity of mediated expertise appears to be indicative of “some paradoxical developments in popular civic culture, marked on

the one hand by a focus on the dissemination of life skills oriented towards individual self-improvement and transformation and on the other by representing normative accounts of ways of living” (2008:10). This very much applies to minimalism discourse and is not unlike Rimke’s (2000) liberation/regulation paradox discussed in Chapter 2. Whether it is the formal self-help books, or the less formal, but no less self-help-oriented Reddit forums and media coverage, this paradoxical pedagogy of autonomous self-improvement and normative conduct is present. Ultimately, Lund and Lewis suggest democratized mediated expertise represents an “ethical model emphasizing the role of personal and domestic lifestyle management as a site of pleasure, empowerment *and* responsibility” (2008:17 original emphasis). As I take up later in this chapter, this is very much in line with Rose’s (1998) enterprising subject.

Lifestyle and Politics

While not my primary focus, it does seem necessary to briefly consider the relationship between lifestyle and politics as it relates to minimalism. Giddens (1991) makes the distinction between what he refers to as emancipatory politics, which deal with life chances, and life politics, which deal with lifestyle. Increasingly, he argues, politics addresses the latter⁴⁴. He defines them thusly, “life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies” (Giddens 1991:214). We see this in regards to consumer issues such as whether consumers have the right to know if products were produced in sweatshops. This is likely not a life or death issue (for the

⁴⁴ Though, as demonstrated through the ongoing fallout of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, emancipatory politics are still very much present.

consumer), but instead pertains to knowledge access and the ability of the individual to make informed choices. The freedom to choose is also a key tenet of contemporary minimalism, particularly as it relates to participation in the consumer market. In other words, while minimalism discourse is rarely overtly political, it clearly contains concerns that are in line with Giddens' notion of life politics.

Drawing on Giddens' life politics, Haenfler et al. (2012) discuss the difference between social movements and lifestyle movements and note the primary difference is the level at which they operate. While social movements tend to be cohesive and address large issues with the aim of social change, lifestyle movements are more about change at the individual level with the belief they are part of a dispersed group. These authors note lifestyles are a way to both identify with and from others, but some lifestyles can be more counter-cultural or alternative. They also assert that through lifestyle movements, the feeling of a collective identity helps to contribute to the formation of an individual identity. As seen in later chapters, though it is rarely addressed as a movement within the discursive sites I analyze, the presence of spaces where minimalists interact with one another about lifestyle suggests an element of community. Haenfler et al. (2012) argue that within societies oriented around individualism and consumerism, that in addition to shopping for a lifestyle, one also treats their involvement with social change in much the same way as something that can be customized to fit their identity.

Related to lifestyle movements and life politics, Rose (1996) argues social belonging is increasingly thought of in terms of community rather than as part of a broader collective. He argues, "Affiliations to communities of lifestyle through the practices of consumption displaces older devices of habit formation that enjoined

obligations upon citizens as part of their social responsibilities” (Rose 1996:343).

Increasingly, we are obliged to enact our citizenship within communities, whether our local proximity-based communities, or broader affiliations based on lifestyle. This is evident in minimalism discourse, particularly the Reddit forums where individuals are in communication about, and because of, their participation in the minimalist lifestyle.

Linking lifestyle with governmentality, politics, and self-help, Hazelden (2003) argues self-help is rarely apolitical but instead helps to define what is deemed political. According to Hazelden, self-help, and ‘psy’ discourses more broadly, are also governmental in that they contribute to shaping individuals into particular types of citizens. Through self-help, users are taught to behave and think about themselves in ways that are in line with broader political goals. As discussed in the previous chapter, self-help is also a site in which we can identify current anxieties, which is certainly the case for minimalism as it addresses concerns with overconsumption including mental health and environmental degradation. Based on the understanding of lifestyle outlined here, I am utilizing lifestyle to refer to both our mundane everyday practices and to conscious efforts to shape our styles of life.

Governing Through Freedom and Choice

For the purposes of theory I am using governmentality to refer to the ‘conduct of conduct’ though this is not the only way in which Foucault used it (Walters 2012). In addition to suggesting governmentality as a methodological approach, Walters (2012) also cautions against applicationism in which governmentality is simply applied to empirical object X. Rather, governmentality should be used as a way to investigate the power relations and knowledge formations, and their outcomes, of a particular instance.

Therefore, following from Walters, for my purposes, governmentality is a means of looking at the ways in which neoliberal rationalities permeate lifestyle formation including sites aimed at resisting elements of neoliberalism.

According to Rose, governmentality is “a range of rationalities and techniques,” (1996:328) as well as “a way of conceptualizing all those more or less rationalized programs, strategies, and tactics for the ‘conduct of conduct’, for acting upon the actions of others in order to achieve certain ends” (1998:12). And, as Binkely explains, rationalities are “imposed ways of doing things” (2007:118). Additionally, Walters argues governmentality is well suited to studying contemporary societies because, “in these societies the exercise of power is also bound up with countless little techniques and knowledges (diets, investment plans, goal setting) which we perform on our selves and others” (Walters 2012:39). Additionally, as Warin (2011) notes, governmentality is not top down, but occurs in all manner of sites and practices. This is why a governmentality approach is so well suited to the use of self-help resources as data.

Governmentality refers to policy, but it also refers to the ways in which policies are enacted through what Rose (1998), drawing from Foucault, refers to as ‘technologies’. This is echoed by Warrin who states, “Governmentality is not simply the government and surveillance of others; it also means the government and surveillance of oneself—what Foucault refers to as technologies of the self” (2011:32-33). And, as Walters asserts, Foucault saw these technologies as stemming, at least in part, from Christian pastoralism. According to Walters:

by means of certain exercises—notably, confessional practice—[the Christian pastorate] takes hold of techniques of individualization and ties them into its practices of governing a multiplicity. As much as experiences of ‘inner truth’ and ‘the self’ might appear like second nature to us now ...

Foucault suggests that they are not eternal but have a history that is closely tied up with the history of governance. (2012:22)

As I discuss in later chapters, confession is a common element of self-help, particularly ‘12 step programs’, but it is also often present in guru books, such as those I am engaging with, in the form of instructing readers to confess their ‘sins’ to themselves. The Reddit forums and Instagram posts can also be read as sites of confession as well as some of the media articles with which I am engaging.

What is more, technologies are all of the little ways the programs and rationalities of governmentality become operationalized both to form subjects and to give them the tools and techniques to govern themselves. What a governmentality approach allows for is the uncovering of the discursive formations through which these processes take place across numerous sites (Rose 1999b). It is doubtful minimalism is part of a larger political or state agenda being organized from the top down, but it is clear within minimalism discourse that the lifestyle is very much in fitting with the broader construction of self-enterprising neoliberal subjects; even as it tries to challenge some of these assumptions.

Governmentality, as Foucault proposed it, “embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one’s own passions, to control one’s own instincts, to govern oneself” (Rose 1999b:3). This is particularly important for the discourses with which I am engaging. While self-help is a pedagogical field of expertise, the sites I am looking at generally take the form of first-hand accounts which are infused with language demonstrative of the ways in which we come to govern ourselves. They demonstrate the internalizing of a neoliberal mentality, even when operating in opposition to some of the tenets of neoliberalism, particularly consumerism.

Rose goes on to assert that these programs and tactics are designed, “not just to control, subdue, discipline, normalize, or reform [individuals], but also to make them more intelligent, wise, happy, virtuous, healthy, productive, docile, enterprising, fulfilled, self-esteeming, empowered, or whatever” (1998:12). This is important for understanding minimalism. The self-help industry is one such program or apparatus that contributes to the ‘conduct of conduct’ by offering instructions on how to alter behaviour and attitudes. This is also important for demonstrating how governmentality is not necessarily negative, but rather is about exerting control over all aspects of our lives including our happiness and self-fulfillment—two aspects of utmost importance to minimalists.

Directly related to this, Binkely (2007), drawing from Rose and Foucault, looks at discourses around happiness and how they increasingly include both the seduction of consumerism and the rationality of governmentality. As discussed above, Binkley argues sociological and governmentality approaches can be used together to understand how lifestyle shapes and informs everyday conduct. He suggests, “consumer lifestyles set individuals to work on their own identities through practices that are primarily aesthetic, derived from a seductive culture of images and sensations,” while governmental rationalities, “... set individuals to work on themselves through instrumental imperatives imposed on them by specific programs and managerial strategies that tell people specifically what they ‘ought’ to be, and give them ways to become it” (2007:112-13). This is precisely how the minimalist lifestyle operates. Having chosen the minimalist lifestyle because of its perceived alignment with a person’s identity, one is put to work through minimalism discourse from sites such as the guru books, Reddit forums, Instagram posts, and media sources I am analyzing. Each of these discursive sites teaches

the person interested in minimalism something about how the lifestyle operates and how it can be achieved through personal work. Therefore, using both a sociological and a governmentality reading of the lifestyle accounts for both agency and external power.

The notion of self-governing individuals is directly in line with the aims of neoliberalism (Rabinow and Rose 2003). This is addressed by Binkley who, discussing neoliberalism and the changing ways in which people are compelled to govern themselves, contends, “The rationalities necessary for such forms of government emerge from an array of dispersed sites, and they all variously seek to optimize certain individual qualities demanded by market conditions” (2007:119). This is one of the things making contemporary minimalism so interesting. It both demonstrates neoliberal rationalities and challenges taken-for-granted market conditions.

Additionally, and related to the previous chapter’s discussion of the consumer-citizen, Lund and Lewis contend governmentality presents a discursive formulation of power which is, “... a shift that for many exemplifies the *modus operandi* of the neoliberal state with its concerns to devolve questions of social and political responsibility to the level of the individual consumer-citizen” (2008:17). This is echoed by Foster who, linking governmentality and authenticity, contends, “authenticity has been pressed into the service of rendering meaningful and helping to buttress distinctively neoliberal notions of personal responsibility and citizenship” (2016:101). As Warin (2011:33) notes, neoliberalism was in part a reaction to the welfare state and is premised on individualism, deregulation, and decentralization. While this creates a sense of individual autonomy, it also emphasizes personal responsibility, which has the effect of relieving the state of responsibility for problems that can in any way be deemed personal

(Warin 2011:36). For example, this can be seen in the increasing prevalence of campaigns around mental health wherein individuals are encouraged to address their own mental health as if it is a personal failing, rather than the result of external circumstances. In terms of minimalism discourse, this absolving of state and institutional responsibility can be seen in how issues such as environmental degradation, poor health, and financial strain are treated as personal problems to be addressed by the individual, further responsabilizing the individual and shaping the minimalist subject.

Subjectivity and the Minimalist Subject

Linking a specific notion of the self with the development of neoliberalism, Rose asserts, “The self is to be a subjective being, it is to aspire to autonomy, it is to strive for personal fulfillment in its earthly life, it is to interpret its reality and destiny as a matter of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice.” He continues by noting, “These ways of *thinking* about humans as selves, and these ways of *judging* them, are linked to certain ways of *acting* upon such selves” (Rose 1998:151 original emphasis). This thinking, judging, and acting is external, but just as importantly, internal. Furthermore, this way of thinking about ourselves alters all of our interactions and relationships by making us subjective beings first and foremost (Rose 1999a). The minimalism discourse considered herein allows us, in addition to exploring the connections between authenticity and consumerism, to see this subject formation in action, particularly as it is internalized by individuals engaging in the minimalist lifestyle.

Within contemporary society, self-help is one of the foremost ways in which subjectivity is discursively constituted, especially through the ways rhetorics of self-help permeate other fields such as popular culture and ‘wellness’ discourses. Discussing how

self-help contributes to and reinforces the notion of the autonomous, self-governing individual, Rimke (2000) posits this process takes place through the ways in which self-help assumes the conceptualization of the core self that can be acted on as given, rather than seeing this as an historically and culturally contingent formulation of 'the self'. Furthermore, her research demonstrates how self-help actively contributes to shaping citizens compatible with neoliberal ways of thinking. As Rimke states, self-help aids in creating, "citizens who are psychologically 'healthy' inasmuch as they are governable, predictable, calculable, classifiable, self-conscious, responsible, self-regulating and self-determined" (2000:63). Rather than helping the user uncover their 'true' self, self-help actively contributes to creating our understanding of the self as something, which can be known and acted upon (Rimke 2000). In other words, through thinking about consumption practices in particular ways, and articulating these characterizations, 'the minimalist' subject was created and could then be acted upon.

Additionally, in her Foucauldian analysis of the self-help genre, Rimke links the notion of enterprise and the role of expertise with self-help, describing how self-help operates from a positive and productive standpoint and how, "the self-helper must be skilled in his or her own subjection, in organizing and sustaining some stable operative unity among the multitudinous, divergent effects of the techniques that produce intelligible selfhood" (2000:63). Further to this, Rimke (2000) asserts self-help is a prime example of responsabilization and governing by emphasizing success and morality.

Similarly, Hoffman (2014) uses a Foucault-inspired approach to look at subject formation in urban China. He argues the emergence of 'the professional' and 'the volunteer' are demonstrative of new subject formations representing new modes of

responsibilized citizens. Hoffman argues these subject formations are political beyond what they mean for state politics because they are formed through what he refers to as “modes of self-governance such as self-enterprise” and that understanding their construction can help highlight broader cultural norms and power dynamics (Hoffman 2014:1578). Relatedly, Mulcahy (2017) looks at the ways in which neoliberal entrepreneurial thinking has shaped the development of the ‘financial subject’ by increasingly placing financial security and responsibility on the individual. Though minimalism is not a project of the state, its investigation can help shed light on, and perhaps reconsider, some of the norms of contemporary consumer culture.

Linking subjectivity and power, Zanotti asserts they “are not unitary and ‘sovereign’ entities that stand in relations of externality. Instead, they are imbricated, formed, and transformed in contingent and uneven agonic relations, and can only be defined practically and historically” (2013:294). For example, the minimalist subject gains meaning, in part, from its relation to the consumer subject, itself a contingent discursive formation. Minimalism discourse shapes minimalist subjects by drawing the boundaries around the lifestyle such that there are specific behaviours and characteristics that define one as minimalist. The contemporary minimalist subject is not unlike the neoliberal subject—they are self-responsibilized, freedom-seeking individuals who prioritize their own wellbeing and feel they are acting autonomously. Moreover, the minimalist subject is one who is disciplined about their consumption and takes a hardline approach to the ownership of possessions, which, for the most part, must be both functional and aesthetically pleasing. They are to emotionally distance themselves from the objects in their possession (except for a select few) and are to focus on the pursuit of

experiences. Furthermore, the minimalist subject has experienced an ‘awakening’ of sorts and is no longer a mindless participant in consumerism. In this way, they are able to claim a moral superiority over others having addressed the existential desire for authenticity by altering their relation to the material world.

Freedom and Power

Bevir, discussing Foucault’s approach to power, claims, “Power was not wielded by a central body, such as the state or capital, against people; it was something that flows all through society, producing people as much as controlling them, deployed on oneself as much as on one by another” (2011:461). Additionally, Rose suggests, “freedom has come to mean the realization of the potentials of the psychological self in and through activities in the mundane world of everyday life” (1998:17). Which, I argue, is why authenticity is such an important concept in contemporary culture. It is no small feat to maximize one’s potential and to do so in a way that is self-guided and self-referential, which is where the idea of authenticity is helpful as a framework for the project of the self. As discussed in the previous chapter, authenticity is best understood as a technique of judgment operating on multiple levels to help us assess the objects, experiences, and people we encounter, but it also helps us to judge our own choices and actions. In essence, we are free to be our authentic selves, but as suggested by Rose, this freedom is also an obligation that holds power over us by making us responsible for the choices we make in the name of ‘being authentic’.

Furthermore, the notion of freedom relates to power because it “multiplies the points at which the citizen has to play his or her part in the games that govern him [sic]. And, in doing so, it also multiplies the points at which citizens are able to refuse, contest,

challenge those demands that are placed upon them” (Rose 1999a:xxiii). This certainly seems to be visible through minimalism in which individuals are attempting to define an alternate role and identity for themselves within the confines of consumer culture. Freedom and choice are regularly invoked as beneficial reasons for engaging in the minimalist lifestyle, but minimalists are not necessarily free of consumer culture or other neoliberal modes of power. However, based on my data, proponents of the minimalist lifestyle experience it as freeing.

This is supported by Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen who note that subjectivity is two-sided insofar as individuals are, “subjected to the power relations within which they are embedded, and at the same time, they are able to act as subjects in and through those same relations. Thus, governing does not imply a negative force only but, most importantly, is a precondition for agency and thus a productive force” (2013:278). This is also important for understanding minimalism. By taking on the minimalist mantle, individuals are joining a vast and dispersed collective of like-minded individuals and are also able to use the identity to justify and empower their choices, and at times, to push back against dominant cultural norms.

Drawing from Foucault and Rose, Lund and Lewis (2008) highlight the seeming tension between freedom and power, observing, “the ideal of liberated selfhood can be marked by both rights and freedoms at the same time as it figures as a pivotal node within a neoliberal system of power”. Furthermore, they argue this means “If both techniques of domination and techniques of the self are implicated in governance, then freedom changes its meaning; it can no longer be understood as that which stands ‘outside’ domination but must be seen as functioning as part of processes of power” (Lund and

Lewis 2008:18-19). In other words, power is partially derived from the ability to form subjectivities and shape what constitutes freedom.

The Enterprising Subject

Having now established how lifestyle and governmentality are understood for the purposes of this research, we can look at how they are brought together through the notion of ‘enterprise’ (Rose 1998). While governmentality is often used to look at how the state or institutions shape subjects, one of its primary elements is how individuals come to govern themselves. As I am arguing, the minimalist lifestyle is a prime example of governmentality in action at the level of the individual. Minimalism, as a lifestyle, is premised on intention, freedom, and choice in the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment, and living in this way is seen to be both pleasurable and authentic. However, as Foster sees it, there is increasingly a “symbiosis of the ethic of authenticity with neo-liberal notions of entrepreneurial conduct” (2016:110). In addition to this, Foster, drawing from both Rose and Taylor argues, “authenticity has effectively collapsed into the form of self-managed therapeutic freedom that Rose calls ‘autonomy’. In this form, the ideal fails to offer any kind of moral critique of existing social arrangements, and in fact simply intensifies the tendencies to atomism, empty individualism and loss of a sense of political community that concerned Taylor” (2016:101). This is a tension highlighted by contemporary minimalism in which individuals are very much acting out of their own self-interest, but as members of a dispersed and like-minded community which has the potential to be overtly political. Minimalism, however, does seem to retain some of the moral critique seen to be lacking in other appeals to authenticity.

Through the processes of governmentality, the individual, as Rose asserts, is compelled to, "... become, as it were, an entrepreneur of itself, seeking to maximize its own powers, its own happiness, its own quality of life, though [sic] enhancing its autonomy and then instrumentalizing its autonomous choices in the service of its life-style." (1998:158). As discussed in later chapters, this is an apt description of minimalist practices. Important to note here are the roles autonomy and choice play in the notion of the enterprising individual. There is no sense the individual is being forced into a lifestyle in the service of others. Nor is there a sense of hardship or alienation.

Similarly, Giddens (1991:12) argues it is a feature of late modernity to be compelled to treat the self, through the desire to 'find oneself' (what I am calling the quest for authenticity), as a site of intervention and transformation. Likewise, Walters contends, "within the Christian pastorate something else takes shape: forms of power that operate by guiding, leading, conducting men and women, that utilize mechanisms that induce self-reflection and conscience in their subjects, and enjoin them to practice a certain government of their selves" (2012:24-25). Pursuant to this, Rose posits:

Enterprise here designates an array of rules for the conduct of one's everyday existence: energy, initiative, ambition, calculation, and personal responsibility. The enterprising self will ... seek to maximize its own human capital, project itself a future, and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be. The enterprising self is thus both an active self and a calculating self, a self that calculates *about* itself and that acts *upon* itself in order to better itself. (1998:154 original emphasis)

These rules are informal and are not necessarily experienced as externally dictated.

Rather, through various pedagogies of the self, such as self-help resources, advertising, and education, individuals are implicitly taught to be self-governing. Banet-Weiser, who looks at authenticity within contemporary brand culture supports this formulation of the

individual by noting, “The contemporary era is one that focuses on the individual entrepreneur, ‘free’ to be an activist, a consumer, or both. This newly imagined entrepreneur is not defined in the traditional sense of being a business owner or investor, but rather is an entrepreneur of the *self*, a category that has exclusive hints to it but also gains traction as something that ostensibly can apply to anyone” (2012:37 original emphasis). Furthermore, as Foster argues, within neoliberalism, authenticity is used to, “incentivizes individuals to enterprise themselves. It has consequently been brought into alignment with entirely privatized notions of self-fulfillment and personal responsibility which erode the necessary social and collective background of authentic self-expression” (2016:110). This way of thinking about the self is not unique to minimalists, but is particularly evident in the discourses under consideration in my research.

Additionally, as described by Rose (1999b) it is a lot of work to live an autonomous life premised on freedom and choice. The ‘authentic self’ becomes something that can be learned about and acted upon and this is to be an on-going, life-long endeavour. Further to this, Rose argues thinking about the self in this way makes us reliant on various forms of expertise as we aim to fashion our lives to be fulfilling and meaningful. One such source of expertise is the self-help industry. As stated in the introductory chapter, the self-help industry is vast both in size and scope. And, in keeping with consumer capitalism, whether it is via books, the Internet, or face-to-face, the expert pedagogies for one’s desired lifestyle, no matter how counter-cultural it may be, are likely to be available for purchase.

Rose also argues that through the emphasis on autonomy we are, “obliged to be free” (1998, 1999a) which is echoed by Giddens who states, “On the level of the self, a

fundamental component of day-to-day activity is simply that of *choice*.” (Giddens 1991:80 original emphasis). As Rose (1998) alludes, not everyone has the same opportunity to choose, but we are nevertheless expected to think about our lives in terms of individual choice. As mentioned above, implicit in the obligation to choose is the onus on the individual to make the *right* choice. And, especially within the context of consumer culture, there is always another choice to be made, which is again where authenticity comes into play as a guiding factor in making choices that make sense for the individual in terms of their overall life-trajectory. Linking the process of enterprise with the notion of the authentic self, Rose finds an individual’s choices are seen as a reflection of their inner self and that “The practice of freedom appears only as the possibility of the maximum self-fulfillment of the active and autonomous individual” (Rose 1998:17). As I explore in later chapters, the notion of freedom is a foremost concern within minimalism discourse and is deemed to be a primary benefit of the lifestyle⁴⁵.

A sense of autonomy and freedom is crucial to the minimalist lifestyle and the reason for this is elucidated by Rose (1998) in his discussion of the impact of the ‘psy’ disciplines and their terminology such as fulfillment, adjustment, and self-actualization, on how we come to think about and act upon the self. He notes, “however apparently external and implacable may be the constraints, obstacles and limitations that are encountered, each individual must render his or her life meaningful as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization” (Rose 1999a:vii-xi). Here, Rose highlights both the role of authenticity (self-

⁴⁵ Within the minimalist texts I have engaged with, freedom is often framed in reference to the ways in which we are ‘enslaved’ by consumerism and the over-accumulation of goods (see Sasaki 2017; Becker 2016; Jay 2016; Loreau 2016; Millburn and Nicodemus 2015a, 2015b). While it is likely a useful rhetorical device for getting their point across, this is a problematic connection to draw, as feeling trapped by consumerism is not morally equivalent to slavery.

realization) and the types of power at play in the notion of freedom. Relating this to self-help is what Rose refers to as the process of modulation. According to Rose, “One is always in continuous training, lifelong learning, perpetual assessment, continual incitement to buy, to improve oneself, constant monitoring of health and never-ending risk management.” (1999b:234). Through self-help and other sites of pedagogy, we are taught to be enterprising and to make a project of our lives in accordance with ever-changing rules and expectations derived from both internal and external sources.

Regardless of their circumstances, individuals are obliged to take personal responsibility for their situation and to make sense of it from an individual perspective. Philip (2009) highlights this in her Foucault-inspired analysis of self-help texts on depression. Philip argues one of the effects of placing the burden on the individual is to reduce the role of the state in supporting those with depression. This is echoed by Warin who argues the rhetoric of choice championed by neoliberalism, “places social problems squarely at people’s feet” (2011:36). This is true for minimalism too. While it may not be intentional, the minimalist lifestyle involves taking personal responsibility for a number of broad social issues including the environment, health, and finances. These are all issues at a societal level yet many minimalists treat them as personal responsibilities that primarily matter at the individual level. This may be because it is perceived as being the best, or only, way of addressing these larger issues given how firmly entrenched we are in neoliberal ways of thinking.

This is supported by Guthman (2008) who looked at how philanthropic efforts are often couched in neoliberal governmentality through an analysis of a sustainable food project in California. Guthman found the project was riddled with neoliberal thinking and

assumptions about how to be successful such as aiming for ‘best practices’ and using audits and analytics, despite widespread systemic change being the initial purpose of the project. She concluded, “the politics of the possible were not only narrowed by the political economy of neoliberalism, but by its governmentalities” (2008:1251). Here, Guthman highlights how even efforts to challenge neoliberalism are often stuck thinking and acting within its confines, which I argue is also true of minimalism discourse.

Looking at another area in which neoliberalism shapes our ways of thinking, both Nathanson (2014) and Gill (2007) link neoliberal entrepreneurialism and postfeminism. Through an analysis of female fashion bloggers during the recent recession, Nathanson concludes, “In essence, these bloggers ‘do it all’, and thus fit with both postfeminist representations of femininity and neoliberal discourses of the entrepreneurial self” (2014:146). These bloggers turned consumption into a form of production by making it their work, and thus help to reinforce neoliberal capitalist culture’s emphasis on entrepreneurship. This is not unlike some of the minimalist gurus who have made being minimalists their jobs and sources of income through blogs, books, podcasts, consulting, speaking, and films. Further to Nathanson’s argument, Gill asserts, “it is clear that the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism” (2007:164). In other words, contemporary feminism has also, in some ways, come to think of itself through a neoliberal lens, further highlighting the ways in which neoliberalism shapes our everyday thinking and actions, even in sites of resistance.

In contrast to these researchers, Thompson and Schor offer a critique of the view that all consumption and market-based efforts to challenge neoliberalism operate within

the confines of neoliberal governmentality. Through their analysis of ‘plenitude practices’ such as community gardens and purchasing raw milk, they contend, “Whereas neoliberalism assumes that a functional economy must be governed by the disciplining forces of market competition, plenitude-oriented economies are premised on an ethos of cooperation and seek to leverage the benefits that can emerge from cooperative networks” (Thompson and Schor 2014:240). Instead, they argue plenitude economies are more like Deleuze and Guatari’s rhizome metaphor because they are diffuse yet interconnected and able to function together as well as on their own. However, while contemporary minimalism may share some features such as a critical approach to consumption with plenitude lifestyles as outlined by Thompson and Schor, it is not nearly as collective and cooperation-oriented, nor does it advocate for alternative economies, and therefore, I contend, still operates within a neoliberal governmentality framework despite its attempts to challenge elements of this way of thinking.

The obligation to choose is never-ending and can become burdensome. For example, former United States president Barack Obama has discussed how he limited his suit selection (creating what some minimalists would refer to as a capsule wardrobe) so that he had fewer decisions to make (Lewis, M. 2012). On the other hand, there is what Soper (2004) refers to as ‘alternative hedonism’ and what Vannini and Taggart (2016) call ‘onerous consumption’ through which one finds pleasure in tasks or lifestyle choices that may seem arduous but that the individual feels contribute to a greater good. This seems to be the case within some of the minimalism discourse under consideration, though for the most part, the impact of individual practices is not discussed in relation to broader concerns. However, choice and discipline are treated as sources of pleasure

within the minimalist lifestyle. In particular, one of the Reddit forums analyzed discussed whether or not minimalism was a form of deprivation, with commenters arguing it is not.

Summary

As outlined in this chapter, I have chosen to take a governmentality approach to exploring the connections between authenticity, consumerism, and lifestyle by looking at a collection of sites of minimalism discourse. Taking this approach allows me to explore the minimalist lifestyle and the self-help industry while also allowing for an emphasis on my primary interests of authenticity and consumerism. It is my contention that through the incorporation of the rhetoric of authenticity, contemporary minimalism embodies neoliberal ways of thinking about the self as a project requiring continuous work.

Lifestyle and governmentality are linked through notions of the self and authenticity. It is increasingly the case that we make sense of our identities through mundane everyday actions, but it is also true that lifestyles are increasingly shaped through outside sources such as self-help. Through these processes we come to understand ourselves as projects to be worked on and governed. In the case of minimalism, individuals are shaped as self-responsibilized, freedom-seeking citizens. Governmentality, as a theoretical approach, facilitates an exploration that uncovers how these elements of power are discursively formed. The following chapter builds from here to outline my methodological framework.

Chapter 4: Establishing an Approach to Studying Minimalism

Continuing my discussion on taking a Foucault-inspired approach to my research I now turn to outlining methodology. Theory and methodology cannot be treated as distinct entities because they operate together to shape the research project. This is particularly true for governmentality because the approach treats theory and methodology as tools to be used together. My project is an effort to think critically about an element of contemporary culture that may otherwise be dismissed as trivial. Consumption practices are often taken for granted or viewed as natural within contemporary society, but they are a site of on-going identity and status negotiations, which can shed light on broader concerns. Such is the case with minimalism discourse, which is about individual consumption habits, but also points to environmental and economic concerns as well as existential concerns about identity and subjectivity in contemporary society.

Influencing my approach to researching minimalism, Kinecheloe and McLaren (2005:304), in their discussion of critical theory and qualitative research, provide a detailed sketch of a 'criticalist' asserting it is a researcher or theorist who acknowledges the mutability of power and language, the role of capitalism in shaping subjectivities, and the intersectionality of social inequalities and oppression. While my project does not advocate on behalf of an oppressed group, it does look at the ways in which a group of people experience consumer capitalism as oppressive and their attempts to resist this oppression. It is my intention to contribute a piece of critical sociological research keeping these characteristics in mind when making decisions and providing analysis. I also feel this description of critical research is in keeping with a Foucault-inspired analysis, particularly with its emphasis on the latent ways power relations are created,

maintained, and challenged through discourse. Moreover, given that I am researching a lifestyle, capitalist production and consumption are front of mind. My focus on lifestyle means there are class-based assumptions present in my data and my critique is primarily class-based, because, given that some of my data is from an Internet forum, race and gender⁴⁶ is not always knowable.

Similar to Flyvbjerg's (2001) comments in Chapter 1, Rimke discusses using a Foucauldian framework and contends, "This perspective and approach does not seek to reveal falsity but to describe the constitution of truth. It not only asks Why? but also How?" (2000:62). Foucault himself asserted, "If, for the time being, I grant a certain privileged position to the question of 'how' it is not because I would wish to eliminate the questions of 'what' and 'why.' Rather it is that I wish to present these questions in a different way; better still, to know if it is legitimate to imagine a power which unites in itself a what, a why, and a how" (Foucault 1982:217). Additionally, Hazelden says a Foucault-inspired approach to analysis can, "... aid social thought in grasping certain present realities of how things work" (2003:415). Moreover, rather than a specific research procedure, what Foucault offers is an epistemological approach to discourse wherein it is understood as a site of negotiation for the establishment of truth, power, and subjectivity. Nevertheless, for the pragmatic reason of adhering to convention, it is necessary here to outline my own approach to methodology.

This chapter begins by outlining the epistemological considerations of my project. I then move on to discuss discourse and what can be gained from its analysis. Next, I

⁴⁶ I do offer some gender-based analysis because there are, at times, clear differences in the self-help texts written by male and female minimalist gurus, and because of the broader gender-based stereotypes made about consumption. Race is only present in my research insofar as it relates to class and is largely absent from the data.

briefly discuss the advantages and challenges of using data from diverse sites. I then move on to outline my approach to identifying and collecting data. And finally, I outline my approach to reading and coding.

Linking Theory and Methodology

Questions about epistemology are often difficult to address because they mean confronting personal as well as disciplinary biases and limitations to knowing. Nevertheless, these confrontations are necessary to produce rigorous work and to advance our understanding. Thinking about epistemology asks us to reflect on what is knowable and how it can be known. In other words, how is methodology compatible with theory, and how do they both shape the approach to data collection and analysis?

According to Carter and Little, “Epistemology is inescapable. A reflexive researcher actively adopts a theory of knowledge. A less reflexive researcher implicitly adopts a theory of knowledge, as it is impossible to engage in knowledge creation without at least tacit assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is constructed” (2007:1319). Furthermore, these authors claim, “Epistemology contains values, in that epistemology is normative. It is the basis for explaining the rightness or wrongness, the admissibility or inadmissibility, of types of knowledge and sources of justification of that knowledge” (Carter and Little 2007:1322). In particular, my analysis of minimalism discourse is focused on the ways in which the notion of authenticity is used to justify participation in the minimalist lifestyle, and how this is shaped by mundane and underlying neoliberal ways of thinking. As outlined in the two previous chapters, I approach authenticity as a cultural value that is used both as a justification of personal behaviour, and a judgment of the culture of consumerism. Moreover, following from

Giddens (1991), I am using lifestyle to refer to mundane, everyday practices, but also to the intentional shaping and styling of life.

As discussed in the previous chapter, governmentality can be understood as a theoretical stance to the operation of power through the ‘conduct of conduct’, but it can also be understood as a methodological approach. As Flyvbjerg (2001) notes, Foucault was more interested in getting down to work than in being tied up with the minutiae of methodology. This is echoed by Rabinow and Rose who claim, “the practice of criticism which we might learn from Foucault would not be a methodology. It would be a movement of thought that invents, makes use of, and modifies conceptual tools as they are set into a relation with specific practices and problems that they themselves help to form in new ways” (2003:xv). Governmentality, according to Walters, can best be understood as, “a cluster of concepts that can be used to enhance the think-ability and criticize-ability of past and present forms of governance,” allowing us to, “understand governance not as a set of institutions, nor in terms of certain ideologies, but as an eminently practical activity that can be studied, historicized and specified at the level of the rationalities, programmes, techniques and subjectivities which underpin it and give it form and effect” (2012:2). Similarly, according to Zanotti, governmentality can be used as “a methodology of inquiry on power’s contingent modalities and technologies” (2013:289). Furthermore, in advocating for governmentality as an approach to research that continues to be relevant to a variety of subject matter, Rose, O’Malley and Valverde (2006:101) contend that to understand how power operates we need to look at its more mundane forms and their role in shaping identities and subjectivities. In this way,

governmentality, as theory and methodology, is a way to approach the study of power within contemporary society.

Moreover, Binkley, who advocates for a combination of sociological and governmentality approaches to research, asserts, “attention to the dual effects of lifestyle seduction and governmental rationalization provides a fruitful methodological tool kit for teasing apart the complex ways in which these practices are inscribed in the lives of modern people” (2007:124). Using a similar metaphor, Rose et al. assert that governmentality should be viewed as, “part of an analytical tool box, good for some purposes but not for others, and capable of being used in conjunction with other tools” (2006:100). In keeping with this, I see governmentality as a way of thinking about power relations, specifically, for my purposes, the persistence of neoliberalism as a set of political rationalities—freedom, choice, and individuality—that come to shape everyday life, particularly within contemporary consumer culture. Because most of my data consists of personal accounts of the minimalist lifestyle, I am looking at how power operates through, rather than upon individuals. In this way, if methodology is thought of as a tool box containing a collection of interpretive devices, my set of tools contains a combination of governmentality, discourse analysis, grounded theory, and frame analysis. Together, these interpretive approaches shaped the reading and coding of my data.

Walters further claims governmentality allows us to observe the, “changing discursive productions of the world and their effects in shaping that world” and can “denaturalize features of the present that have become second nature” (Walters 2012:3). Similarly, in advocating for the role of sociology in contemporary society, Ramos asserts, “Sociology challenges commonly held assumptions and does so with evidence that often

is not self-evident” (2017:370). Drawing from Holstein and Gubrium (2005) Mikkonen, Vicdan and Markkula (2014) use an ‘analytics of interpretive practice’ which combines a Foucauldian approach to discourse with elements of ethnomethodology. They say their reading of self-help texts is rooted in the theoretical premise that language both reflects and creates reality. This approach allows the researcher to investigate the ways in which ‘truths’ are constructed and communicated.

As discussed in the previous chapter, ‘the self’ is one such truth that is discursively constituted. The naturalness of consumerism is another. We have come to think about the self as something inherent in each of us that can be identified, known, and worked on. From a postmodern perspective we have several selves that are changeable and context-specific. However, when dealing with authenticity, the self is treated as something fixed and essential that can be discovered and optimized. It is this notion of the self that is prevalent within the self-help industry. In particular, it is suggested within my data that consumerism is hindering our ability to be our authentic selves, but by following the minimalist lifestyle, we can break free of consumerism’s grasp and live in a way that better meets our need to be authentic. A further epistemological consideration regards discourse, which is where my attention now turns.

Theorizing Discourse

In attempting to ascertain Foucault’s approach to methodology, Flyvbjerg notes, “The meaning of discourses can be understood only as part of society’s ongoing history” (2001:115). Meanwhile, Cherrier, drawing on socio-linguistics, contends, “discourse refers to language use as a social practice. As a social practice, language is a mode of action, which is simultaneously socially constructed by, and socially constructs, our

social world” (2009:182). Additionally, according to linguist Norman Fairclough who is credited with developing critical discourse analysis, “Discourse is not simply an entity we can define independently: we can only arrive at an understanding of it by analysing sets of relations. Having said that, we can say what it is in particular that discourse brings into the complex relations which constitute social life: meaning, and meaning making” (2010:3). Furthermore, Fairclough argues critical discourse analysis, “is not just analysis of discourse (or more concretely texts), it is part of some form of systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process” (2010:10). Moreover, according to Mills, “a discourse is not a disembodied collection of statements, but groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence” (Mills 2004:10). In other words, discourses cannot be isolated from their broader sociocultural context. Such is the case for the minimalism discourse I am engaging. They have been isolated for the purposes of analysis, but they are being read within the broader contexts of contemporary consumer culture and neoliberalism, as well as the ongoing simplicity movement.

Sara Mills (2004), in an historical and theoretical overview of discourse across disciplines such as sociology, critical theory, and literary studies, argues the concept is one of the most widely used, yet under-defined, terms in social theorizing. Ultimately, within social science research, the particular use of the concept of discourse is context specific. According to Mills, “Influenced largely by Foucault’s work, within cultural theory as a whole, discourse is often used in an amalgam of the meanings derived from the term’s Latin and French origins and influences (a speech/conversation) and a more

specific theoretical meaning which sees discourse as the general domain of the production and circulation of rule-governed statements” (2004:7-8). It is this latter understanding of discourse that is shaping my project.

In his own words, Foucault contends, “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable”. He continues, “To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault [1978]1990:100). This is particularly pertinent for my project because it would be easy to fall into the trap of situating discourses in dominant and subordinate relation to one another. Rather, Foucault suggests looking at power in the sites it is resisted arguing, “in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations” (1982:211). Furthermore, he contends, “the main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much ‘such or such’ an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class, but rather a technique, a form of power” (Foucault 1982:212). This is supported by Mills who states, “A discourse theory view characterises subjects as engaging in their own constitution, acquiescing with or contesting the roles to which they are assigned” (2004:41). Flyvbjerg also draws on Foucault to claim, “The researcher’s methodology must take account of the complex and unstable process according to which discourses can be both an instrument of power and its effect, but also an obstacle, a point of resistance or a starting point for a counter posing strategy. Discourses thus transfer and

produce power. They reinforce power, but they also subvert and conceal it, make it fragile and contribute to obstructing power.” (2001:124). For my project, minimalism discourse can be read as a site of resistance to consumer capitalism, but should not be seen as subordinate, and can therefore be utilized to investigate the presence of power, particularly neoliberal governmentality. I contend that, through the formation of a lifestyle oriented around challenging consumerism, minimalism discourse results in reinforcing a neoliberal way of thinking about the citizen as consumer who is shaped by the ideals of freedom and individuality. A governmentality analysis of minimalism discourse allows us to see the ways in which neoliberal ways of thinking permeate how we think about our society, and ourselves, even in moments of resistance.

While capitalism or neoliberalism are often thought of as ‘dominant’ discourses, Foucault cautions that discourses should not be thought of as stable entities, nor in terms of dominant or subordinate, but rather as sites where knowledge and power come together ([1978]1990:100). Crucially, Dahlberg reminds us capitalism itself is a discursive construct asserting it is, “ ... constituted relationally by the articulation, and in the process the constitution, of a complex array of elements” including concepts, objects, codes and practices, and subjectivities (2014:258). Many of these elements of capitalism, such as the concepts of individualism⁴⁷ and consumerism; communication technology; credit systems and workplace codes; and the consumer identity, are being resisted within minimalism discourse. However, they are being resisted through an argument based in neoliberalism and centered around notions of individualism, entrepreneurialism, self-

⁴⁷ Importantly, minimalism both critiques and promotes individualism. On one hand, minimalism critiques the mentality of individualism that is sustained by and sustains consumerism. While on the other hand, the lifestyle is touted for how it can improve the individual’s wellbeing by suggesting it can reinstate the individual’s sense of freedom and authenticity.

reliance, and freedom. This is demonstrative of the ways in which power operates, even in points of resistance. Neoliberalism shapes how people think about themselves and the world around them, and in the case of minimalism, it shapes what is thinkable in terms of an alternative to consumer capitalism. In contrast to other forms of simple living where practitioners live off-grid, participate in alternative economies, or disengage from paid labour, decluttering is not so far removed from mainstream consumer capitalism, though it endeavours to discursively situate itself as such.

Additionally, Rose claims that when studying discourse, “What is important, then, is not so much what language means, but what language does, what it enables human beings to imagine and to do to themselves and to others” (1999a:xix). This is supported by Rimke who states, “Rather, the self is a project and a product of a mastery of a discourse—a form of ‘knowing how’ rather than ‘knowing that’” (2000:70-71). Knowing how, or ‘know-how’ is produced and disseminated through self-help resources, which is why they are so often studied as sites of governmentality. Demonstrating how this works, Hazelden (2003:424) points to four axes through which self-help discourses operate contending that they discursively create or establish an ethical substance (the self), a ‘problem’, technologies of the self, and models of conduct. Using these four axes to read minimalism discourse we can see ‘the self’, the ‘problem’ of consumerist over-accumulation, the ‘technologies’ of enterprise and authenticity, and the conducts of discipline, intentionality, and responsibility.

Using Data Across Discursive Sites

Discussing the use of diverse texts in cultural sociology, Illouz asserts, “texts include both expert and popular knowledge systems formalized in visual and textual

genres and propagated by the mass media” (2008:18). Additionally, according to Mills, discourse can, “allow us to analyse similarities across a range of texts as the products of a particular set of power/knowledge relations” (Mills 2004:21). This is certainly true for my data sources wherein the sites—self-help books, Reddit forums, a documentary film, TED Talks, Instagram posts, and media texts—adhere to their own genre conventions while also being part of broader discourses.

The Internet, and social media in particular, offer valuable data sites for researchers. Nevertheless, as Poell notes, “... social media are not neutral tools, as they are always already entangled in complex techno-cultural and political economic relations, from which they cannot be analytically separated” (2014:717). For one thing, despite how pervasive it seems to be, not everyone has access to social media. Participating in social media such as Reddit or Instagram also requires time and a certain level of social and cultural capital. What this reiterates is that I am exploring a privileged form of consumer behaviour, but this does not mean social media is not a valid source of data. Rather, it is important to acknowledge what it can and cannot offer as a research site. According to Barthel et al., “Both Reddit users in general and users who get news on the site tend to be young, male, and self-identify as liberal at higher rates than the overall [American] public” (2016). Meanwhile, Instagram has more than 500 million users worldwide (MacDowell and de Souza 2018). Through the variety of languages encountered, it was clear from Instagram that minimalism is practiced outside of North America, however only posts with English text were analyzed. Moreover, not everyone who practices minimalism chooses to discuss it in an open forum such as through a blog or social media, so the Reddit discussions and Instagram posts may not be a demographically

representative sample, but they do offer a window into what some minimalists talk and post about, and most pertinent to my project, *how* they frame minimalism.

Törnberg and Törnberg, discussing analyzing Internet forums, state, “The reason for focusing on an Internet forum is the incipient shift toward social media as an increasingly important source for the (re)production of discursive power in society, but also because it is a unique source for studying everyday discourses outside the scope of mass media” (2016:402). Indeed, for my own purposes, the use of the subreddit on minimalism, and Instagram posts with the hashtag #minimalism or #declutter, rounded out my data with first-hand accounts from people participating in the lifestyle. For this reason, Instagram, and Reddit in particular, were valuable to my research as they provided insight I could not have easily accessed through other means. As mentioned in the Introductory Chapter, the use of social media as a source of data breaks down time, space, and cost barriers which could be prohibitive to the research process.

Törnberg and Törnberg also observe that “Traditionally, discourse analysts have often studied societal discourses by focusing on mass media, seen as playing a key role in the reproduction of dominant knowledge and ideologies in society and the main channel through which the elite exercise their power” (Törnberg and Törnberg 2016:402-403). Within the ‘traditional’ news sources used in my data, this tends to be the case with many of the articles involving interviews with minimalist gurus or in some way promoting the lifestyle. However, some of the media sites I accessed provided critiques of the lifestyle, which I felt were equally, if not more, important to include because they demonstrate the contentious nature of consumption as a site of lifestyle politics.

Meanwhile, Shatz (2017) suggests Reddit as a recruitment site for research projects, particularly in terms of finding survey participants. While this was not my purpose in using Reddit, Shatz does offer an overview of the website and how it operates which is useful to my work. According to Shatz, Reddit is, “a form of a community-based moderation” wherein content is submitted by users and then voted on which impacts the content’s visibility on the site (2017:539). Furthermore, the site is divided into ‘subreddits’, which are subject-specific forums. Shatz argues, “The use of subreddits has important implications for researchers, because it enables them to target special interest groups and specific demographic interests when necessary” (2017:539). Hashtags offer a similar narrowing-down of content on Instagram. Within my own project, the minimalism subreddit, and the aforementioned hashtags on Instagram allowed me to easily access a large amount of data directly related to my research interests. Because the site is user-moderated, the subreddits I accessed were demonstrative of what was currently popular and being discussed by users. Similarly, over the period of data collection, I accessed the most recent Instagram posts using #minimalism or #declutter. This means I may not have seen older forums or posts, which could have also been relevant to my project. However, I do not feel this compromised my data collection.

Importantly, Steinmetz discusses the use of virtual ethnography for analyzing message boards and asserts, “As more individuals go online to meet their cultural and social needs, the more pressing it is that researchers develop proper methodologies to study online interactions” (2012:27). Steinmetz is particularly concerned with the ethics of using message boards or social forums as data sources because they can often be traced to identify the user, therefore compromising anonymity. For his own research,

Steinmetz (2012) participated in message boards with online ‘pirates’, whereas for my work I took the position of what he refers to as a “lurker” because I accessed the forums without any interaction with users. I felt this hands-off approach was right for my research because it allowed me to see what self-identified minimalists were discussing unprompted, but there may be times when it is best for the researcher to establish a connection with social media users. For related ethical reasons, MacDowell and de Souza (2018) made sure to get permission to include reproductions of Instagram posters’ selfies in their research. Due to similar ethical concerns I have only included images that do not contain identifiable people. Furthermore, as with my use of Reddit, I have refrained from including the usernames associated with the analyzed Instagram posts in an effort to maintain the anonymity of the Reddit commenters and Instagram posters whose words and images I use throughout my project.

Regarding Instagram, which has received comparatively little research attention, MacDowell and de Souza (2018) argue this is because the visual nature of Instagram makes it more difficult to analyze in comparison to text-based social media such as Twitter, especially if computer programs are being used to collect and analyze data. I did not use a data analysis program, but engaging with images as well as text does add a level of complexity to the analysis process because visuals are often more open to interpretation than text. These authors also note that Instagram does not contain the same level of easily available data as some other social media sources. According to MacDowell and de Souza, “Posts often appear as fleeting digital objects in a continually updated visual flow: It is difficult to extract comments (except as screenshots), posts are given relative dates (e.g., 17 weeks ago) rather than fixed dates, and users can delete

posts at any time” (2018:9). This poses a challenge to the researcher because the posts are dynamic and can change during and after analysis. Additionally, Veum and Undrum look at the presentation of selfies on Instagram and, “analyze texts not exclusively as images, but as user-generated *multi-modal utterances*, paying attention to how selfies on Instagram appear as a combination of semiotic resources such as images and written language” (2018:87 original emphasis). The notion of multi-modal utterances applies to my data sources beyond Instagram, especially when they are all considered together and is important for how I approached the collection and analysis of data.

Data Sources and Collection

In order to provide a broad overview of the minimalism discourse currently circulating I drew on a number of sites for my analysis. First, I looked at a collection of self-help books, a sample of posts and comments from Reddit threads within the minimalism subreddit, and drew on a sample of popular media⁴⁸ and news coverage of the minimalist lifestyle. This was then supplemented with a documentary film, a collection of TED Talks, a sampling of Instagram posts, and one additional Reddit thread⁴⁹. These sites are all readily available to anyone who may be interested in learning about the minimalist lifestyle (provided they have the means to access them) and thus make up a number of the major sites of minimalism self-help resources.

Like Philip’s focus on self-help books addressing depression, the books on minimalism are a, “distinguishable sub-set of the broader self-help genre, with recurrent themes, images, metaphors and rhetorical devices” (2009:152). And, like Mikkonon et

⁴⁸ In the second round of data collection, articles available on *Real Simple Magazine*’s website were added to this sample.

⁴⁹ I also listened to five randomly selected episodes of the ‘Minimalism For the Rest of Us’ podcast after being led to it from the final Reddit thread, but it did not yield any useful data.

al., mine is a sample that is “descriptive of the genre” (2014:258). The self-help texts are considered the official expert sources of minimalism discourse and are often referenced by the additional data sites. They are a form of ‘how-to’ manual written by minimalist gurus and are aimed at introducing the reader to the minimalist lifestyle. In addition to offering ‘how-to’ advice and guidelines, the majority of the texts are semi-autobiographical and draw on the guru’s personal experience with minimalism to teach and encourage the reader by offering tips and procedures for adopting the lifestyle. Using a purposive sample I have selected the following ten texts:

- *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (2014) by Marie Kondo
- *Spark Joy* (2016) by Marie Kondo
- *The Joy of Less: A Minimalist Guide to Declutter, Organize and Simplify* (2010) by Francine Jay.
- *The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own* (2016) by Joshua Becker.
- *Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life* (2011) by Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua Fields Millburn
- *Everything That Remains* (2014) by Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua Fields Millburn
- *Essential: Essays by the Minimalists* (2012) by Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua Fields Millburn
- *Teach Yourself Decluttering* (2006) by Bernice Walmsley
- *L’art de la Simplicité: How to Live More with Less* (2017) by Dominique Loreau
- *Goodbye Things: The New Japanese Minimalism* (2017) by Fumio Sasaki

Marie Kondo is widely regarded as the leading expert on minimalism (although she does not call herself a minimalist). Her first book is an international best seller and her Konmari Method has made its way into popular culture with Marie Kondo appearing on an episode of *Ellen* (2016) and her system being referenced on an episode of *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (Sherman-Palladino 2016). For these reasons Kondo’s book was the first chosen for my sample. From there, I searched the *New York Times*, *Amazon*, and *Chapters* best seller lists and recommendations for other minimalism texts. I then made

sure to have texts focused on decluttering and owning less, and that I had included the key gurus within contemporary minimalism discourse.

After selecting the self-helps books I then began to seek out popular and news media coverage of minimalism as a way to gauge the popularity of the lifestyle and to expand my field of data. This began with a Google search and then a more in-depth Factiva database search, which is described in more detail below. One of the news articles⁵⁰ led me to the Reddit forum on minimalism. At the time of writing, the forum has nearly 230,000 subscribers and most posts have a ‘flair’⁵¹ of either ‘art’, ‘meta’, or ‘lifestyle’. My sample focused on posts with the ‘lifestyle’ flair because a preliminary search of all flairs led to the determination that these posts would be most pertinent to my research⁵². An initial scan of several posts was conducted in order to gauge the topics and types of discussion taking place within the forums. Through this initial reading, ten posts were selected based on their level of discussion and the types of questions posed. The subject headings and numbers of responses generated for the sampled posts follow:

- Weight off my shoulders (31 responses)
- Six months into minimalism here’s what I still ‘need’ every day (83 responses)
- What are you trying to achieve in minimalism (59 responses)
- Have any of you read the life changing magic of tidying up, aka the Konmari method of folding/organizing? What do you guys think about it? (29 responses)
- Minimalism vs having no kids (195 responses)
- When you started becoming more minimalist, what were some of the biggest challenges that you faced? (37 responses)
- New to minimalism, what helped you to detach from items? (24 responses)
- Is minimalism deprivation? (25 responses)
- As a minimalist, what is your life aspiration? (27 comments)

⁵⁰ Chayka, Kyle. 2016. “Austerity Measures,” *The New York Times*, July 13, pp.13.

⁵¹ Flairs are tags that allow the original poster to indicate the subject area of their post within the broader subject of minimalism.

⁵² In the second round of data collection an archived thread with a ‘meta’ flair was included because it offered a critical take on *The Minimalists* who are responsible for three of the books and the documentary analyzed. This post had the heading ‘I hate The Minimalists’ with 297 comments and offered some important insight to how ‘lay’ practitioners frame the lifestyle.

- What's your helpful starter pack for someone that wants to start living a more minimal lifestyle? (80 responses)

The posts all took place over the two months of May and June, 2017 and were all accessed and transcribed between June 12 and 15, 2017⁵³. Posts were transcribed word-for-word and in a style that maintained their threaded quality to maintain the flow of discussion. In some instances, responses that were only a couple of words long, or were deemed off topic were not transcribed, however, most of the time these responses were transcribed in order to maintain the entirety of a discussion. To broaden the scope of my social media analysis 75 Instagram posts tagged #minimalism and 25 tagged #declutter were gathered during the second round of data collection. To gather these posts thousands of posts were scanned and the selected posts were saved for more in-depth analysis. The Instagram posts were collected over the last weeks of December 2017 into the first weeks of January 2018 by periodically going through one hour worth of posts at a time⁵⁴.

Following the Reddit forums, I returned to a search of print and online media. The collection and transcription of articles took place between June 16 and 21, 2017 and resulted in a collection of forty-five articles from the past several years. Many of the articles were about the self-help gurus and texts that were also used in this research, some articles addressed 'lay' experiences with minimalism, and finally, some articles offered critiques of the minimalist lifestyle. A series of Factiva searches were done in order to narrow down the number of hits from 4010 to 138. The first Factiva search spanned from January 1, 2010 to the present and used only the search term 'minimalism'. This search

⁵³ One post, "Six months into minimalism here's what I still 'need' every day" was re-accessed on July 5, 2017 because the transcript was incomplete. The number of comments had not changed and the transcription process was finished in a manner that maintained the flow of discussion.

⁵⁴ My second round of data collection happened in this time period, which also happens to be a time of year when people are thinking about renewal and resolutions. This was evident through these Instagram hashtags with many posts tracking users' progress with a minimalism challenge for the new year.

included English articles and the region of North America. The included publications were *The New York Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Forbes*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Telegraph*, and *The National Post*. This search resulted in 4010 hits, many of which were articles that were not pertinent to my project because they only included passing reference to minimalism, usually as part of a discussion of music, fashion, or art. However, through this initial search, ten articles were collected.

The search was redone to only include the past five years and to use the terms ‘minimalism’ and ‘lifestyle’. Without specifying the desired publications, this search resulted in 641 hits, many of which were from small regional publications, or duplicates. The search was narrowed again to include *The New York Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Telegraph*, and *The National Post*, resulting in 138 hits. The results were scanned to eliminate articles about design, fashion, music, and art. While fashion, music, art, and design are all elements of lifestyle these articles were eliminated because they had very little in the way of substance that would help to address my research questions, because while the term minimalism was present in the articles, they were not about minimalism as used for this project. A final Factiva search was done to include the publications *Forbes*, *Advertising Age*, and *Adweek*, but it resulted in no new articles. In total, eighteen articles were accessed using the Factiva database.

The remaining twenty-seven articles were accessed through a Google News search using the term ‘minimalism’ which included the majority of the articles found by Factiva, as well as others from print publications, and a number of articles from online

sources. Given that many people increasingly consume news online, the online sources were included when the articles were deemed to provide rich data. Publications and web sources accessed through the Google search included *The Atlantic*, *Forbes*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Fast Company*, *Business Insider*, *The Boston Globe*, *Bustle*, *The Edmonton Journal*, *Time Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *Vice*, *Slate*, *CNN*, and *The Washington Post*. In the second round of data collection an additional 31 articles with the subject ‘minimalism’ or ‘declutter’ from *Real Simple* magazine’s website were included. The articles from *Real Simple* ranged from short lists of items to declutter immediately, to more in-depth considerations and critiques of the minimalist lifestyle.

This relatively small number of articles on decluttering minimalism is important to consider. On one hand, the articles offered useful insight into the lifestyle and how it is perceived and promoted. On the other hand, the small number of articles seems to suggest that minimalism is not considered particularly newsworthy. However, newsworthiness should not necessarily be a consideration when selecting a research subject. As seen in the following chapters, the media sources often connect minimalism to millennials so it is possible that it is simply dismissed as a fad rather than as a valid cultural critique.

The ten books I have selected are a solid starting point for my data collection because they are seen as sources of expert knowledge and authority on the subject of minimalism which makes them valuable as sites of discursive analysis with a focus on power and subject creation. Engaging with expert knowledge allows us to see the ‘official’ discourse on the subject matter. These expert knowledges tend to be the entry point for laypersons interested in learning more about the lifestyle and are therefore

important to consider as part of the broader minimalism discourse. A number of the books are written by some of the most popular minimalist bloggers—Francine Jay of ‘Miss Minimalist’, Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus of ‘The Minimalists’, and Joshua Becker of ‘Becoming Minimalist’. For this reason, I did not consult minimalist blogs because the books contain much of the same content⁵⁵.

Because they are considered the authority on the lifestyle, many of the ten selected books or their authors come up in the other data sites, however they also each offer some unique insights into the minimalist lifestyle. The Reddit forums and Instagram posts offer access to lay thoughts, experiences, and conversations on the lifestyle, while the media coverage, documentary, and TED Talks offer publicly available commentary. The Reddit forums also allow me to hear from minimalists first-hand and in conversation with each other without the logistical challenges of in-person interviews or focus groups. Moreover, they allow me to see what self-identified minimalists are discussing on their own, rather than through a setting where I, as the researcher, impose questions or topics on the informant. Reddit and Instagram, like other social media sites such as Twitter or Facebook, also break down spatial and temporal barriers that could prove to be both time and cost prohibitive to the research process.

Media⁵⁶ coverage of minimalism was chosen because it allows me to see a site of public discourse that provides both information about, and at times critique of, the

⁵⁵ For example, *Essential: Essays by The Minimalists* (Millburn and Nicodemus 2015b) is a compilation of their most popular blog posts. A number of the gurus also have popular Facebook pages where they share similar content to their books and blogs so Facebook was not included as a data site. Moreover, in consultation with a friend who follows some of the Facebook pages on minimalism, it was confirmed that the content is all rather repetitive.

⁵⁶ While publications such as *Real Simple*, *Live Happy*, or *Conscious* are in some ways related to minimalism and the broader simplicity movement, the latter two do not address decluttering minimalism in enough detail to be considered as further data sites. Interestingly, Becker and some other minimalist gurus have started producing an online publication called *Simplify* which will likely prove an important site for future research into minimalism discourse, but which is too new and limited to be considered at this time.

minimalist lifestyle. Like the self-help books, the media can offer an entry point into the lifestyle. Furthermore, the film *Minimalism: A Documentary About The Important Things* and a sample of 22 TED Talks allowed me to hear from people engaged in minimalism related practices such as downsizing, decluttering, and off-grid living. Together, while they are not exhaustive, these discursive sites provide a window into the lifestyle and how it relates to authenticity and consumerism, as well as how self-help functions as a site of neoliberal governmentality.

Reading and Coding

Having established the process for identifying and collecting data I now turn to discussing the reading and coding of my selected texts. While the process of reading is fairly straight forward, coding is much more nuanced. For this reason, a discussion of coding makes up the bulk of this section, though I first outline my approach to reading.

As discussed above, my analysis was comprised of reading minimalism discourse across a variety of sites, each with their own unique discursive structures. As Walker and Myrick note, “The magnificence of [qualitative research] exists in its capacity to create rich descriptions and understandings of social life. The challenge lies in working with massive amounts of empirical data as texts that have multiple meanings, at both the individual and social levels. Qualitative data analysis seeks to organize and reduce the data gathered into themes or essences, which, in turn, can be fed into descriptions, models, or theories” (Walker and Myrick 2006:549). For my purposes, An inter-textual approach to discourse allowed for a richer understanding of the minimalist lifestyle than if only one discursive site had been accessed. However, it also complicated the analysis because each site had its own way of talking about minimalism meaning they had to be

read together with a focus on their commonalities and differences. Essentially, the self-help texts were prescriptive, the Reddit forums were confessional, many of the media sources were critical, the documentary and TED Talks were introductory, and Instagram ranged from descriptive to motivational.

The self-help books were my entrance into minimalism discourse with two of the texts—Kondo’s (2014) *Life-changing Magic* and Jay’s (2016) *The Joy of Less*—having been read prior to this project. These two texts were re-read along with the eight additional texts with transcripts being made and collected into one searchable document. Next, the ten Reddit forums were read and transcribed into a single document. Finally, the same process was repeated for the media texts, documentary, and TED Talks. The Instagram posts, because they are also visual, were saved so that they could be re-visited throughout the data analysis process. Throughout this initial reading phase open coding was conducted resulting in a list of terms outlined below. Once transcription was complete, reading across the sites was continuous as comparisons were made, differences were noted, and themes began to emerge. Throughout the analysis and writing process the transcripts and original sites were returned to for verification, clarification, and contextualization. Coding took place within this re-reading process.

As discussed above, Foucault did not outline a formal methodology for approaching governmentality, so as part of assembling an analytical tool kit it was necessary to draw on other sources to establish an approach to coding. These sources included critical discourse analysis (CDA), frame analysis, and grounded theory. My project does not fit neatly into any of these, but rather draws on all of them to conduct a robust inter-textual analysis. As described by Walker and Myrick, “Coding in qualitative

research is one way of exploring bits of information in the data, and looking for similarities and differences within these bits to categorize and label the data” (2006:549). Because of the diversity of discursive sites analyzed, focusing on similarities and differences was essential to my analysis in order to bring the data together cohesively.

Walker and Myrick further outline the coding process noting, “To code, data are broken down, compared, and then placed in a category. Similar data are placed in similar categories, and different data creates new categories. Coding is an iterative, inductive, yet reductive process that organizes data, from which the researcher can then construct themes, essences, descriptions, and theories” (2006:549). In particular, I used open coding during my initial reading phase. According to Pafford and Matusitz, “open coding is a systematic process of gathering data by dissecting words or images so as to classify ideas (e.g. concealed meanings)” (2017:278). Likewise, Turgeon et al. (2014) describe their use of a modified grounded theory approach, which consisted of open and focused coding leading to the emergence of themes and the continuation of coding and analysis.

Pafford and Matusitz use critical discourse analysis (CDA) and argue it focuses on rhetoric, which, “can help reveal hidden messages and intentions of authors, artists, actors or politicians who produced the rhetoric” (2017:276). Furthermore, “In CDA, it is important to locate underlying themes that may not be obvious at the superficial level” (Pafford and Matusitz 2017:278). This is what my reading for authenticity and governmentality achieved. In addition to rhetoric and possible underlying themes, in a discussion of grounded theory Turgeon, Taylor and Niehaus discuss the importance of reading for contrast noting, “Contrast is a semantic move in which the speaker focuses on the differences between two groups. This facilitates an ‘us versus them’ mentality

through which the in-group is often portrayed as the victim. By contrasting groups, speakers both draw on and contribute to ‘discourses of difference’” (2014:659). The notion of contrast is particularly pertinent for my analysis because I am reading minimalism discourse as a point of resistance, which necessarily involves the delineation of ‘us versus them’. In the case of minimalism discourse, ‘us’ refers to minimalists or those desiring to be, and ‘them’ refers to consumer capitalism or its participants.

In addition to coding for rhetoric and underlying themes, the texts were also read in terms of frames allowing for an exploration of inclusion and exclusion. Entman argues framing is about selection and salience, noting, “To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described” (1993:52 original emphasis). These four elements of framing—problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—helped guide my coding and analysis process and can be seen in minimalism discourse. Briefly, discontent resulting from clutter is defined as the problem⁵⁷, consumerism is identified as the cause, the moral evaluation deems this to be inauthentic, and minimalism is suggested as the remedy.

Together this set of analytical tools shaped my reading. Coding was conducted as data was collected, read, and re-read to highlight themes, commonalities, and differences across data sites. This was done as a means of thought organization to keep my focus on the language used throughout my data sources. Beginning with some of the core

⁵⁷ Or, in the case of media coverage that was critical of the lifestyle, minimalism was framed as the problem.

terminologies of the rhetorics of authenticity and governmentality, a running list of terms was assembled throughout the data collection process:

- | <u>Authenticity</u> | <u>Governmentality</u> |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| • Real | • Self-control |
| • Genuine | • Purpose |
| • True | • Diligence |
| • Past/Present | • Deliberate |
| • Nature/Environment | • Discipline |
| • Fulfilling | • Organize |
| • Meaningful | • Choice/Decision |
| • Happiness/Joy | • Intentionality |
| • Objects vs. Experiences | • Responsibility |
| • Identity | • Must vs. Should |
| • Intuition | • Consistent |
| • Need vs. Want | • Focus |
| • Mission/Purpose | • Well-curated |
| • Honest | • Caution |
| • Façade/Veneer | • Determination |
| • Simple | • Training |
| • Discontent | • Cultivate |
| | • Boundaries |
| | • Deprivation |

This allowed me to zero in on how my data sources were steeped in the language of both authenticity and governmentality. Through this, I was also able to look at how lifestyle, the self, and consumerism were framed across texts. As can be seen in the list of authenticity terms, in the process of re-reading and coding data the three broad themes of past and present, objects and experiences, and needs and wants emerged. These overarching themes shape the following three empirical chapters, which illuminate how the notion of authenticity is mobilized in the governing of the minimalist lifestyle.

Summary

Methodology, together with theory, shapes the research project. Utilizing a Foucault-inspired approach to discourse means there is not a set procedure to follow, but

rather, it offers a way to assess discourse critically as a site of power negotiation, as well as the formation and contestation of knowledge and subjectivities. I have looked at minimalism discourse across a collection of sites, allowing me to see how it operates in different forms. The use of multiple data sites proved both challenging and beneficial, ultimately leading to a rich analysis of minimalism discourse.

I have utilized governmentality as both a theoretical and a methodological approach. This has shaped the epistemology of my project by placing the emphasis on the discursive formations of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. Underlying all of this is the taken-for-granted formulation of the self that can be identified, and worked on in pursuit of the authenticity ideal, as well as the neoliberal tenets of individuality and freedom.

Because Foucault does not outline a formal methodological approach to governmentality, it was necessary to draw on a collection of analytical tactics with which to approach my data. Because of this, I present an inter-textual analysis utilizing a mixed-methods 'tool box' consisting of governmentality, critical discourse analysis, grounded theory, and frame analysis. The use of diverse sites and a variety of analytical tools has resulted in a rich and rigorous analysis of contemporary minimalism discourse. The following three chapters present my analysis through the themes of past and present, objects and experiences, and needs and wants.

Chapter 5: Transitioning from Past to Future

The following three chapters present my analysis of minimalism discourse by looking at how it is steeped in the rhetoric of authenticity and, through this, is shaped by neoliberal ways of thinking. As discussed in the preceding chapter, these empirical chapters are formed around three broad themes that emerged across data sites: (1) past and present, (2) experiences and objects, and (3) needs and wants. Rather than dedicating a chapter to each data site individually, I present these three themes in order to better show the consistencies and tensions across sites, and to illuminating the connections between authenticity and governmentality within minimalism discourse.

As discussed in earlier chapters, my data demonstrate the ways in which governmentality, or the ‘conduct of conduct’ is internalized at the individual level. Through language that is mundane and taken for granted, minimalism discourse is shaped by neoliberal ways of thinking about the responsabilized individual. This way of thinking is further supported by the use of authenticity as a means of social critique and/or to justify the actions of the individual. The notion of authenticity is compatible with neoliberal ways of thinking because of its emphasis on the autonomous self. In this way, while minimalism is meant to resist consumerism (which can itself be understood as an element of neoliberal governance), it ultimately helps to reinforce a neoliberal worldview by shoring up its foundational concepts of individualism and freedom.

In this chapter I outline the ways in which minimalism discourse involves a complex temporal formulation wherein the pre-consumerism past is more authentic than the present, but the minimalist’s present is more authentic than their consumerist past. In other words, there is a sense of nostalgia for a time before consumerism, while there is

also a sense that, for minimalists, participation in mass-consumption is in their personal past. Therefore, the consumerist present is inauthentic, while the pre-consumerism past and the minimalist present (or near future for those desiring to become minimalists) are both considered to be authentic relative to consumerism. This approach to an individual's timeline is consistent with the self-help genre's 'before and after' trope, but in the case of minimalism, it also serves as a social critique aimed at consumerism.

A primary minimalist critique of consumerism is that we participate in it because we have to, not because we want to⁵⁸. Consumerism is not considered a natural way to do things, but we go along with the system anyway. This critique also suggests consumerism strips our individual freedom (a tenet of neoliberalism) and that minimalism can reinstate it. Through this, minimalism is rooted in the assumption that individual freedom and responsibility are foundational to living a good (read: authentic) life.

This chapter begins by looking at the ways in which minimalism discourse critiques the consumerist present. It then goes on to explore how minimalism discourse presents an idealized past and an imagined future, both to promote the minimalist lifestyle and to further critique consumerism. Finally, the chapter includes a discussion of how the media sources under investigation tend to have a better sense of the broader political economy context for minimalism than the minimalist gurus themselves.

Consumerism is Alienating

Unsurprisingly, within decluttering minimalism, consumerism is presented as the enemy because participating in consumerism is limiting our potential as human beings. Marketing and advertising are often singled out as 'the bad guys', likely because they

⁵⁸ The complex formulation of needs and wants within minimalism discourse is explored in Chapter 7.

have become an acceptable place to lay blame for consumer behaviour, but they are not the only thing wrong with consumerism. Minimalism also goes after consumer culture as something that is problematic more generally, but in a way that places responsibility on the individual. Moreover, a common refrain within the discourse is that we are enslaved or imprisoned by consumerism and must free ourselves.

Marketing and Advertising

Marketing and advertising have become easy targets for discontent and critique within advanced consumer capitalist societies. Within minimalism discourse, marketers and advertisers are often identified as villains who prey on consumers' weaknesses. However, the responsibility for participating in consumerism, and for escaping it, is placed on the individual. For example, Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, known as The Minimalists, tell their readers, "Consumption is an unquenchable thirst. You create that thirst, you manufacture the desire to consume more. Advertisers play their role, they help activate the desire you create, but ultimately the desire is yours to control. Once you realize you have control, you can break the cycle—you can avoid the continuous downward spiral" (2015b:22-23). Self-control is part of governmentality wherein the individual is latently taught, by various sources, to take responsibility for their actions regardless of external influences. In this passage, Millburn and Nicodemus also blame the individual rather than consumer capitalism for over-consumption.

In another of their books, Millburn and Nicodemus again refer to consumption as 'an unquenchable thirst' and place responsibility for managing this on the individual, arguing advertising takes advantage of the innate desire to consume:

Avoid holiday doorbuster sales. Whether it's Black Friday or any of the subsequent big shopping weekends, it's best to stay inside. It's important to understand that consumption is an unquenchable thirst. Retailers and advertisers and manufacturers know this too well, and these sales are designed to take advantage of our insatiable desire to consume. Instead, support your local businesses; support the people in your community who are making a difference. (2014:184)

The use of 'unquenchable thirst' as a metaphor for material consumption alludes to food over-consumption, which is another area where individuals have been taught to govern themselves and to manage their own behaviours regardless of extenuating circumstances.

The minimalist appeal to physical and mental health is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, but this is one example of how minimalism discourse is often similar to the numerous 'wellness' discourses circulating alongside it. Additionally, the appeal to support local business is common in minimalism discourse, and, as discussed later in this chapter, is tied to an idealized notion of the past as being more authentic than the present.

In contrast to Millburn and Nicodemus, Francine Jay, author of *The Joy of Less: A Minimalist Guide to Declutter, Organize and Simplify*, and the Miss Minimalist blog, places a bit more responsibility on the agents of capitalism for their role in promoting over-consumption. She tells her readers:

Advertisers, corporations, and politicians like to define us as consumers. By encouraging us to buy as much as possible, they succeed in lining their pockets, growing their profits, and getting re-elected. Where does that leave us? Working hard to pay for things we don't need. Putting in overtime to purchase items that'll be obsolete, or out of style, in a matter of months. Struggling to make credit card payments on stuff that's cluttering up our homes. Hmm, something about that doesn't seem quite right ... (Jay 2016:263-64)

Jay seems to situate the individual as the victim here. However, despite seeming to remove responsibility from the individual, she then goes on to discuss how individuals

can respond to these pressures, which is explored below regarding the common minimalist refrain that we are enslaved by consumerism.

Relatedly, one interviewee in the *Minimalism* documentary says advertising and social media do not reflect reality claiming, “American culture has, for the most part, these blinders on. There’s definitely this illusion of what our lives should look like. Whether it’s advertising, or your Instagram, or Facebook feed, it’s this illusion that our lives should be perfect” (D’Avella 2015). The notion of illusion is present a few times within the discourse analyzed and is part of the authenticity critique presented by minimalists which draws on the rhetoric of authenticity using terms such as fake or artificial. Along similar lines, in a TED Talk about minimalism, Elizabeth Dulemba blames marketing and advertising for tricking consumers noting, “They give us choices. So many choices. And they convince us these choices represent freedom when really it’s just a ploy to make us buy more stuff” (2016). Her claim is noteworthy because it uses freedom and choice, two of the most important elements of minimalism, to critique consumer capitalism. It does not, however, acknowledge that freedom and choice are also core elements of neoliberal governmentality, thus illustrating an apparent blind spot within the discourse wherein there is an unawareness of how it reinforces neoliberal ways of thinking while at the same time claiming to challenge them. It values freedom and choice derived from minimalism, but derides them when they come from consumerism.

In *Teach Yourself Decluttering*⁵⁹, Bernice Walmsley points to marketing as part of the reason for problematic clutter caused by excessive paper. She instructs her readers:

The art of marketing has developed to such an extent over recent years that we are all inundated with junk mail—the advertisements for credit

⁵⁹ This book is part of a ‘Teach Yourself’ self-help series not unlike the ‘For Dummies’ series.

cards, or low-cost loans, books that will change your life, ‘free’ holidays, supermarket special offers—every single day. The age of consumerism is with us, and it brings with it more and more paper ... We cannot manage without paper in our lives and so we have to learn to manage it. (2006:82)

While there is some irony in a self-help author lamenting the marketing of ‘books that will change your life’, what this passage illustrates is a disdain for consumerism and yet another appeal to the individual to take matters into their own hands and manage how they deal with a negative side effect of consumerism. This passage also suggests things have not always been this way and that consumerism is a contemporary problem.

Likewise, Joshua Becker, in *The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own*, warns his readers, “We have to measure the magnitude of consumeristic propaganda and observe how thoroughly it permeates public discourse and our own personal outlook. We must also admit we have been influenced by it. For only then can we take a stand against consumerism’s effects on our lives” (2016:44-45). This call to self-reflection is akin to confession which is also a common feature of the self-help genre that Philip (2009), drawing from Foucault, identifies as a technology of the self. Referring to advertising and marketing as propaganda undermines its validity and claims to truth, further reinforcing the idea consumerism is not natural or authentic.

Finally, in an *Edmonton Journal* article in which the author revisits his own efforts to practice minimalism, Griwkowsky (2016) reflects, “Archeologically delving into my own horrid detritus and proof of at least slight mental illness (not joking), I daily faced the ghosts of dead friends, embarrassing fetishes and a twisted version of the beauty myth, which, in a modern capitalist society, tells us we don’t matter as much unless we buy things—the true tyranny of objects”. This author points to one of the ways in which consumerism is linked to myriad other discourses including mental illness and

our understanding of beauty, thus demonstrating how difficult it can be to think outside of or beyond the consumerism status quo.

In pointing to marketing and advertising as part of the problem with consumerism, minimalism discourse seeks to argue that we are constrained by consumer capitalism. In this way, it suggests we are subject to a system that is holding us back from reaching our full potential as individuals. This is achieved in part by pointing to the ‘art’, ‘myth’, and ‘propaganda’ of marketing and advertising which serve to question the authenticity of the messaging we receive on a daily basis, and of consumer culture more broadly. This critique frames minimalism as an authentic alternative to the “illusion” of consumerism. What’s more, this discussion of advertising points to a tension running throughout minimalism discourse regarding autonomy in which it is suggested that we are both in control of, and controlled by, consumerism simultaneously.

Greed

As discussed in the introductory chapter, Cushman (2015) identifies what he refers to as ‘greed talk’, which is a moral critique of accumulation and consumption often appearing at times of economic scarcity. This vocabulary is present in some of the self-help texts I have analyzed, particularly *The More of Less*, by Joshua Becker. Much like identifying marketers and advertisers as targets for consumer discontent, condemning greed is another easy and acceptable way to express criticism toward consumerism. And, I argue authenticity functions in a similar manner insofar as it is an acceptable way to pass judgment on the actions of others, and ourselves.

Becker, who has worked as a pastor and often uses language that might be found in a sermon, first tells his readers, “The tendency toward greed and acquisitiveness has

always been a human weakness. But consumerism as we know it today is a relatively modern phenomenon, dating back only about a century” (2016:45). Here, he is condemning both the historical human weakness of greed and contemporary consumerism. Later in his book he tells his readers, “If we want to recalibrate to a lower level of accumulation and stay there, we need to replace our culturally inspired greed with self-cultivated gratitude about what we have” (Becker 2016:148). In this passage, Becker removes individual responsibility for greed, but does not absolve the individual from needing to overcome it. Again, the individual is responsible for their own actions and mindset when it comes to changing how they consume.

In addition to Becker, Millburn and Nicodemus also make reference to greed as part of their critique of consumerism. In their memoir *Everything That Remains*, Millburn reflects on his relationship with consumerism observing:

For decades now, I have played the role of the moth, lured by the flame of consumerism, pop culture’s beautiful conflagration, a firestorm of lust and greed and wanting, a haunting desire to consume that which cannot be consumed, to be fulfilled by that which can never be fulfilling. A vacant proposition, leaving me empty inside, which further fuels my desire to consume. (Millburn and Nicodemus 2014:72)

For Millburn and Nicodemus, consumerism is an empty promise that we get caught in because we want what it is offering and keep seeking it in the same ways even though the promise is never fulfilled. This is similar to Potter’s (2010) reasoning for abandoning the search for authenticity. However, unlike Potter, Millburn and Nicodemus seem to believe in the ideal of authenticity, but do not believe it can be found through consumption. According to many of the minimalist gurus, participating in a cycle of greed and consuming leads to feeling trapped by consumerism.

A concern with greed was not evident in the other sources I analyzed, but its presence within a few of the guru books points to an interesting critique of consumerism. Consumerism is often the target of moral concerns such as those involving labour practices or environmental impact, and as Cushman (2015) notes about greed, moral concerns seem to go hand-in-hand with capitalism. As discussed in Chapter 2, there is also an undeniably moral element to concerns of authenticity, and in this way, minimalism discourse seems to be adding to and echoing broader concerns about the morality of contemporary consumer capitalism.

We are Slaves to Consumerism

Many of the minimalist gurus, as well as some of the TED Talk speakers, frame consumerism as a form of enslavement. This way of speaking reiterates both their desire for authenticity and their underlying neoliberal mentality. Regarding authenticity, using a slavery metaphor implies people are forced into doing something unnatural, and that consumerism is alienating. This serves to present minimalism as an alternative that will provide them with a sense of authenticity and freedom if, as discussed in Chapter 2, authenticity is understood as a state of non-alienation. And, since individual freedom is a core value of minimalism, framing consumption as slavery positions minimalism as the restorer of autonomy and choice, which are also two principles of neoliberalism. This way of framing consumerism also further reinforces the minimalist argument that it is up to the individual to shape and change their own behaviour.

In *Goodbye, Things: The New Japanese Minimalism*, Fumio Sasaki cautions his readers, “All these things [the objects we accumulate] eventually turn on us; we become slaves to our belongings, forced to spend time and energy caring for them. We lose

ourselves in our possessions. Our tools become our masters”. He follows this by saying, “These objects themselves have no power. We’re the ones who have raised their status to become our equals or even greater, but they’re actually nothing more than objects. They don’t symbolize us and they aren’t our masters. They used to be plain old tools. So why not consider hanging on to just the things that we really need?” (Sasaki 2017:77). Sasaki, along with some of the other gurus discussed below, suggests that through consuming and accumulating, people have consented to their own enslavement and it is therefore their responsibility to change their own circumstances.

Millburn and Nicodemus make a similar argument when they assert, “**Your income dictates your lifestyle.** It should be the other way around: we should work to earn enough money to live, not live to earn enough money to buy shit we don’t need. Until one breaks free from consumerism, the hoarder is slave to the hoard” (2015b:109 original emphasis). Here minimalist experts are again placing the onus to change on the individual rather than advocating for systemic change. This is also the argument presented by Jay who, following from the earlier passage where she suggests individuals are victims of consumer capitalism, tells her readers they can set themselves free:

[Minimalism] unshackles us from the ‘work and spend’ cycle, enabling us to create an existence that has little to do with big box stores, must-have items, or finance charges. Instead of toiling away as consumers, we can become ‘minsumers’ instead: minimizing our consumption to what meets our needs, minimizing the impact of our consumption on the environment, and minimizing the effect of our consumption on other people’s lives. (2016:264)

According to Jay, we are imprisoned by consumerism, but minimalism is the path to freedom. Furthermore, Jay and the other gurus do not tell their readers to abstain from consumption all together, but rather to alter their thinking and actions when it comes to

consuming. For example, Millburn and Nicodemus question, “As Americans, our consumption has transformed from necessary to compulsory. It’s hard for me to think of a single argument against this truth. But why doesn’t anyone else seem to break the cycle?” (2014:54). The ‘compulsory’ nature of consumption is one of Millburn and Nicodemus’ primary criticisms of contemporary consumerism, and again suggests consumerism is not natural, but instead something we go along with being forced into.

Similar to these gurus, Dave Bruno (2012) tells his TED Talk audience, “Excessive consumerism has become the albatross that hangs around the neck of the modern world”, while Maura Malloy (2015), in a speech about simplicity, observes, “I don’t want minimalism to shackle me just like I don’t want to be shackled by stuff”. Again, these minimalists prioritize a sense of freedom and place consumerism as its antithesis. Bruno’s reference to ‘the modern world’ also again suggests that the contemporary moment is not authentic in comparison to an unspecified past.

If we are not being enslaved by consumerism, then we are at least trapped by it according to Loreau who posits, “I understood the need for caution too: consumerism, inertia (both physical and mental) and negativity are waiting to ensnare us whenever our determination falters” (2016:2). Loreau uses fear of failure and becoming ‘ensnared’ to promote the minimalist lifestyle. In her view it is dangerous not to live a calculated, intentional (read: neoliberal) life. According to Loreau, by not being in control of all aspects of our lives, including consumption, we risk losing our freedom and autonomy. This highlights what Rose (1998, 1999a) refers to as the ‘obligation to be free’ in that it demonstrates the work required by the individual to maintain a sense of freedom.

Millburn and Nicodemus also reference the inertia of consumerism by discussing holiday shopping claiming, “Shopping. This one word, although birthed from a place of great intentions, has fundamentally changed our outlook from blissful to grim, from jolly to anxious, from *celebrating* Christmas to *surviving* the holidays. It’s upsetting, and with consumption’s vicious inertia, it seems there’s no way for us to exit the speeding train of consumerism” (2015b:161 original emphasis). Like Loreau, there is also an element of fear mongering present in their assertion that participating in consumerism is potentially dangerous. The combination of fear and morality is common throughout much of the minimalism discourse that comes from the gurus as well as some of the TED Talks.

Using milder language, one Instagram user posted a quote from Marie Kondo (Image 1) along with the following text:

Decluttering Challenge Day 10: about 1/3 through this challenge. Keep going! Why is it important to you to get rid of things? For me, I’m tired of spending my life managing my stuff than being present with my family. The life I want to live also means I don’t spend time looking for things I know I have but can’t find amongst the rest of my belongings. It involves more opportunities to invite someone over on a whim rather than avoiding it because I think my house isn’t tidy enough. I want to feel enhanced by my belongings, not burdened by them⁶⁰.

In addition to feeling burdened by their belongings, this post also illustrates how minimalism is often framed as a journey which is in keeping with the self-help emphasis on transformation. It also points to the importance of time which goes hand-in-hand with the core minimalist desire for freedom. The quote in the image also demonstrates the connection between objects and identities which is explored in the following chapter.

⁶⁰ Instagram, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdxdqetH5Oe/?hl=en&tagged=minimalism>.

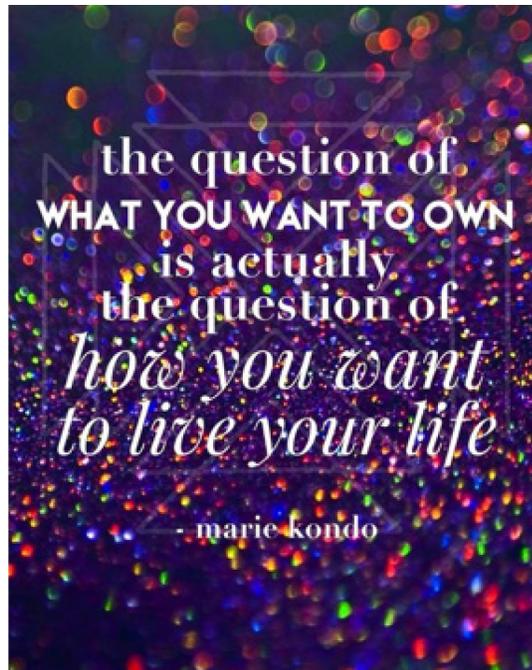


Image 1

Lastly, both minimalist guru Joshua Becker and a couple of Reddit commenters point to the mindlessness of consumerism. In response to a thread asking about people's goals within minimalism, one commenter shared:

I like the philosophy of minimalism, but not necessarily the popular aesthetic of it (ie: black, white, gray, minimal lines etc) because the peace of mind it can give me.
also have to add:
I'm tired of pointless, overzealous consumption. things don't make me happy. if anything, too many things frustrates the shit out of me⁶¹.

Moreover, in a different Reddit discussion on the compatibility of minimalism and having children, one user commented of minimalism, "it means being less of an anti-environmentalist, brainless consumer sheep than mainstream american [sic] society"⁶².

The suggestion here is that people participate in consumerism unwillingly or without thinking and that there is a lack of autonomy in this. Meanwhile, Becker contends:

⁶¹ Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6abbnk/what_are_you_trying_to_achieve_in_minimalism/.

⁶² Reddit, accessed June 13 and 14, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6fkcep/minimalism_vs_having_no_kids/?ref=search_posts.

Consumerism surrounds us like the air we breathe, and like air, it's invisible. We hardly even know how much we are influenced by the philosophy that we must buy, buy, buy if we are to be happy ... our inner desires align with this external messaging, and as a result, consumerism feels normal and natural to us. We go along with the carnival of consumerism, only occasionally feeling a twinge of doubt about whether something might be wrong with it all. (2016:44)

For Becker, consumerism is not natural, but we are taught that it is. Rather, consumerism is a carnival where everything is distorted, larger-than-life, and not quite real. In other words, inauthentic. Like the others, he also suggests we do not necessarily participate in consumerism knowingly, again pointing to a false consciousness and lack of autonomy.

Framing consumerism as a force trapping or enslaving individuals serves to suggest that consumerism limits personal agency. This goes against the pro-consumerism argument that it allows us to freely be whatever it is we want to be. What this shows is the complex discursive work that goes into shaping and maintaining notions of freedom. On one hand, we are free to participate in consumerism, but on the other hand we are trapped by it. Yet, we are also able to free ourselves from its grasp. All of this serves to reinforce freedom as the ultimate goal without ever really clarifying what it means to be free, or how it is achieved. The use of slavery and imprisonment imagery also points to concerns with alienation and the crisis of authenticity that seems, according to minimalists, to be caused by contemporary consumerism.

Idealizing and Distancing the Past

One of the most common features of discussions invoking authenticity is nostalgia or a sense the past was somehow better, and simpler than the present. This way of thinking is particularly evident in minimalism discourse where a generalized notion of the past is understood to be simpler and more natural than the industrialized,

technologically mediated present or future. Many of the minimalist gurus as well as some of the media sources examined, make mention of ‘the past’ as a way of understanding minimalism. This serves as a critique of consumerism as well as a justification of the minimalist lifestyle. As Boyle (2004) contends, this nostalgic element of authenticity glazes over how bad the past was both in terms of general living conditions and broader socio-cultural inequalities. Because of its foundation of individual autonomy, minimalism discourse also tends to be blind to inequalities, believing instead that people make their own way in the world and can change their circumstances if they so choose.

Minimalism discourse picks and chooses the elements of the past that best support its argument, particularly notions of ‘simplicity’, ‘hands-on work’, ‘thrift’, and ‘collectivity’, which all align with authenticity. Collectivity is interesting because despite making reference to it and community, minimalism is deeply rooted in individualism. For example, one online news sources made reference to the sharing economy arguing, “A new focus on sharing, renting, giving and selling has emerged. This is how people lived in the distant past, except now it is organized and systematized” (Leizrowice 2017). While it is called the ‘sharing’ economy, many of the services, such as Uber and Airbnb, cost money rather than an exchange of other resources so it may not actually be sharing in the usual sense. Nor are these services available to everyone who may benefit from them. On the other hand, while the discourse tends to emphasize individualism, there are occasional appeals to community and the presence of minimalism on social media, such as the Reddit forums and Instagram posts, point to a sense of collectivity within the lifestyle. This is one of the core tensions within minimalism discourse and one of the points that most clearly reinforces neoliberalism while purporting to challenge it.

There also is not one particular point in the past that minimalists deem ideal. The Middle Ages (Loreau 2016) and the ‘war years’ (Walmsley 2006) are both invoked, as well as ‘the old days’ (Jay 2016). For example, Walmsley discusses the accumulation of clutter experienced by many contemporary households and contends:

One of the main culprits is materialism. In the war years, when utilitarianism held sway and people had to ‘make due and mend’, I’m willing to bet that nowhere near as many homes suffered the effects of too much stuff as they do today. Indeed, the tendency to hang on to things ‘just in case’ and the need to buy more and more things to satisfy ourselves probably have their roots in the war years and just after, and are a direct reaction to the circumstances then. From the 1950s onwards, the consumer society has gone from strength to strength and almost all of us have homes full of stuff. (2006:165)

Here, Walmsley is romanticizing the ‘war years’ as inspiration for contemporary minimalism because it was a time when people made due with less. According to Walmsley, we are suffering in the present because we own too many things, while during the war years, people benefited from utilitarianism. At the same time, she is situating this period of austerity as one of the reasons for the period of excess that followed. Walmsley also points to the accumulation of material items as a way to mitigate risk which is addressed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Loreau, author of *L’art de la Simplicité: How to Live More With Less*, asserts, “Throughout the Middle Ages, material minimalism and spirituality went hand in hand. Prior to the Renaissance, medieval clothing, food and homes were designed to answer reasonable needs, nothing more. But in today’s world, enough is never enough” (2016:29). Given how vastly different the living conditions were, The Middle Ages are not a particularly useful comparison to contemporary society, nevertheless Loreau chose this time period to support her argument about the excess of contemporary consumerism.

While invoking the past, Loreau also hints at the minimalist emphasis on needs and having ‘enough’, both of which are explored in Chapter 7. Further to Loreau’s mention of spirituality, Becker points to spirituality as it relates to the simplicity of the past noting:

Living with less has always been freeing and life giving, filling people with hope and purpose. It has enabled human beings to expand in spirit and to live as more than mere accumulators of possessions. And therefore minimalism is not a brand new approach to life invented as a response to our overproduction of consumer goods. Quite the contrary. Our most trusted spiritual leaders have promoted it for centuries. (2016:24)

Becker is the most overtly religious of the minimalist gurus I have analyzed and occasionally draws on scripture to support his argument. Like Shi (2001), Becker suggests simplicity has always been a sought-after ideal and that minimalism is worth pursuing because it aligns with the values of ‘trusted spiritual leaders’. In this passage, Becker also suggests ‘living with less’ is the path to freedom, which is one of the most common refrains in minimalism discourse and one of the points where it most clearly evokes authenticity while also aligning with neoliberal sensibilities.

One of the other features of the past commonly lamented by minimalists is pre-industrial manufacturing. Millburn and Nicodemus reference Picasso to discuss the way in which children are artists but lose their creativity as they grow up. They relate this to contemporary labour which they see as lacking an element of physical creation claiming “...[Picasso’s] words ring truer in today’s postindustrial world, a world where our vocations no longer ape the form of creation (a la farming and factoring [sic]). And thus the gap between creation and consumption widens as we attempt to buy what no one can possibly sell: individual creativity” (Millburn and Nicodemus 2015b:245). According to these gurus, in the contemporary moment we have lost our creativity, something that is fundamental to our humanity. In other words, they are making a classic Marxist argument

wherein, in comparison to the generalized past in which we were more connected to our labour and the material world, we are currently alienated and living inauthentically.

Jay, meanwhile, also points to the way things used to be made claiming:

Back in the old days, limits were applied by external factors: most significantly, the price and availability of material goods. Items were generally handmade and distributed locally—making them scarcer and more costly (relative to income) than in modern times. It was easy to be a minimalist a hundred years ago, as it was difficult enough to acquire the necessities—let alone anything extra. Nowadays, we can zip over to our local superstore and purchase whatever our heart desires; mass production and global distribution have made consumer items cheap, widely available, and easy to obtain. Sure, it's convenient, but as many of us have learned, it can be too much of a good thing. If we don't voluntarily limit our consumption, we can end up drowning in stuff! (2016:95)

Jay does not specify to which 'old days' she is referring, but demonstrates nostalgia for when things were made locally and by hand, which are two material features becoming desired and widely available again (that likely never went away). 'Local' and 'handmade' are also two concepts essential to the contemporary formulation of authenticity both in terms of what consumers are looking for in items they buy, and in the ways products and brands are marketed. Jay also demonstrates a romanticized understanding of the past wherein she reads people not being able to meet basic needs as 'easy minimalism', thus suggesting we are burdened by consumerism. This is also an example of how minimalism discourse is guilty of poverty fetishism which occurs occasionally throughout the data.

Finally, in a 2013 *Globe and Mail* article about how the Edwardian aesthetic might be taking over from minimalism, Ellen Himelfarb observed:

In London, House of Wolf has become a standard-bearer for this yesteryear style, popular with thirtysomething dandies in three-piece suits who, while flung toward a paperless future of pocket gadgets, cling to ideals of sustainability, authenticity and heritage. Just as we calculate food miles and insist on knowing the origins of the meat we order in restaurants (Portlandia mocked that too), we want to be told that the kitchen table we

covet was hewn from hand-cut timber by an artisan living off the grid.
(2013:L2)

This is one of the few overt mentions of authenticity within my data, though it is offered as a critique of ‘thirtysomethings’ who want both the technology of the future and the authenticity of the past. Moreover, despite aesthetic differences, the fundamental desires described here as being part of the Edwardian lifestyle, are not far removed from those of the minimalist lifestyle. Both look to the past to offer a critique of the present.

As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, minimalism demonstrates a complex temporal orientation that differs depending on the point of reference. While the gurus discuss an idealized and generalized past, on some of the Reddit forums there is discussion of individual transformation and critique of personal pasts. For example, as part of a discussion on the challenges of starting minimalism one commenter wrote, “The hardest part was before I knew what I needed and wanted. Something wasn’t right and I had no idea minimalism was the answer”⁶³. As discussed in the theory chapter, Giddens (1991) argues late modernity is characterized in part by its reflexivity, which is demonstrated by this commenter, and the Reddit posts in general. Furthermore, in a Reddit discussion on what people are trying to achieve through minimalism another commenter shared they were seeking “Efficiency and simplicity” elaborating:

I don’t want to maintain, clean, backup and update 4 computers. I don’t want to deal with tons of clothes and i don’t want to have to own tons of things just because another thing uses those things. For example, in the past i collected retro computers and you needed spare power supplies, spare cables, extra monitors, converter cables, converter units for video and audio, spare parts and tons of stuff just to keep those retro computers running and be able to use them. I also don’t like a cluttered home so i recently ditched my television and stereo which got rid of a ton of cables, power strips etc and now i have rearranged the living room so that it looks

⁶³ Reddit, accessed June 14, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6exi18/when_you_started_becoming_more_minimalist_what/?ref=search_posts,

much more open and inviting. minimalism for me is all about clearing my head, getting rid of clutter and excess. everything i own has to have a purpose and has to get used. Also the emotional detachment from my belongings give me a feeling of freedom. If i can take my laptop, backup harddisks, some clothes and my cat i'm good to go. The rest i don't care for at all⁶⁴.

This commenter shares their experience with transitioning from a cluttered past to a minimalist present, while also illustrating the class-based nature of the minimalist lifestyle. While class is returned to in later chapters, it is worth noting here that it likely takes considerable financial resources to afford and maintain the items mentioned by this commenter, thus demonstrating how class is often implicit in minimalism discourse.

Taken together, the minimalism discourse analyzed exhibits a complex orientation to the past. By idealizing the past, minimalist gurus suggest contemporary consumer capitalism has removed us from more authentic ways of being. Alternatively, by distancing themselves from their pre-minimalist pasts, these Reddit users reinforce the ideals of freedom and autonomy, while also critiquing consumerism for inhibiting these fundamental human desires. Further complicating the temporal orientation of minimalism is the exercise of imagining one's future.

Imagining the Future

As is common with self-help, looking to the future is important for understanding the present. After all, a personal transformation leading to a different and better future is typically what is sought when accessing self-help. It is also suggested the person interested in minimalism is not presently living authentically, but that by following the minimalist lifestyle they will be living authentically in the future. Conjuring the future

⁶⁴ Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6abbnk/what_are_you_trying_to_achieve_in_minimalism/.

also demonstrates how minimalism discourse is confined by neoliberal governmentality in that it places responsibility for change and improvement on the individual, and while it promises a better individual future, it does little to suggest broader systemic change.

Because the future cannot be known, it is often pointed to in vague terms as a time when things will be better than in the past or present. For example, Millburn and Nicodemus use the future to critique the consumerist present arguing:

we needn't look around at all this mass-consumption and over-indulgence and believe it's normal—it's not. Things haven't always been this way—this chaotic, this meaningless—and the future needn't be, either. A sunrise is on the horizon, and we can see it once we open our eyes, become more aware of what's important, and realize we're in too deep. (2015b:25)

Here, the suggestion is that the individual has to wake up to see what they have been doing wrong and change themselves. Because of consumerism the present is meaningless, but an unspecified future as a minimalist will be relaxed, meaningful, and ultimately, authentic. These gurus are also passing judgment on anyone who partakes in consumerism as being unaware of what they are participating in, and they appeal to a sense of fear which recurs in many of the minimalism self-help texts.

Furthermore, in *Everything That Remains: A Memoir by The Minimalists*⁶⁵,

Millburn and Nicodemus propose their readers imagine the future:

Now I'd like for you to imagine your life a year from now. Two years. Five. Imagine living a healthier life, one in which you don't just look better, you *feel* better. Imagine a life with higher standards. Imagine a life with less clutter, less stuff, fewer distractions. What would it look like? Imagine your life with less—less stress, less debt, less discontent. What would it feel like? Now imagine your life with more—more time, more contribution, more elation. Imagine better, more interesting relationships. Imagine sharing meals and conversations and experiences and smiles with people who have similar interests and values and beliefs as you. Imagine

⁶⁵ This passage is included, almost verbatim in one of their TED Talks.

growing with your peer group and your loved ones. Now imagine cultivating your passion until you can't imagine a day without pursuing it. Imagine creating more than you consume. Imagine giving more than you take. Imagine a consistent commitment to growth. Imagine growing toward your limits and then past your limits and waving back with a smile. Imagine still having problems, but *better* problems, problems that fuel your growth and excitement, problems you want to face. Imagine getting everything out of the way so you can love the people closest to you. Imagine the myriad ways you can show your love, not just say it, but really *show* it. Imagine holding hands and exchanging hugs. Imagine making love with the man or woman you love, unencumbered by the trappings of the noisy world around you, fully in the moment, two bodies, flesh and hearts as one. Imagine making priorities your Real Priorities. Imagine real success. Imagine feeling lighter, freer, happier. (2014:201-202 original emphasis)

In this extended passage they make no mention of minimalism per se and only one mention of consumption, instead suggesting a vastly better future is possible through the lifestyle. By following their path to minimalism readers can advance all areas of their lives from becoming debt free to improving their intimate relationships. Here, minimalism is presented as a holistic lifestyle that will make everything better for the practitioner. Moreover, the consumer-turned-minimalist will live more authentically once pursuing their passion, rather than mindlessly following the status quo.

Marie Kondo uses a similar approach to imagining the future, but reveals more of the work that goes into making it possible:

Now that you can picture the lifestyle you dream of, is it time to move on to discarding? No, not yet. I can understand your impatience, but to prevent rebound you need to move ahead properly, step by step, as you launch into this once-in-a-lifetime event. Your next step is to identify *why* you want to live like that. Look back over your notes about the kind of lifestyle you want, and think again. Why do you want to do aromatherapy before bed? Why do you want to listen to classical music while doing yoga? If the answers are 'because I want to relax before bed,' and 'I want to do yoga to lose weight,' ask yourself why you want to relax and why you want to lose weight. Maybe your answers will be 'I don't want to be tired when I go to work the next day,' and 'I want to lose weight so that I

can be more svelte'. Ask yourself 'Why?' again, for each answer. Repeat this process three to five times for every item. (2014:38 original emphasis)

The Konmari Method is demonstrative of how the minimalist is called upon to be a reflexive and enterprising subject. For example, it involves taking detailed, self-reflexive notes similar to an audit in a business setting. This is not unlike Guthman's (2008) finding that an effort to re-think industrialized food production was mired in neoliberal ways of thinking. The aspiring minimalist is to take the process seriously and treat him or herself, like a job. This also helps to reinforce Kondo as an expert because she has the knowledge to go about the process correctly. This passage also further demonstrates how minimalism is about much more than discarding superfluous items. Likewise, in a discussion about the challenges of becoming minimalist one Reddit commenter shared, "And that the process is never really done. It's not like you spend one weekend cleaning and BAM now you're minimalist. It's something you gotta keep revisiting (at least for me) when I stray off the path occasionally and impulse buy stuff I later regret" (2017f). This comment further reveals the work and sense of control that goes into minimalism.

Kondo's (2014) self-reflective approach is echoed by Walmsley instructing, "if we understand why we are how we are, we can perhaps take steps to stop our past dictating our future. Knowledge can help in all sorts of ways, and self-knowledge is the most important of all" (2006:9). This is yet another example of governmentality operating within the self-help texts. According to Walsmley, the minimalist has to know itself and make responsible choices based on this knowledge. Again, the individual is the target of change, not the culture or social structures that shape consumerism.

Becker is vaguer in his reference to the future but asserts, "As best you can, identify the life you want to lead, and then pursue the kind of minimalism that will get

you there” (2016:31), suggesting that readers are not currently living the life they want, or are meant, to be. Additionally, Sasaki encourages his readers to take the first steps toward minimalism recommending, “Holding on to things from the past is the same as clinging to an image of yourself in the past. If you’re the least bit interested in changing anything about yourself, I suggest you be brave and start letting things go. Leave only the items that you need moving forward from this very moment” (Sasaki 2017:101). The sense of bravery is similarly hinted at in a Reddit response to a post about feeling better after getting rid of a large collection of video games:

I did this with my beading collection.
I was an avid jewelry maker and I just wasn’t leaving enough time to complete projects that I once loved.
It is hard because my collection of beads was expensive and they were all stones I wanted to use in mala necklaces (prayer/meditation beads) but I had no joy in making them anymore.
I had already made and kept one of the most beautiful malas that I made and that was enough.
It was hard to let go of, but my coworker has a 9 year old niece who loves to head [sic] and I’m sure she would get much more use out of them than I did.
It feels like you are giving a part of yourself up, but it is making room for the person you are now⁶⁶.

In addition to illustrating the sense of transition that takes place between pre- and post-minimalist transformation, this commenter also demonstrates some of the emotion that goes into owning particular items, which is discussed in a later chapter.

Moreover, Loreau claims, “You can conjure anything at all in your thoughts, and the more powerful they are, the more they will motivate you to attain your goals. You will become the physical materialization of your own ideal image: a person radiating vitality, agility and health. You can choose to become whoever you want to be. *You* have

⁶⁶ Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6eb4pm/weight_off_my_shoulders/.

that power” (2016:147 original emphasis). According to Loreau, it is up to the individual to live authentically and there is nothing holding them back except themselves. What all of these passages share is a belief that the only thing standing in the way of becoming a minimalist is the individual itself. There is no mention of the systemic barriers making this lifestyle unattainable for many, just the suggestion minimalism will make everything better for the individual who is willing, and wanting, to change.

Millburn and Nicodemus also address the economy when looking to the future, but in a way where individuals can improve the economy, rather than looking at how the economy could be changed to help the individual. They contend:

Ultimately, minimalists aren’t interested in ‘stimulating’ the economy—stimulation is short-lived. We’d rather improve our economy’s long-term health by making better individual decisions about consumption, getting involved in our community, and supporting local businesses who care. If more people do this, we’ll build a stronger economy, one that’s predicated on personal responsibility and community interaction, not a false sense of urgency and the mindless stockpile of junk we never needed in the first place. (Millburn and Nicodemus 2015b:98)

As Rose (1996) argues, community is also a site of governance for which we are to take responsibility, so this again feeds into neoliberal ways of thinking, even though it is meant as a challenge. Millburn and Nicodemus also demonstrate neoliberal ways of thinking about the economy as something that has ‘health’ and should be prioritized.

Lastly, in an article for *Vice*, James Wilt references the future as part of his critique of the minimalist lifestyle. Wilt contends minimalism is an elitist, “anti-poor” lifestyle which ignores systemic issues such as income inequality:

Bemoaning people who live paycheque-to-paycheque—which, according to a 2016 study, is 48 per cent of all working Canadians—to be more *disciplined* and *attentive* lets the very rich and powerful in society off the hook. It blames the masses for ‘living beyond their means’ when it’s a select few—like, literally a few—who are hoarding the money and control

and obstructing society from rapidly transitioning to a just and sustainable future. (2017 original emphasis)

Unlike many of the gurus, Wilt looks at structural reasons for inequality suggesting a future in line with minimalist values, but achieved in a way that is not promoted by minimalism. By looking to the future, it seems minimalists further demonstrate how their thinking is shaped by neoliberalism and serves to reinforce individual responsabilization through a strong suggestion that the future individual can live more authentically if they put in the work. It also suggests, yet again, that consumerism inhibits individual freedom.

Contextualizing Minimalism

The media coverage analyzed tended to have a better sense of the political economy and cultural contexts for minimalism than the self-help texts, though there is some mention from those sources. Discussions of this context are also scarce in the Reddit posts, but do garner some mention in a thread about disliking *The Minimalists*. And, as I argue, because minimalism is forged in neoliberal ways of thinking, it tends to be viewed individually, rather than as a piece of a larger whole. Because many of the media sources are offering a critique of minimalism, they tend to speak about minimalism as a collective lifestyle, and sometimes, as a movement. What they provide is a different way of situating minimalism than that primarily offered by the ‘experts’.

While most of the gurus hint that consumerism is a system which structures people’s lives, Becker makes a passing reference to other systemic forces allowing, “Underemployment, coupled with record levels of student debt, have left some Millennials⁶⁷ with little discretionary income even if they wanted to be consumeristic”

⁶⁷ The apparent connection between millennials and minimalism is discussed further in Chapter 6.

(2016:54). This shows more awareness than most of the other gurus of the social, political, or economic factors shaping people's participation in, or ability to abstain from, consumerism. What Becker identifies here is minimalism as a rationalization for an inability to participate in mainstream consumerism. As an example of this, in a Reddit thread asking advice on how to start minimalism one commenter, likely jokingly, asked, "Does being poor count?"⁶⁸. Additionally, as part of a response on another Reddit thread about minimalism and children, one commenter remarked:

If all the books, podcasts and forums are representative of 'minimalists' as a whole, the largest subset of the group is primarily younger. 20-30 to be more specific.

Many people have had children during that time period, but statistically less in our current day in age due to new issues like crippling student loan debt and skyrocketing housing prices. As a result, many of today's 'minimalists' have found this way of living as a means of escaping those pressures and finding a lifestyle that they can still enjoy. Learning to embrace less makes not being able to obtain more feel more appreciable, and in fact I agree that most don't need as much as they own⁶⁹.

This Reddit user places minimalism within its broader context as a way to deal with the contemporary challenges faced by many young people in advanced capitalist societies.

While many practitioners use minimalism as a justification for consuming differently than they think society expects them too, for others, minimalism offers a rationalization for not being able to meet the expectation to consume in the first place. This is echoed in the *Minimalism* documentary when one interviewee, who designs tiny houses, asserts:

I think there is this element of affordability, simplicity, and sustainability that just makes tiny houses seem like the perfect solution to a problem we haven't yet figured out, which is, how do we go from working all throughout our lifetime to enjoying a lifetime with a bit of work here and there? For a long time when people were looking to buy their first house,

⁶⁸ Reddit, accessed June 15, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6c7j21/whats_your_helpful_starter_pack_for_someone_that/.

⁶⁹ Reddit, accessed June 13 and 14, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6fkcep/minimalism_vs_having_no_kids/?ref=search_posts.

they looked at their budget and they said, ‘how much money do I have to spend? Oh, I have \$500,000, let me buy whatever \$500,000 can get me’. And the big mistake there was that these individuals didn’t have \$500,000. They had a loan that would guarantee them that amount. And, of course, after a few years of people buying houses that they weren’t actually buying, they were just hoping to buy someday, the entire housing market collapsed. I think where that has left us in the wake of a recession is with a really, really strong appeal to buying a house outright. (D’Avella 2015).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, homeownership is out of reach for many people in North America, and within the broader simplicity movement tiny houses or micro lofts are presented as a solution to this problem. In addition to the cost of housing, this passage identifies the ‘work and spend’ cycle as a problem that can be addressed by minimalism.

Relatedly, reducing debt and seeking financial freedom garnered some mention on Instagram. For example, one post included a photograph of a book about Swedish⁷⁰ simple living (Image 2) along with text addressing income inequality stating, “If you are a fan of minimalism [sic], living simply, and living a balanced life. This is an interesting read. Also, it will make you more disgusted at the USA's culture of prosperity for the 1% and the struggle for the working class to survive and have a healthy [sic] existence”⁷¹. Since the 2008 Recession, as well as the Occupy Movement, income inequality has come to the forefront of much economic discussion and it seems some see a connection between minimalism and this disparity. As suggested by Etzioni (2004) and Alexander and Ussher (2012) minimalism could be a way to address global income inequality if individuals and nations consuming excessively changed their habits.

⁷⁰ As previously mentioned, a number of the minimalism gurus are either Japanese or influenced by Japanese culture. However, while Scandinavian design has often been celebrated for its minimalism, the decluttering movement seemed less interested in the Scandinavian way of life. This seems to be changing with a number of books touting Scandinavian lifestyles appearing in the past year, particularly a new book on ‘Swedish Death Cleaning’. It seems that as part of the critique of contemporary consumer capitalism, people are increasingly seeking alternatives from cultures judged to be more authentic than our own.

⁷¹ Instagram, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdQUUkqnDYS/?hl=en&tagged=minimalism>.

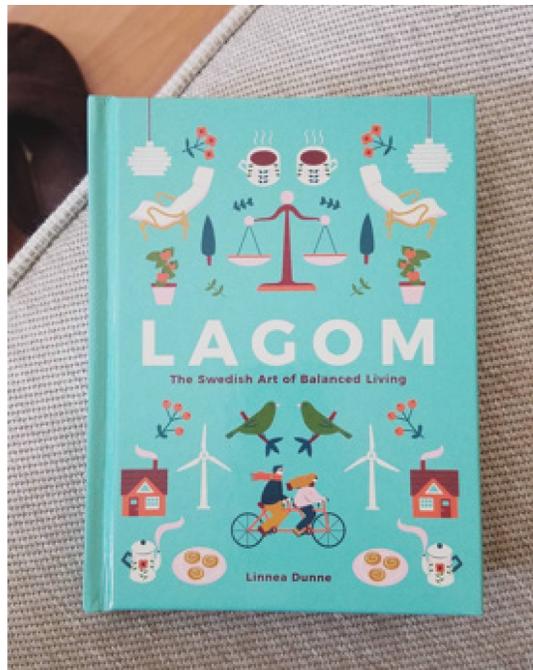


Image 2

In an article for *Forbes* magazine, Weinswing also discusses millennials' participation in minimalism observing:

Millennials—the 18-34 demographic make up more than a quarter of the U.S. population and the majority of the workforce. Millennials have a unique set of values around how they choose to spend their money. They grew up during the recession, entered a struggling job market and must now pay off record amounts of student debt. Retail expert, Robin Lewis, of *The Robin Report*, explained the consequences of millennial factors, 'This is a generation that is bigger than the boomers in population, but their wallets are smaller, and they are more into the style of life than the stuff of life. This is a big threat to retail. They're not into a lot of shopping.' (2016)

Unlike the minimalist gurus who warn their readers about the dangers of consumerism, in this article, readers, likely from a business audience, are warned about the dangers of minimalism and millennials to their bottom line. However, this also points to the potential of minimalists to be identified and targeted as a new group of consumers.

Additionally, in a 2012 *Toronto Star* article about The Minimalists (Millburn and Nicodemus), attention again turned to young people and their changing consumption habits. Graham notes:

These tech-savvy 20-somethings have been systematically embracing smaller, less cluttered and more meaningful lives, a rebellion against the consumer culture that defined their boomer parents. Their devotion to parsimony could be associated to a variety of social and cultural phenomena—the hoarding tendency, for example, that’s captured on television shows, or the disposable nature of fast fashion and cheap electronics. (2012:E1)

In contrast to Weinswing who acknowledges some of the possible structural factors keeping young people from consuming, Graham presents it as more of a conscious choice, which is in line with the argument of his article’s subjects. Moreover, in a *New York Times* opinion piece, Hill contends, “We live in a world of surfeit stuff, of big-box stores and 24-hour online shopping opportunities. Members of every socioeconomic bracket can and do deluge themselves with products” (2013). Similar to Millburn and Nicodemus, Hill describes how he left behind his well-paying job and excess stuff for a life of more meaning. Hill tries to mitigate his privilege by suggesting everyone is caught up in the trappings of consumerism, not only the wealthy. However, not everyone can take the time and expense to leisurely travel the world deciding what really matters to them as Hill did following a tech industry windfall⁷².

As previously noted, many of the media sources analyzed offer a critique of minimalism and this is particularly true of Kyle Chayka’s *New York Times* article ‘Austerity Measures’ in which he argues:

Part pop philosophy and part aesthetic, minimalism presents a cure-all for a certain sense of capitalist overindulgence. Maybe we have a hangover

⁷² Hill has gone on to co-found ‘LifeEdited’, a company that designs and promotes small space living. Two of the included TED Talks were about this company and their approach to small living.

from pre-recession excess—McMansions, S.U.V.s, neon cocktails, fusion cuisine—and minimalism is the salutary tonic. Or perhaps it's a method of coping with recession-induced austerity, a collective spiritual and cultural cleanse because we've been forced to consume less anyway. But as an outgrowth of a peculiarly American (that is to say, paradoxical and self-defeating) brand of Puritanical asceticism, this new minimalist lifestyle always seems to end in enabling new modes of consumption, a veritable excess of less. It's not really minimal at all. (2016:13)

In this article, Chayka identifies both streams of contemporary minimalism. On one hand are those who are financially, socially, and culturally secure enough to walk away from consumerism, while on the other hand are those who are unable to meet the standards of consumerism and are 'minimalist' by default. He also points to the contradictory nature of minimalism in that it may amount to little more than a new mode of consumption.

Finally, Chelsea Fagan (2017), in *The Guardian*, states, "... there is a very strong capitalist-critical argument to be made about buying in more intentional and ethical ways, but color me shocked that very few of these minimalist troubadours ever really take things to an economic or class-based argument". As can be seen in this chapter Fagan's observation is largely accurate. There is very little mention of structural challenges or systemic change within minimalism discourse. Instead, minimalists are encouraged to follow their individual path to happiness and authenticity. One notable exception to this is Becker who proclaims, "I want to be a voice urging us to buy less, because the potential benefits for our world are incalculable when hundreds, thousands, millions of lives are transformed by minimalism" (2016:8). However, despite this claim, Becker primarily focuses on the individual and how they can personally benefit from minimalism. This is demonstrative of the discourse more generally in which far-reaching, societal and cultural issues are addressed at the individual level.

Summary

Distinguishing between past and present is common in negotiations of authenticity. In particular, the past tends to be held up as a paragon of authenticity, while the present is inauthentic. Within minimalism discourse, the complex distinction between past and present demonstrates how authenticity is used to justify the minimalist lifestyle while also serving to reinforce the neoliberal rationales of individual choice and responsibility. Moreover, in distinguishing between past and present, minimalism offers a nuanced critique of how contemporary consumerism strips us of our freedom and agency.

In keeping with the self-help genre, there is an emphasis on transformation within minimalism discourse. In particular, it is suggested that those who want to be minimalists can follow their path to authenticity by simply exercising discipline and responsibility in their choices and behaviour. Also in keeping with *self-help*, individuals are blamed for their shortcomings, as well as their perceptions of broader problems, and are ‘empowered’ by experts to address these concerns for themselves.

In terms of mobilizing authenticity, this chapter has demonstrated how minimalism discourse invokes a generalized and romanticized past as a critique of the present. In doing so, minimalism utilizes the rhetoric of authenticity such as simplicity, pre-industrial manufacturing, naturalness, and collectivity in order to situate the lifestyle as a desirable alternative to consumerism. Furthermore, by using slavery and imprisonment metaphors, it is suggested that consumerism is alienating but that minimalism is an authentic alternative. To further my analysis of minimalism, the next chapter addresses the discursive distinctions made between objects and experiences.

Chapter 6: Objects, Experiences, and Capital

Like the previous chapter on past and present, this chapter explores minimalism's complex discursive orientation to objects and experiences. As outlined in Chapter 2, objects and experiences are both important to the discursive formation of authenticity. Objects, because of their physicality, are considered vessels for authenticity wherein proof of provenance or artisanship can be established. Experiences, meanwhile, are related to authenticity through the realm of emotions. It is understood there is a felt element to authenticity that is unique to the moment and the individual. While experiential authenticity is more difficult to pin down objectively, it is understood to be more important to establishing the authentic self because it is personal and singular.

Within minimalism discourse, this understanding of authenticity holds, but there is also a tension between the roles objects and experiences play in identity formation. Because minimalism is taking place within a material culture, it displays complex, and at times conflicting, conceptualizations of the role of possessions in our lives. There are times when objects are dismissed as unnecessary to one's understanding of self, but there are also times when objects are framed as part of who a person is. Minimalism is clearer about experiences in that they should be valued over objects because they are more meaningful and authentic, and contribute more to a person's sense of self and wellbeing.

As presented in the previous chapter, freedom is a core value of minimalism and this is also demonstrated through the discussion of objects and experiences. Essentially, owning objects takes resources such as time and money away from gaining experiences. Continuing the critique that consumerism inhibits agency, objects are seen to hold people back from living freely and being able to fulfill their potential.

This chapter first looks at how objects are negotiated within the discourse through the emotions and meaning we attach to the things we own. I then look at how minimalism discourse frames experiences as more valuable than objects. Finally, this chapter explores the social, cultural, financial, and temporal capital needed to for minimalism.

Objects, Stuff, Things, and Possessions

To practice minimalism, people need to learn to distinguish between mundane, and what I am calling elevated, objects. Objects are dismissed as ‘things’ or ‘stuff’ when they do not matter, but are valued as possessions when they do. This is a very personal decision, but the consensus seems is that many of us own far more than we need and that we are suffering as a result. There is also an understanding that some non-consumable objects are elevated and worth attaching meaning to while others are not. Determining which items are worth keeping involves discipline and discernment, two traits valued by minimalists that align with the self-help genre and governmentality.

Contemporary minimalism is about ‘decluttering’, but this goes beyond objects. As Sasaki instructs his readers, “In today’s busy world, everything is so complicated that minimalism, which began with objects, is spreading to other areas as well” (2017:45). In this way, for minimalists, objects are simply an accessible target for their broader concerns about work/life balance, finances, mental health, and general quality of life.

Memories

Memories and sentimentality are complicated for minimalists. On one hand, objects do not memorialize events or experiences, while on the other hand, the value we place on objects often comes from these types of associations. For example, in her second

book, *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up*, Marie Kondo observes, “Objects that have been steeped in memories carry a much clearer imprint of special times” (2016:268). Whereas Jay tells her readers:

We have to remember that our memories, dreams, and ambitions aren’t contained in objects; they’re contained in ourselves. We are not what we own; we are what we do, what we think, and who we love. By eliminating the remnants of unloved pastimes, uncompleted endeavors, and unrealized fantasies, we make room for new (and *real*) possibilities. Aspirational items are the props for a pretend version of our lives; we need to clear out this clutter, so that we have the time, energy, and space to realize our true selves and our full potential. (2016:23 original emphasis)

The idea that objects do not contain memories is a fundamental tenet of minimalism. And, according to Jay, the objects many people own are keeping them from realizing their full potential and living as their authentic selves. Participating in consumption leads to living inauthentically by buying and collecting ‘aspirational items’ that are not true to who one is. As in the previous chapter, there is a sense that minimalists feel consumerism has us living in a state of false consciousness.

One Reddit exchange between four users nicely illustrates the complex negotiation that goes into determining which objects are worth keeping:

Commenter 1:

For items that you attach memories to—a few are fine, but recognizing that your memories are independent of those objects, and that you are not throwing away the memory with the object, is freeing.

Commenter 2:

That’s what I find myself having trouble with. For some reason its [sic] like subconsciously I feel that I will lose the memory if I throw out the object. I hope to break this way of thinking.

Commenter 3:

A lot of people I know alleviate this by taking a photo before getting rid of the item. That way they feel that they can still see the photo if they need too.

Commenter 4:
Take pictures of them :)

Commenter 1:
If you don't hold the memory itself, the object could not trigger that memory⁷³.

This Reddit exchange demonstrates the complicated ways we think about and treat objects. Photographs are also difficult for minimalists to grapple with. A common suggestion is to digitize images so they do not take up physical space, but this requires the resources to do so⁷⁴. This Reddit exchange also seems to suggest many objects are important, but not so important that they need to be kept, however that does not make them easy to get rid of because people form attachments to objects. Within material culture, objects are essential to identity formation and meaning making, but for minimalists, some objects are debased while experiences are worthier of investment.

Emotions, Meaning, and Identity

In addition to memories, many people place emotions, meaning, and even their identity on the objects they accumulate. According to Loreau, “Objects are the recipients of our emotions. They should be both practical and a source of pleasure. Identify and reject anything that seems ugly or out of place: its negative energy will affect your wellbeing as surely as noise pollution, or a poor diet” (2016:34). This approach to discarding suggests objects can be highly personal and vessels for our feelings, but we have to be discerning about our objects. Here, Loreau also makes a connection between minimalism and health, which is explored in the following chapter. This is also an

⁷³ Reddit, accessed June 14, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/lifestyle_new_to_minimalism_what_helped_you_to/?ref=search_posts.

⁷⁴ In an example of the commodification of the minimalist lifestyle, *The Minimalists* (Millburn and Nicodemus 2014) recommend a specific scanner for this task.

example of how objects are occasionally personified by the minimalist gurus, particularly Kondo (2014), who often discusses the feelings of objects that are un-cared-for.

Loreau also tells her readers to, “Own only a small number of things, either artisan-made or mass-produced, but be careful to select them as extensions of yourself: objects are our servants, not our masters” (2016:35-36). Similarly, Millburn and Nicodemus tell their readers, “There is one way out of consumption’s spiral: we must realize the things we purchase do not define who we are—unless we allow them to” (2015b:23). However, they, and other minimalists, are actually defining themselves by what they own—they just happen to now own less than many other members of society. What these authors seem to be getting at however, is that objects are extensions of our identities and can therefore reflect our authenticity when approached in the correct way (which they, as experts, can teach you). As in the previous chapter, there is also the concern that we are trapped by consumerism.

Sharing a similar sentiment, one Instagram user posted the following picture of a closet (Image 3) along with text that read, “Decluttering feels amazing. I spent the last week cleaning out my home including my youngest daughter's closet pictured above. It inspired me to take a closer look at the burden of too much in our lives and what we can put in place of stuff in my latest post (link in bio). Because we are so much more than what we own”⁷⁵. Like many minimalists, this practitioner mentions being burdened or held back by owning too much stuff and is attempting to separate objects and identity, which is challenging within a material culture.

⁷⁵ Instagram, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdiW1h4HU3A/?hl=en&tagged=minimalism>.



Image 3⁷⁶

Another issue related to identity is that we use objects to symbolically communicate with others. As Sasaki contends, “Why do we own so many things when we don’t need them? What is their purpose? I think the answer is quite clear: We’re desperate to convey our own worth, our own value to others. We use objects to tell people just how valuable we are” (2017:68-69). Sasaki sees this as a problem because our value should not come from the objects we own, but in a material culture, objects are important for how we make sense of ourselves and the world around us. Minimalists focus on owning objects that are functional, but within material culture symbolism can be understood as a function of objects. This is one of the main tensions within minimalism.

Furthermore, Jay cautions it is inauthentic to tie our identities to objects:

Such freedom [from the cycle of consumption], in turn, affords a fabulous opportunity for self-discovery. When we identify with brands and express ourselves through material items, we lose our sense of who we are. We use consumer goods to project a certain image of ourselves—buying a

⁷⁶ Funnily, the piggy bank in the picture contains the text ‘New Shoe Fund’, which seems in opposition to minimalism, however ‘shoe’ has been crossed out and replaced with ‘baby’.

persona, in essence, to show to the rest of the world. Furthermore, we're so busy dealing with *stuff*—running to and fro, buying this and that—that we find little time to stop and explore what really makes us tick. (2016:285 original emphasis)

According to Jay, materialism takes away from what is important and hinders us from reaching our full authenticity. When we are free from stuff, we can get to work discovering who we really are. However, this does not allow for the possibility that the image we are projecting through brands and material items could be authentic. Objects can be an important part of this, yet Jay argues we do not have time to know ourselves or what is important to us because we are consuming or caring for things we have accumulated. Again, this is done to support the minimalist critique that consumerism is inauthentic, but lifestyle is not necessarily that far from a brand, and therefore minimalism can be understood as simply another way of buying or projecting a persona.

Building from this, the meaning we ascribe to our objects is also important to minimalists. In her second book, Marie Kondo breaks down the reasons we are attracted to objects, observing, "... I have discovered three common elements involved in attraction: the actual beauty of the object itself (innate attraction), the amount of love that has been poured into it (acquired attraction), and the amount of history or significance it has accrued (experiential value)" (2016:45). This way of thinking about objects is not unlike Benjamin's ([1968]2007) concept of aura discussed in Chapter 2. Our objects gain meaning and become attractive to us when we have spent time caring for them and when we associate them with our experiences. In this way, objects and experiences are intertwined and it is not necessarily easy to separate the two in order to reduce the number of items we keep in our possession. In a Reddit discussion of Marie Kondo's decluttering method, one commenter shared:

The konmari method is one of the best forms of actionable minimalism that I've discovered so far. Working through it got me from 'trying to live more minimalist' to 'living as a minimalist'.

Best of all, it helped me say goodbye to more sentimental items--particularly the large luggage cases I used to travel everywhere with. Even though I switched over to traveling with just one carry on backpack no matter where I go, I used to think I could keep my older luggage to help store things because they looked cool (but instead they took up way too much space). After reading her books, I reassessed things and finally gave them to people who had better use for them. Actually saying 'thanks' after removing them (out of earshot from anyone--yeah, I know it is a little odd) kinda helped me feel better--you put a lot of care and thought and worry into travel luggage, so that helped me finally detach all of the old feelings that I had put into the objects.

One other nice thing is that the Konmari Method is not just for minimalists. my friends who have no interest in minimalism end up being just as interested in the method. They may not want to get rid of the collections of things they like, but it helps to do away with any of the unnecessary things that also tend to accumulate over time⁷⁷.

According to this Reddit commenter, the Konmari Method acknowledges that we place importance and meaning on our objects, but also that they are not really the keepers of our memories and emotions, further demonstrating this core tension of minimalism. This passage also demonstrates deference to expertise, which Rose (1998) argues is increasingly common in contemporary society.

In an article on the *Real Simple* website, Hannah Norling (n.d.), after trying to live as a minimalist, wrote about why minimalism was not right for her. In addition to finding it exhausting she reflects, "The knick-knacks that line the shelves of my room tell a story of who I am, where I've been, and what I find interesting. My once-white space is now completely filled with items inspired by baroque art, citrus fruits, and denim. (Far too much denim.) And it's a lot, but it feels like me this time". This writer highlights the ways in which the items we own are often much more than 'junk', but instead help to

⁷⁷ Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, [https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6gdpcf/konmari_method/Konmari Method?](https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6gdpcf/konmari_method/Konmari%20Method?).

reinforce our identities and reflect who we are to others. Norling illustrates the emotions and meaning that many of us place on the things we own and how this is a complex process. Moreover, it is suggested by Norling that minimalism actually felt inauthentic to her, while being surrounded with meaningful items “feels like me”. Similarly, in a different *Real Simple* post about not liking minimalism, writer Joanna Novak (n.d.) observed, “In the furor of purging, it is easy to forget that life cannot be simply a process of getting rid. Some material comforts are just that—comforts. Like taking time for self-care, furnishing a home (or an apartment or a bachelor unit) requires making good decisions”. Here, while she is writing in opposition to minimalism, Novak still demonstrates the underlying governmentality of lifestyle by telling readers that furnishing their homes “requires making good decisions”.

Related to the emotions of discarding is the understanding that there are items worth keeping, but that there has to be deliberation, intention, and discipline exercised in determining what to keep. Loreau, for example, distinguishes between regular items and personal items, “A person’s intimate possessions should fit into a couple of suitcases: a well-chosen capsule wardrobe, a vanity case, an album of favorite photographs, two or three treasured objects. The rest—the objects that fill our homes (bedlinen, dishes, TV, furniture)—are not ‘personal’ possessions in the strictest sense” (2016:29). Loreau also seems to put a limit on the number of items suitable for keeping, though she does not state an exact number. Moreover, the distinction of personal items suggests some are more attached to our identities than others. Kondo also hints at some objects being more important to our sense of self, instructing her readers:

The fact that you possess a surplus of things that you can’t bring yourself to discard doesn’t mean you are taking good care of them. In fact, it is

quite the opposite. By paring down the volume that you can properly handle, you revitalize your relationship with your belongings. Just because you dispose of something does not mean you give up past experiences or your identity. Through the process of selecting only those things that inspire joy, you can identify precisely what you love and what you need. (2014:126)

Here, Kondo indicates objects are tied to our experiences and identity, but at the same time, our experiences and identity are independent of our objects. Similarly, Millburn and Nicodemus hint at there being a correct number of items to own when they posit, “Much like a hipster’s impressive vinyl collection, a well-curated bookshelf holds significantly more meaning than, say, clinging to a random collection of paperbacks just in case we might read them someday in some substitute future. The same can be said for DVDs, CDs, and ... what’s next?” (2015b:75). This assessment of what is worth keeping (the right books) and what is not (CDs and DVDs), carries an implicit cultural judgment wherein books are more valuable than ‘low-brow’ DVDs. According to these gurus, while experiences are more authentic than objects, objects can still be meaningful, but not all objects, and not too many. This is one way governmentality comes into play through minimalism. As discussed in earlier chapters, the self-help genre is particularly governmental in how it instructs users to exercise discipline and make work of themselves, and this way of thinking is especially evident within minimalism discourse.

Discarding is Easy(?)

Despite the acknowledgement by many of the minimalist gurus that our objects are emotional and meaningful, and related to our sense of self, their overall stance seems to be that objects are unimportant and can be gotten rid of easily. This is seen in Kondo’s assertion that “When you tidy, you are dealing with objects. Objects are easy to discard

and move around” (2014:30), which inadvertently highlights one of the problems with materialism and overconsumption—we think of objects as being disposable. Further to this, Loreau tells readers, “Don’t hesitate to discard things that are ‘more or less OK’. Replace them with objects that are perfect and fit for purpose, even if this means spending what many will dismiss as wasteful sums of money. Minimalism can be costly: contentment with the strict minimum comes at a price” (2016:35). This is an important acknowledgement that the other minimalist gurus stay away from. Minimalism is often presented as a way to save money by spending less on ‘needless’ items, but there is also an aesthetic element that comes with the lifestyle. Some of the other gurus discuss focusing on quality items over quantity, but ‘quality’ seems to be code for ‘expensive’, much like how ‘authenticity’ is a coded moral judgment. By avoiding outright acknowledgement that minimalism can be costly, the gurus can try to appeal to a larger audience. In general, Loreau is the most open about the cost of minimalism, and seems to embrace expense and luxury⁷⁸ as part of the lifestyle.

In her critique of the Konmari Method, and minimalism more broadly, Arielle Bernstein highlights some of the reasons why items are not always easily disposable. Pointing to the tension of Kondo’s book popularity occurring at the same time as a refugee crisis, Bernstein (2016) contends:

Against this backdrop, Kondo’s advice to live in the moment and discard the things you don’t need seems to ignore some important truths about what it means to be human. It’s easy to see the items we own as oppressive when we can so easily buy new ones. That we can only guess at the things we’ll need in the future and that we don’t always know how deeply we love something until it’s gone.

In the same article, Bernstein (2016) discusses her own family’s history noting:

⁷⁸ Luxury is explored in detail in the following chapter on needs and wants.

Kondo says that we can appreciate the objects we used to love deeply just by saying goodbye to them. But for families that have experienced giving their dearest possessions up unwillingly, ‘putting things in order’ is never going to be as simple as throwing things away. Everything they manage to hold onto matters deeply. Everything is confirmation they survived.

As Bernstein notes, one of the problems with thinking things are easily disposable, is that one needs the means to replace them. Within consumer culture we have become used to ‘new and improved’ and planned obsolescence, but not everyone wants, or is able, to think this way. Another problem highlighted by Bernstein is that objects, even mundane ones, can become highly personal making parting with them incredibly difficult.

Objects Keep Us from Living Freely

To support their argument that we do not need many of our objects, minimalists often claim that clutter hinders reaching their full potential. If people just got rid of their ‘junk’, they could focus on cultivating their authenticity. As argued by Angela Horn (2013) in a TED Talk on owning less, “for us, there is no single object or thing that can ever, ever come close to giving us, or measuring up to, that sense of freedom that we have, with that peace of mind that we have experienced since downsizing”. Similarly, one Instagram user shared that minimalism has given them more time and freedom:

Where I come from, owning more has always been the way to go. Having money has got to be shown through material possessions. On the other hand, having less is a sign of hardship. But taking the minimalist journey has definitely proved to me that less is definitely more. This journey has gotten deeper than just material possessions. It’s freedom. I have been appreciating every single wind that blows my way and every single second I breath around my loved ones. Because those are the little things that never get to come back. The time, the moments, the memories made, the love shared. That’s worth life itself. Not clothes, not shoes, not cars, but TIME. ♥⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Instagram, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdNhFOJFK-N/?hl=en&tagged=minimalism>.

still focused on the things I didn't have" (2017:41). This is a rare instance in the guru texts where there is a suggestion of guilt about accumulation. While this seems to be a sentiment underlying the minimalist lifestyle, it is rarely addressed in my data.

While she does not make mention of guilt, Loreau does tell her readers their superfluous objects are limiting their ability to lead a fulfilling life. She states:

... an excess of things is invasive, overwhelming. It deflects our attention from the essentials. Our minds become cluttered, like an attic full of objects accumulated over time. We feel constrained, unable to move forward. But if we fail to move forward, we are not living. If we carry on accumulating possessions and pursuing multiple desires, we become confused, anxious and listless. (Loreau 2016:14)

Loreau, like Sasaki, hints at the mental health cost of owning too much, but also cautions that people are missing out on life by dedicating their time and energy to the ownership of things. This again suggests consumerism is alienating people from their surroundings.

Jay also cautions readers about owning things for the wrong reasons, asserting:

... if the item in question fills your heart with joy, display it with pride and enjoy its presence. If, on the other hand, you're holding on to it out of a sense of obligation (worried that Aunt Edna would turn over in her grave if you gave away her porcelain teacups) or proof of an experience (as if nobody would believe you visited the Grand Canyon if you ditched the kitschy mug), then some soul-searching is in order. (2016:17)

According to Jay, keeping objects for sentimental reasons requires deep introspection to determine the real reasons and/or insecurities for doing so. Jay seems to judge people for their inability to part with items she deems unnecessary, which is demonstrative of the underlying governmentality present in the self-help texts. The implication being people should be disciplined and rational enough to separate their emotions from their objects.

Finally, in some of the strongest governmentality discourse present in the self-help texts, Loreau champions minimalism by advocating:

Discipline, clarity and determination are the preconditions for a life lived with the strict minimum, in clean, airy rooms. Minimalism requires an ordered lifestyle and careful attention to detail. Eliminate as much as possible, resist becoming overwhelmed by objects and items of furniture, then concentrate on what really matters, free of the constant concern that comes with clutter. Decisions will become natural and instinctive, your dress sense will be more elegant, your home more comfortable and your diary less crowded. Basic good sense will reassert itself. You will find yourself contemplating life with greater lucidity. Learn to eliminate quietly, carefully, but firmly and thoroughly. (2016:12)

This passage from Loreau also demonstrates the link between authenticity and governmentality. The two discourses come together in this passage to recommend minimalism as an appealing lifestyle. The notion of authenticity is present here through its proxies such as ‘natural’ and ‘instinctive’, while governmentality is seen in the preference for ‘discipline’, ‘determination’ and ‘thoroughness’—all of which are presented as preferred personal traits that can be cultivated through minimalism.

The minimalist orientation to objects is complicated, to say the least. As Dulemba (2016) states in her TED Talk, “It all comes down to stuff versus experience. Are you a stuff person? Or are you an experience person? Now, there is nothing wrong with being a stuff person. I have no problem with that. I like visiting other peoples’ stuff. But I think there’s nothing more sad than being an experience-based person stuck in a stuff-based lifestyle. And the weird thing is science has even proven stuff does not make us happy”. In this quote Dulemba appears to be shaming or pitying those who are unable to elevate themselves beyond owning things to instead focus on gaining experiences, which is in line with the tacit judgment present in much of the minimalism discourse.

Superfluous objects are the primary target for minimalists, but there is no easy way to determine what makes something superfluous in the first place. Moreover, minimalists seem to acknowledge the important role objects play in our identity

formation, yet they argue not all items are worthy of this task. In this way, minimalism is about exercising the discipline and discernment necessary to determine between mundane and elevated objects, and carries with it a sense of judgment toward those who are unable to achieve this. Minimalism also seems to be motivated, in part, by feelings of guilt about participating in contemporary consumer capitalism.

Prioritizing Experiences

Following from objects, experiences hold an important place within the minimalist lifestyle. One of the main ways experiences are prioritized over objects is that they are thought to contribute more to our identity formation. For this reason, experiences are also positioned as being more fulfilling than the accumulation of objects.

Additionally, experiences are framed as contributing to community engagement and, within the media sources, are often discussed in relation to millennials.

Identity

Of the minimalist gurus, Sasaki is the most adamant that experiences are foundational to identity formation discussing how experiences contribute to both our identity and our happiness, which is a core minimalist value. First he tells his readers, “When you think about it, it’s experience that builds our unique characteristics, not material objects. So maybe it’s natural that we find our own originality when we strip away all the things that distract us” (Sasaki 2017:141). He then notes, “it’s known that happiness continues for longer periods if it’s based on experiences rather than objects” (Sasaki 2017:183). Sasaki goes on to surmise, “Perhaps that’s why experiences give you longer periods of happiness. You’ll feel a much richer sense of contentment by building

your experiences rather than buying items, because your experiences resist comparison with others'. And because they are tough to compare, your experiences don't even have to be anything rare or expensive to be special to you" (2017:184). Here, Sasaki makes the common authenticity argument that experiences are valuable because they are unique to the individual. However, given the dominance of social media in many peoples' lives, experiences are very much open to comparison. And finally, Sasaki tells his readers, "Unlike our material possessions, our experiences are inside ourselves, and we can take them with us any place we go. No matter what may happen to us, the experiences are ours to keep" (2017:196). In other words, experiences, rather than objects, contribute to cultivating authenticity by affirming our identity and contributing to our happiness.

Also speaking about the connection between experiences and happiness, as well as referencing intuition like Loreau (2017), Hill (2013), in an essay for *The New York Times*, asserts, "intuitively, we know that the best stuff in life isn't stuff at all, and that relationships, experiences and meaningful work are the staples of a happy life". Hill's mention of meaningful work is not unlike Millburn and Nicodemus' contention that everyone should follow their passion. These three men were able to walk away from employment in order to pursue their passions, but given the political economy context discussed in Chapter 1, particularly precarious employment and the high cost of living, many people cannot leave their jobs, no matter how much they hinder their authenticity.

The idea that experiences contribute to our identity is also present in some of the media sources analyzed. For example, Jalaluddin discusses her children and contends:

Instead, I have decided to refocus their interests from things to experiences.

I was inspired by a 2016 article in Forbes, ‘Why You Should Spend Your Money on Experiences, Not Things’ that reinforces the power of experiences that ‘become part of our identity.’ (2017)

In addition to Jalaluddin’s *Toronto Star* essay, Urist writes in *The New York Times*:

In theory, minimalists have more time and money to amass something that researchers have found to provide far more satisfaction than material items: memories. Experiential purchases, psychologists assure us, offer deeper emotional sustenance than any new gadget or piece of furniture. Studies suggest that even the perfect Danish modern chair fades into the background after daily exposure. Yet our brains never quite get over the thrill of, say, hiking Bryce Canyon, which yields more psychological bang for the buck. (2017)

Importantly, both of these articles talk about experiences as things that are purchased, which is not always explicit in the minimalism discourse more generally. For example, one Reddit commenter states, “By spending less on things, I can spend more on experiences, which are much more valuable to me. I’m not deprived at all”⁸¹. There is sometimes mention that money saved from not consuming objects can go toward experiences, but it is also common for experiences to be referenced more abstractly, thus obscuring the cost and inaccessibility of many experiences.

Lastly, in an article for Time.com, Sanburn draws on a happiness expert to advocate for the minimalist lifestyle and claims:

Gilovich, who has been studying happiness as it relates to experiences and possessions for over a decade, says there are three main reasons why doing something brings about more pleasure than owning something: experiences become part of our identity; they promote social connections with others; and they don’t trigger the kind of jealousy or envy we often get when thinking about someone’s material things. (2015)

Given the presence and popularity of social media, it seems unlikely that experiences are less envy-inducing than objects. Indeed, the phrase Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) refers

⁸¹ Reddit, accessed June 15, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6dun02/is_minimalism_deprivation/?ref=search_posts.

to the jealousy induced by seeing others' experiences on social media. If people are consuming experiences rather than objects, it is likely they are also comparing and coveting the experiences of others. Sanburn (2015) goes on to note, "He [Gilovich] does, however, believe that there is a sort of experiential awakening happening, in which people truly are recognizing that there is greater value from experiences even though it will always be tempting to buy material things". It is likely some of the value experiences possess is social capital in terms of demonstrating our worth to others, much like many of the material items we consume. Moreover, as discussed above, consuming experiences rather than objects seems to help mitigate some of the guilt of consuming. Unlike material consumption, which has been tainted by our knowledge of how wasteful it can be, the more unsavory elements of experiential consumption, such as environmental impact and exploitative labour (just like material consumption), appear easier to dismiss.

Fulfillment

Fulfillment is another core value of minimalism and is directly related to authenticity. Both speak to a sense of discontent with one's current state and a desire to live in a way that feels freer and truer to the individual. In this sense, both desires are connected through a feeling of alienation. As an example of how notions of fulfillment and authenticity permeate minimalism discourse, even when neither idea is explicit, Jay argues, "when our homes—the containers of our daily lives—are overflowing with clutter, our souls take a backseat to our stuff. We no longer have the time, energy, and space for new experiences. We feel cramped and inhibited, like we can't fully stretch out and express ourselves" (2016:7-8). Jay's reference to the soul speaks to both authenticity and fulfillment as does her call to 'express ourselves'. In more explicit terms, Jay also

tells her readers, “Instead [of buying more than meets our basic needs], we could devote that time and energy to other, more fulfilling pursuits—such as those of a spiritual, civic, philosophical, artistic, or cultural nature” (2016:265). Again, minimalism discourse often contains an underlying judgment wherein some activities and objects are more worthwhile than others. Implicit here is the idea that people who accumulate objects rather than these approved experiences are less cultured than minimalists who focus on more valuable pursuits. It is again suggested that one should turn to the expertise of minimalist gurus to know which experiences are the correct ones in which to participate.

In a *New York Times* article, Jacoba Urist (2017) speaks to the philosophy and popularity of minimalism, stating, “Minimalism as a lifestyle creed is pretty simple: The less you own, the happier you’ll be. Pare down and declutter, the thinking goes, and your mind will have room to exhale. Minimalists say that it’s about spending more energy on living, less energy on having. With more than six million Instagram posts tagged #minimalism⁸², and four million more tagged #minimalist, it’s a trend that won’t die”. This suggests ‘having’ is not as fulfilling as ‘living’. It also speaks to the aesthetic element of minimalism, which is evident when either of these hashtags is searched on Instagram, resulting in a range of stylish photographs, and further reinforcing the idea that experiences are just another thing to be consumed to communicate our identity and value to ourselves and others. As an example of this, one Instagram post tagged with #minimalism was the following image of a person in Hawaii (Image 5).

⁸² An Instagram search of these hashtags on September 21, 2017 returned 7.8 million (#minimalism) and 5.6 million (#minimalist) results. As of February 1, 2018 these numbers had increased to 9.2 million and 6.5 million, respectively.



Image 5

This image was accompanied with text that read, “Living a life with less things and filling it with more adventure and experiences has been one of the best decisions we’ve made for our family [raised hands emoji]”⁸³.

In line with the idea that minimalism gives practitioners ‘room to exhale’, Loreau tells her readers, “Our primary concern should always be a more profound recognition of our inner self, yet we waste time and precious energy accumulating objects and possessions, and seeking pleasure in food, drink and exciting experiences. We strive endlessly for more possessions and time, but we forget that power and knowledge are inside each one of us” (2016:224). Here, Loreau even seems to suggest experiences are a waste of time and energy and that our focus should instead be on finding our authenticity from within. This also aligns with minimalism’s foundational individualism.

In contrast to Loreau, who cautions those who pursue ‘exciting experiences’, Millburn and Nicodemus tell their readers:

Once you know what excitement looks and *feels* like, and you’re able to relate it to specific experiences that have excited you, it’s easier to answer the question *What would you do with your life if money wasn’t an object?* Answer: *I’d do things that excited me every day.* So, what excites you the most for the longest period of time? That is likely your passion. (2015a:91 original emphasis)

⁸³ Instagram, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bds3S4Vn3gE/?hl=en&tagged=minimalism>.

Millburn and Nicodemus want people to lean into excitement and follow their passions rather than give in to accumulating more non-consumables. However, money is very much an object for most people, and while it makes sense from a self-help standpoint to imagine an ideal future, following one's passion simply is not possible for many people. In another of their books, Millburn and Nicodemus acknowledge, "In truth, most of us desire both: we desire the experiences *and* the stuff. Usually the latter gets in the way of the former: too often our material desires get in the way of a more meaningful life. We are what we desire" (2015b:20 original emphasis). These authors, who at times discuss their addictive habits, often refer to the excess things they owned before minimalism as 'pacifiers' suggesting they were in an infantile state prior to finding minimalism, and that those who participate in consumerism are also akin to children who are yet to advance to the elevated state of minimalists. Ultimately, minimalism requires discipline and a desire for autonomy in order to pursue a more fulfilling and authentic life.

Community and Giving Back

While the minimalist lifestyle is rooted in individualism, there are occasional appeals to collectivity and community. According to some of the minimalist gurus, one of the benefits of the lifestyle is that it gets people involved with their communities:

In our quest to become minimalists, we want to reduce the amount of things in our homes that require our care and attention. Fortunately, we have ample opportunity to do so—simply by shifting some of our pleasures and activities into the public realm. In fact, it produces a pretty wonderful side effect. For when we hang out in parks, museums, movie houses, and coffee shops—instead of trying to create similar experiences in our own homes—we become more socially active and civically engaged. By breaking down the walls of stuff around us, we're able to get out into the world and enjoy fresher, more direct, and more rewarding experiences. (Jay 2016:51-52)

Again, there is implicit judgment about how people spend their time, with the suggestion that those listed by Jay are appropriate. Jay continues, “When we’re no longer chained to our stuff, we can savor life, connect with others, and participate in our communities. We’re more open to experiences, and better able to recognize and take advantage of opportunities. The less baggage we’re dragging around (both physically and mentally), the more living we can do!” (2016:33). This is similar to the discussion in the preceding chapter about how minimalism says we are slaves to consumerism. Not only are we missing out on experiences, we are also failing as citizens when we spend time isolated with our objects. However, Jay does not elaborate on how attending “movie houses” makes one more civically engaged beyond being in proximity to others. Her suggestions are also more costly than simply performing similar activities in one’s home.

Related to the cost of objects and experiences, Sasaki suggests, “Minimalism is very effective for cutting down on costs, but it isn’t limited to just that. We can change the way we use money—we can direct it away from things that are just for show, and invest instead in experiences, people, or new initiatives. We can spend our money where it’s really important” (2017:210). Demonstrating this way of thinking, Becker (2016) discusses the charity he and his wife founded, and offers it as a cause readers could donate to as part of their minimalism-inspired civic-mindedness. Likewise, Millburn and Nicodemus say a benefit of minimalism is having more time for “contribution” to causes telling readers, “Minimalists don’t focus on having less, less, less. Rather, we focus on making room for more, more, more: more time, more passion, more experiences, more growth, more contribution, more contentment—and more freedom. It just so happens that clearing the clutter from life’s path helps us make that room” (2015b:3). In their case,

Millburn and Nicodemus volunteered with Habitat for Humanity shortly after becoming minimalists. They also point to the all-important notion of freedom. Importantly, while these gurus suggest readers engage in their communities, what they are ultimately recommending is that individuals can personally benefit from these activities.

While not a common topic of discussion, community does come up in a Reddit thread on getting started with the minimalist lifestyle:

Commenter 1:

You don't have to have everything need [sic]. They only need to be reasonably accessible. You don't have to have a lawnmower if neighbors are willing to share. You don't have to have a book if it can be borrowed from the library or read online. You don't have to own a set of professional haircare equipment if you go to a barber. You don't have to have a car if some combination of public transport and Uber suffice.

Commenter 2:

Honestly though. You should probably get your own lawn mower. Your neighbors don't mind sharing if yours just broke down or is getting serviced. But other than that, you're mooching. Otherwise, get a lawn mower and let them know they can get rid of theirs.

Commenter 3:

not necessarily. if you are doing something for them in return. having lived in a sharing community, it was not at [sic] unusual to have arrangements like this. everyone contributes in some way. no one is mooching.

Commenter 1:

Precisely. Neighbors can cut down on a lot of crap if they just get to know one another. Currently clothing infant twins in their older sister's clothing, that have already gone through a couple of other kids besides.

Commenter 2:

Fair enough.⁸⁴

In addition to the Reddit forums serving as a community space in which like-minded people can gather to discuss minimalism, this passage also echoes the discussion in the

⁸⁴ Reddit, accessed June 15, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6c7j21/whats_your_helpful_starter_pack_for_someone_that/.

preceding chapter about the ‘sharing economy’. Though, in this case, there seems to be a more reciprocal orientation to sharing. Similarly, a participant in the *Minimalism* documentary discussed how minimalism can bring people together stating:

There’s something about not being prepared for every moment that actually helps you engage with your community. Being pregnant, for instance, it’s such a limited time. I had a dress-up event to go to and I said to David [her partner], ‘let me see if I can find a dress’ and I was thinking, gosh, this is really outdated. I have two months left. The event is next week. What am I gonna do? So I called a couple of my girlfriends ‘hey, do you have any dresses I can, you know, go through?’ But in the past, I definitely would have bought what I needed when I needed it, because that’s what you do. You prepare yourself, you know, for your situation. The beauty of it is, it’s become very communal. Our friends ask us for stuff. We’ve become closer to people because of it. (D’Avella 2015)

From these two examples, the suggestion neighbours share resources points to an idealized past which, as in Chapter 5, is considered more authentic than the present.

Interestingly, in a popular Reddit thread about disliking the Minimalists (Millburn and Nicodemus), the conversation became driven by people who felt marginalized by the version of the lifestyle presented by these gurus. Referencing the *Minimalism* documentary, one Reddit commenter shared:

That was exactly how I felt watching it. I’m a black American stuck in the lower middle class. I felt very interested in the concept of minimalism, but totally disconnected from almost everyone in the documentary. Everything sounded like, ‘I got tired of being surrounded by things that all of my money gave me so I decided to try something new... live like I have nothing. It’s revolutionary!’ it felt like everyone was just following a trend. One person that *did* impress me was the woman who shrank her wardrobe down and said it helped her make connections with other people when she had to borrow outfits from friends for things like a color themed party. That was a fascinating way to look at things. This way of thinking helps counter some of the technological advances that keep us from seeing each other in person because we chatted on FB/text/phone⁸⁵.

⁸⁵ Reddit, accessed January 19, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6g10y1/i_hate_the_minimalists/ (original emphasis).

This minimalist raises a number of critiques of minimalism, most notably classism, but also feels there is a place for them in the lifestyle, and is especially drawn to its potential to foster a sense of community against a backdrop of increasingly digital interaction (while interacting with a minimalist community in a digital setting). The overall tone of this Reddit thread was that The Minimalists had essentially tried to turn the lifestyle into a brand and the result was that many feel this is disingenuous, runs counter to the lifestyle, and essentially amounted to their being inauthentic.

Returning to the documentary, Sociologist Juliet Schor, whose work on plenitude is cited in earlier chapters, was interviewed and, along with thoughts on material culture, she spoke about community, stating, “If I had to revise the American Dream it would be more about coming together in community. It would be more about a society which had much less inequality and more fairness in which everybody had a chance, and that is responsible toward the planet and our ecosystem. To me, that would be an American Dream” (D’Avella 2015). This statement is present in the documentary about minimalism, but the sentiment, especially regarding inequality, is lacking elsewhere in the discourse. While the potential is there for minimalism to be oriented around a sense of community and shared purpose, my data suggests the lifestyle is currently aimed at individuals attempting to address personal concerns and discontent arising from a crisis of authenticity brought on by contemporary consumer capitalism.

Millennials and Minimalism

As with the previous chapter, the media sources tend to associate minimalism with millennials, particularly when it comes to prioritizing experiences over objects. Speaking of her own involvement with minimalism, Rosie Leizrowice (2017) says,

“Evidence shows that my generation tends to focus on experiences over possessions. Whilst people used to want stability, now it is all about flexibility and freedom. When I think of my future, I get excited about the idea of traveling the world or working freelance. A white picket fence house with a mortgage, a car, and heaps of belongings do not fit into that picture”. This is demonstrative of the ways in which minimalism discourse is steeped in the neoliberal ideals of flexibility and freedom, which seem to be embraced by the author as personal values or character traits that have nothing to do with neoliberalism. This passage is also demonstrative of an imagined future in which the individual’s life is better because of minimalism. Leizrowice claims these ideals are shared by her generation and that as a result, they prioritize experiences over objects.

This is echoed by Weinswing, writing for *Forbes*, who argues:

Even as millennials pay off their debt and garner more disposable income, we believe they will choose to spend their money on experiences—such as traveling, concerts and eating out—rather than things. Other industry trends support this idea. The sharing economy, in which consumers choose to use the new set of services available through Uber and Airbnb rather than buy cars or time shares, and the caring economy, comprised of consumers who spend on ethical and sustainable brands, are two examples. We predict companies that provide consumers, particularly millennials, with services that fit into this minimalist and socially conscious lifestyle will see success. (2016)

Importantly, and keeping in mind that this was written for a business audience, this passage illustrates how individuals are treated as consumers, even when their lifestyle is centered around minimizing individual consumption. It also points to the idea of the citizen-consumer who exercises civic engagement through consumption, and suggests this may be a generational shift. It does not however consider the possibility that one of the reasons young people may be spending their money on experiences rather than objects is because many of them are unable to afford their own spaces in which to amass

material items. As Weinswing (2016) argues, “Millennials are highly adept at using technology and social media influences many of their purchases. They prefer to spend on experiences rather than on stuff ... They favor products marketed as ethical, sustainable and environmentally friendly”. In this way, even minimalists can still be treated as a target consumer group with marketing tailored to their preferences.

Minimalism Requires Capital

As discussed throughout this chapter, minimalism can be costly. In addition to money, minimalism requires time, as well as social and cultural capital. These elements of minimalism are commonly critiqued by the media sources analyzed, and I have touched on them in my discussion thus far, but they are worth exploring in more detail. In Chapter 3 I discussed the relationship between lifestyle and consumption, arguing consumption is an important, but not the only, element of lifestyle. However, minimalism is a lifestyle oriented around consumption, consisting of strong views on what should and should not be consumed. Sasaki, for example, asserts, “Unnecessary material objects suck up our time, our energy, and our freedom. I think minimalists are starting to realize that” (2017:32). Like others, Sasaki sees freedom as a core personal value that, along with time and energy, is being wasted on consumption.

A primary critique of minimalism is that it is elitist. As Loreau acknowledges:

Yes, minimalism can be costly. A scattering of ornaments may be cheaper than a plain wall paneled in fine wood. But a minimalist lifestyle needs more than cash. It demands unshakeable conviction. A life dedicated to order and beauty can be achieved without neglecting your passions: music, yoga, collecting, hi-tech gadgetry. Never treat something you consider a personal talisman as you would a simple, decorative piece, however. Your talisman is your personal energy source, and should be kept in its own special place. (2016:22)

Here, Loreau tells her readers minimalism is possible with conviction, but it also requires money and taste. One needs to have the social and cultural capital to collect the right items, or to choose the right design elements, or to know which items to value as talismans. This is similar to Jay (2016) who, in passages quoted earlier in this chapter, casually recommends worthwhile and culturally valuable experiences to her readers.

Loreau also guides aspiring minimalists about the types of objects to purchase:

Surround yourself with ‘basics’. Free your imagination by choosing pieces manufactured according to artisan traditions drawing on the know-how, experience and wisdom of craftspeople who have handed down their techniques from generation to generation. Prefer these to the creations of individual artists, often made solely to boost their own reputations and personal wealth. Buying a quality bag or string of pearls from a good jeweler may seem snobbish, but the cost and quality of the pieces are justified when you know how much work and skill have gone into their making. (2016:38)

Loreau, who very much appears to write with a female audience in mind, also spends time recommending her readers invest in a high quality (and high cost) handbag. Her recommendations about clothing, interior design, and accessories all require both financial and cultural capital. In this passage she also talks about objects in terms of their proprietary authenticity suggesting artisan items are worthier of investment.

In an article for Time.com Josh Sanburn (2015) talks about the minimalist preference for experiences, noting, “Millburn, Nicodemus and a growing number of similarly minded purgers around the U.S. have forgone non-necessities in exchange for a much simpler existence in the last few years. Minimalists like to say that they’re living more meaningfully, more deliberately, that getting rid of most material possessions in their lives allows them to focus on what’s important: friends, hobbies, travel,

experiences”. However, focusing on friends, hobbies, travel, and experiences all cost money and require time many people cannot afford.

Returning to Bernstein’s article in *The Atlantic*, she points to the value objects can hold in people’s lives and how minimalism is not an option for everyone:

Of course, in order to feel comfortable throwing out all your old socks and handbags, you have to feel pretty confident that you can easily get new ones. Embracing a minimalist lifestyle is an act of trust. For a refugee, that trust has not yet been earned. The idea that going through items cheerfully evaluating whether or not objects inspire happiness is fraught for a family like mine, for whom cherished items have historically been taken away. For my grandparents, the question wasn’t whether an item sparked joy, but whether it was necessary for their survival. In America, that obsession transformed into a love for all items, whether or not they were valuable in a financial or emotional sense. If our life is made from the objects we collect over time, then surely our very sense of who we are is dependent upon the things we carry. (2015)

Bernstein writes about refugees and her own family’s experience, but there is a broader class-based critique here wherein refugees are by no means the only people hesitant to trust the minimalist creed to discard belongings.

Mentioning Bernstein, Kyle Chayka, in *The New York Times*, argues:

Writing in *The Atlantic* in March, Arielle Bernstein described minimalism’s ban on clutter as ‘privilege’ that runs counter to the value ascribed to an abundance of objects by those who have suffered from a lack of them—less-empowered people like refugees or immigrants. The movement, such as it is, is led in large part by a group of men who gleefully ditch their possessions as if to disavow the advantages by which they obtained them. But it takes a lot to be a minimalist: social capital, a safety net and access to the internet. The technology we call minimalist might fit into our pockets, but it depends on a vast infrastructure of grim, air-conditioned server farms and even grimmer Chinese factories. (2016:13)

The conditions of consumer capitalist production raised by Chayka are rarely present in ‘official’ minimalism discourse. While there is some mention of concern for the environment, there is also a lot of championing of technology, without reference to either

the financial, human, or environmental cost of such items. Technologies such as smartphones are considered compatible with minimalism because of their multi-functionality—one no longer needs to own a phone, and a watch, and a calculator, and an address book, and, and, and ...—but their multiple non-monetary costs do not seem to count as clutter.

What minimalists champion as flexibility, others increasingly experience as precarity. This is echoed in a *Slate* article by Katy Waldman in response to Hill's (2013) *New York Times* essay on his experience with minimalism. Waldman observes:

And it wasn't just the hipper-than-thou details that grated, but the sense that Hill was writing from a socioeconomic blind spot. Didn't he realize that minimalism might prove, well, *expensive*? Owning the one übergadget that obviates the need for everything else in your pockets is a luxury. So is dumping out the content of your junk drawers because, should the need arise for X, you can always go out and buy it. A clear-eyed Tumblr post by Charlie Lloyd put it best: 'Poor people don't have clutter because they're too dumb to see the virtue of living simply; they have it to reduce risk'. (2013 original emphasis)

The relationship between minimalism and risk is addressed in greater detail in the following chapter, however it is worth noting risk does not seem to be a big issue, particularly for the minimalist gurus, precisely because they are able to mitigate it.

Summary

Much like the past and present, the discussion of objects and experiences demonstrates the complex ways in which numerous issues are negotiated to both support and critique minimalism. Objects and experiences are important to the lifestyle, particularly as they relate to identity formation. This is seen in the sometimes-conflicting advice from minimalist gurus. As Jay (2016) says, "We are not what we own". However, as Loreau (2016) cautions, "be careful to select them [items] as extensions of yourself".

Prioritizing experiences over objects highlights some of the core tensions of minimalism. First, minimalists recognize the importance of objects for identity formation within material culture, but also dismiss objects as superfluous to identity formation. Second, experiences are prioritized without acknowledging how this can be just as ethically fraught as consuming objects. And third, the capital required to be minimalist is often glazed over in favour of focusing on the personal benefits of the lifestyle.

As discussed in Chapter 2, objects and experiences are essential to how we understand authenticity, and this can be seen in minimalism discourse. Both objects and experiences are discussed as being directly tied to one's identity. With objects, some are identified as elevated because of their emotional and symbolic value, while those deemed superfluous are seen to hinder authenticity. Experiences, on the other hand, are simply understood as contributing to one's identity and authenticity. This distinction serves to further the minimalist critique that consumerism inhibits the ability to fulfill potential.

Additionally, the discursive formations of objects and experiences further exhibit how the neoliberal rationalities of freedom and individuality are embedded in the process of lifestyle formation. However, minimalism also demonstrates a tension between individualism and community. On one hand, the lifestyle is focused on improving individual lives, while on the other it occasionally promotes sharing and community. Moreover, while it is not an organized social movement, minimalism does represent a form of community which is particularly evident on the social media sites analyzed for this project. Finally, governmentality, when understood as the 'conduct of conduct' is evident within minimalism discourse promoting discipline and discernment as the path to happiness, fulfillment, and authenticity.

Chapter 7: Meeting Needs in Pursuit of Wants

Like the two preceding chapters, minimalism discourse demonstrates a complex orientation toward needs and wants. Within minimalism discourse there are real needs and artificial needs as well as material wants and existential wants. Minimalism places an emphasis on meeting one's needs so that focus can then be placed on meeting existential wants. Again, because consumerism is 'the bad guy' in minimalism discourse it is situated as being the source of artificial needs, particularly through advertising. In terms of authenticity, real needs, such as adequate food and shelter, are meant to take precedence over consumerism-dictated needs such as seasonally trendy clothing, or the latest 'must-have' gadget. Moreover, the primary aim of minimalism is to devote one's resources to fulfilling existential wants, namely happiness, freedom, and authenticity.

The minimalist emphasis on freedom is again shown in the complex discursive formulation of needs and wants which demonstrates how this lifestyle is built on a foundation of neoliberal ideals. Distinguishing between needs and wants also illustrates how a desire for authenticity undergirds the minimalist lifestyle. Basic needs are considered authentic because they are natural and necessary while existential wants are deemed authentic because they relate to fulfilling human potential. Again, consumerism is situated as hindering this process by creating material wants and artificial needs.

This chapter begins by looking at the minimalist desire for happiness. It then moves on to consider the role risk plays in minimalism discourse. I next look at how minimalism links to discourses on physical and mental health. Following this, I explore the minimalist distinction between 'luxury and 'enough', as well as the discourse's

passing mentions of the environment. Finally, this chapter looks at the distinction made between real and artificial needs within minimalism discourse.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Happiness is a core value within minimalism, and is typically positioned, along with freedom, as a primary reason for pursuing the lifestyle. Much like authenticity, happiness tends to evade definition. However, I read both as addressing the same desire for contentment and wholeness, or, as Rae (2010) suggests, a state of non-alienation.

In her TED Talk on owning less, Kim Coupounas (2014) states, “Happiness, when it comes from buying things and stuff is fleeting and therefore an illusion”, thus implying that happiness originating from other sources, such as experiences, is real. This is yet another example of the use of the rhetoric of authenticity to frame consumerism as an ‘illusion’ and position minimalism as the authentic alternative. Similarly, Marie Kondo directly links the process of decluttering with the desire for happiness. She also connects a lack of happiness to living within a consumer society:

What is the perfect amount of possessions? I think that most people don't know. If you have lived in Japan or the United States all your life, you have almost certainly been surrounded by far more than you need. This makes it hard for many people to imagine how much they need to live comfortably. **As you reduce your belongings through the process of tidying, you will come to a point where you suddenly know how much is just right for you.** You will feel it as clearly as if something has clicked inside your head and said, ‘Ah! This is just the amount I need to live comfortably. This is all I need to be happy. I don't need anything more.’ The satisfaction that envelops your whole being at that point is palpable. I call this the ‘just-right click point.’ Interestingly, once you have passed this point, you'll find that the amount you own never increases. And that is precisely why you will never rebound. (Kondo 2014:124 original emphasis)

In this passage, Kondo also establishes herself as an expert by suggesting others do not have the knowledge to determine the exact number of things to own. In addition to her appeal to expertise, Kondo plays into the neoliberal emphasis on individualism by stating that each person has their own ‘just-right click point’ they have to learn to identify and work towards. Interestingly, despite suggesting that living within a consumer society makes us unhappy, at one point Kondo also suggests we learn what makes us happy through consumption. She claims, “Because they [younger sisters] receive so much clothing from others, they don’t really need to shop and therefore they have less opportunity to develop the instinct for what really inspires joy” (Kondo 2014:56). If it is true that through shopping we learn to hone our instincts, then consumption is a rather important practice to engage in, which seems counter to the goals of minimalism. However, minimalism discourse implies these same instincts can be developed through the process of decluttering by carefully discerning which items are worth keeping.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Kondo goes as far as to propose that our possessions have feelings and also desire happiness. She contends:

To truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose. To get rid of what you no longer need is neither wasteful nor shameful. Can you truthfully say that you treasure something buried so deeply in a closet or drawer that you have forgotten its existence? If things had feelings, they would certainly not be happy. Free them from the prison to which you have relegated them. Help them leave that deserted isle to which you have exiled them. Let them go, with gratitude. Not only you, but your things as well, will feel clear and refreshed when you are done tidying. (Kondo 2014:61 original emphasis)

Here, not unlike those in Chapter 5 who assert that people are slaves to consumerism, Kondo claims our things have lives of their own and that, by holding onto them, we are preventing them from also finding happiness or, in self-help-speak, living their best lives.

It seems that within minimalism discourse individualism and autonomy extend to inanimate objects. This way of thinking also hints at some of the guilt underlying minimalism wherein readers are made to feel badly about how they are treating their items. Importantly, Kondo points to shame here which, along with guilt, seem to underscore the minimalist lifestyle. Guilt in particular gets almost no overt mention but is present, for example, when Becker (2016) and Jay (2016) both tell their readers to compare their living conditions with those of developing nations. Walmsley (2006) also makes passing reference to feeling guilty about accumulation. Participating in consumerism increasingly involves awareness of the conditions of production and the environmental impact of mass-consumption, and minimalism seems in part to be motivated by feelings of guilt about this. However, it is not framed in these terms.

Returning to happiness, Jay claims it is about being content meeting our basic needs, rather than constantly seeking more. This is something she repeats in her book:

... even though we've satisfied our needs, there's still the matter of our wants and desires. In order to experience the joy of 'enough,' that's where we'll need to focus. It's quite simple, actually: happiness is wanting what you have. When your wants are satisfied by the things you already have, there's no need to acquire any more. But wants can be pesky little things; and in order to get them under control, we have to understand what drives them. (Jay 2016:53-54)

According to Jay it is the individual's responsibility to control their wants and they have to change their mindset in order to be happy. In line with governmentality theory we also see here the responsabilizing of the individual to take control over their wants, rather than addressing the root cause of excessive material wants—consumer culture. She follows this by drawing from economics to support her argument, claiming:

The fact of the matter is, once we've covered our basic needs, our happiness has very little to do with the amount of stuff we own. Beyond

this point, the marginal utility (or satisfaction) derived from consuming additional goods diminishes rapidly, and, at what economists call the ‘satiation point,’ it actually turns negative. (Perhaps the reason you’re reading this book!) That’s why ‘more’ often fails to satisfy us—and in some cases, can even make us less happy. (Jay 2016:55)

Like Kondo, Jay is here establishing her position as an expert who should be turned to concerning matters of decluttering and happiness. Drawing on expert knowledge is typical of neoliberalism, and self-help in particular, where people reference their own experiences or generic ‘expertise’ from others to establish authority on a given subject.

Sasaki is also adamant happiness is a primary concern for individuals, asserting “We all want to be happy. We all work hard at our jobs, studies, sports, parenting, or hobbies because when you get right down to it, we’re all just looking for happiness. The quintessential energy that drives us is the desire to be happy” (Sasaki 2017:24). He links happiness with minimalism by arguing, “Minimalism is a lifestyle in which you reduce your possessions to the absolute minimum you need. Living as a minimalist with the bare essentials has not only provided superficial benefits like the pleasure of a tidy room or the simple ease of cleaning, it has also led to a more fundamental shift. It’s given me a chance to think about what it really means to be happy” (Sasaki 2017:24). Interestingly, rather than claim minimalism has made him happy, he instead offers that it can give him more time to think about happiness. Sasaki also states, “I never realized before that I already had everything I needed to live a decent life. I kept wanting more and never felt satisfied. Often we think that our reality is so far removed from our ideal lifestyle that we must have suffered some misfortune along the way. But all that does is make us unhappy” (2017:57). Here, Sasaki links happiness with meeting one’s needs rather than

giving into wants, much like Jay (2016), demonstrating governmentality thinking by telling readers to take ownership over their lifestyle rather than blaming 'misfortune'.

Finally, Sasaki tells his readers, "I want to show you how amazing it is to have less, even though that's the complete opposite of how we've been taught to be happy. We think that the more we have, the happier we will be. We never know what tomorrow will bring, so we collect and save as much as we can. This means we need a lot of money, so we gradually start judging people by how much money they have" (2017:23). The ways in which we judge others by wealth and accumulation is one of Sasaki's main problems with consumerism, and with his own pre-minimalist mindset. Like Jay (2016), Sasaki proposes happiness comes from simply changing one's mindset to focus on what you have, rather than what you want. Here, Sasaki also hints at the connection between minimalism, consumption, and risk, which is addressed in the following section.

Loreau also speaks about happiness as a natural human desire. In doing so, she further talks about consumption and excess accumulation as a form of slavery, stating:

'I, me, mine' are chains. They enslave us because they apply to the things that enrich us: wealth, money, power, a name. They are equivalent of the verbs 'to take', 'to cling on to', to 'want', to 'accumulate'. These are of course human tendencies, but to be human also means to seek happiness. Elsewhere. Once you have trained your brain and nervous system to embrace the idea of non-dependence, and to go no further, you will obtain everything you desire in life. And you will look at the world through far more optimistic eyes. 'Practice' and 'training' are the key. (Loreau 2016:225)

Again, adopting the minimalist mindset requires training and practice akin to treating oneself as a project to be managed and worked on, which is how Rose (1998, 1999a) describes the enterprising subject that results from being taught to self-govern.

Like Loreau, Millburn and Nicodemus say we are trapped by consumerism, “Consumption isn’t the problem: compulsory consumption is. We’ve trapped ourselves by thinking consumerism will make us happy—that buying crap we don’t need will somehow make us whole” (2015b:3). Wanting to be ‘whole’ also speaks to a desire for authenticity that, within consumer culture, is often transferred to consumption and accumulation. In another of their books, Millburn and Nicodemus state, “... we spent more money than we made, purchasing things like luxury cars, large houses, big-screen TVs, fancy furniture, expensive vacations, and everything else our heavily mediated consumer culture told us would make us happy” (2015a:8). Millburn and Nicodemus say they consumed beyond their means because they were taught to by advertising such that their consumer behaviour was not free and authentic, but mediated. However, they were able to overcome this by changing their mindsets toward happiness and success.

The desire for happiness is also present in some of the Reddit discussions⁸⁶. For example, one commenter shared:

I want to be comfortable. I want to have what I need and I want to not care about anything else. Everything else in my life, all my time, my attention, my daily activities, my money, all of the stuff that isn’t ‘the shit I own’ I want that all to be focused on what I’m interested in, what I like to do, the people I love, and the way I want to spend my time. I want, above all else, to be happy. And I think minimalism is a good first step towards letting myself do that⁸⁷.

This passage is a good example of what I am referring to as existential wants, with happiness being most important. Similarly, in another Reddit discussion, a commenter shared what they want out of the minimalist lifestyle:

⁸⁶ Also see the Reddit quote used to open the Introduction.

⁸⁷ Reddit, accessed June 15, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6d679j/as_a_minimalist_what_is_your_life_aspiration/.

I want a HAPPY life. That's the point of living right? Minimalism is my key to achieving a happy life. Appreciating and being grateful for everything I have. Treating my objects and treasures with respect. More time for family, friends and experiences. Less worries about money, cleaning, finding things in a messy room. Treating our planet with care and being responsible for it. Less carbon footprint. Minimalism has made me proud of myself and not ashamed. :)⁸⁸.

This passage illustrates some of what makes this minimalist happy, none of which has to do with consumption. However, their happiness does in part come from the things they own. This comment also hints at the connections between minimalism, consumption, and mental health addressed later in this chapter.

Happiness is a core tenant of the minimalist lifestyle. And, as I argue, is directly related to authenticity if both are understood as experiencing a state of non-alienation. In this way, the minimalist desire for happiness serves as further critique of consumerism which is situated as at best limiting happiness, and at worst directly causing unhappiness. Moreover, the minimalist desire for happiness seems to further point to consumerism as a source of false consciousness in which one's ability to reach their full potential or to know their authentic self is stifled by being taught to pursue artificial needs.

Dealing with 'What If?'

While not a primary focus of minimalism, risk does appear in the discourse in an interesting way wherein minimalists appear less concerned with risk than before they adopted the lifestyle. Essentially, risk is cited as a reason for the excess accumulation that defined their pre-minimalist lives. For example, Kondo tells her readers:

Human judgment can be divided into two broad types: intuitive and rational. When it comes to selecting what to discard, it is actually our rational judgment that causes trouble. Although intuitively we know that

⁸⁸ Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6abbnk/what_are_you_trying_to_achieve_in_minimalism/.

an object has no attraction for us, our reason raises all kinds of arguments for not discarding it, such as ‘I might need it later’ and ‘It’s a waste to get rid of it.’ These thoughts spin round and round in our mind, making it impossible to let go. (2014:59)

Yet again, one has to change their thinking when becoming a minimalist. The division of intuitive and rational thinking also points to a call for authenticity, where minimalists are encouraged to trust their instincts and act based on their true desires. The disregard for waste is also important to note as it is common in many of the minimalist gurus’ texts. Most of the gurus mention recycling or donating items, but the main message seems to be, ‘don’t worry about waste, just get rid of it’. While this approach may result in owning less, it does not minimize the impact of waste from one’s earlier consumption habits.

In confirmation of Kondo’s method, one Reddit commenter noted, “While I did snicker a bit at the thought of thank your stuff, it did get me past the ‘sunk cost’ or ‘I might need this ... someday’ barriers to letting things go. It is worth trying, even if it seems woo-woo”⁸⁹. This sentiment was common on a thread about the Konmari Method. A number of commenters thought it was a little strange to thank their belongings before getting rid of them, but they also found the method helpful. In the case of this commenter, it helped them address their ‘what if?’ concerns, which point to a sense of unease that seems common in contemporary society. Indeed, while not their main focus, both Rose (1996, 1999b) and Giddens (1991) discuss risk as part of modern society.

The feeling of uncertainty leading some people to accumulate things prior to becoming minimalists is captured by Millburn and Nicodemus who observe:

Ah, those three delicate words: just in case. I know them too well. For the longest time I had an intimate relationship with *just in case*. I held on to hundreds—maybe thousands—of things, *just in case* I needed them. Too

⁸⁹ Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6gdpb/konmari_method/Konmari_Method?.

often I didn't let go because I *might* need some miscellaneous material possession in some distant hypothetical future. Even when I'd travel, I'd always pack way too much—*just in case*. (2014:86 original emphasis)

This passage points to the crux of the risk society, which is that we are taught to be personally responsible for mitigating imagined risks, often by engaging in preparatory and speculative consumption and accumulation. As is common of the class-based critique often aimed at minimalism, not everyone can get rid of the things they hold onto 'just in case', because there is a very real possibility they will not be able to afford a replacement should they need one (e.g., Waldman 2013). However, minimalism itself is situated as mitigating risks deemed to be artificial and constructed to drive consumption.

Further demonstrating the 'just in case' conundrum as well as the 'just get rid of it' mentality is a *Real Simple* online article about dealing with excess handbags. In this article there are five recommendations made, the first of which states:

The way you think about your possessions is part of what makes it so hard to give them up. Ever find yourself thinking, 'I should keep this tote just in case' or 'I can always use this clutch' (even though you haven't in ages)? Or feel guilty getting rid of an evening bag because 'it was pricey' or 'it's so pristine'? Experts suggest swapping out that train of thought for more of a cut-and-dry guideline: if you haven't used it in the last year, get rid of it⁹⁰.

Again, this passage demonstrates how minimalists, or people interested in decluttering, need to change their ways of thinking in order to succeed at the lifestyle. It also addresses the element of guilt that seems to underscore the discourse, however this guilt seems personal rather than being directed at how one's consumer behaviour may negatively impact the lives of others. Lastly, this statement from an expert source on home

⁹⁰ This webpage had no author or date. Reference: Real Simple. "Here's Why It's So Hard To Declutter Your Stash of Bags (and How to Finally Do It)." Retrieved January 10, 2018 (<https://real.cimple.com/home-organizing/organizing/organizing-more-rooms/declutter-bags>).

organization alludes to other ‘experts’ to support their claim, which is in keeping with the genre of self-help and lifestyle resources.

Similarly, an Instagram user who offers life coaching shared a quote credited to Mother Theresa (Image 6) and some thoughts on getting rid of excess clothing.

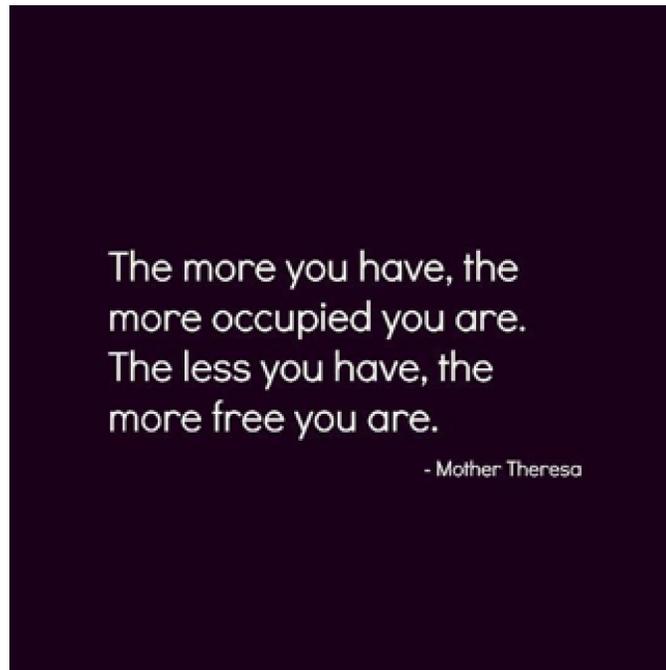


Image 6

The text with this image gets at the ‘just in case’ mentality that helps drive consumption:

Let Go and Let Flow Challenge-Day 5-closet/clothes^[sic]Are you ready to shed some clothes? I have clothes in my closet I like but never wear and today I am going to let them go. We all have some clothes that we safe [sic] for a special occasion/date or party/event but is that ever coming.....Do you really need all the clothes in your closet? And if you would be in the store right now would you buy it again? If the answer is no.....throw or give it away⁹¹.

The use of a quote credited to Mother Theresa illustrates the sense of spirituality that seems to underscore the lifestyle for some people. While it is not an overtly religious lifestyle, minimalism does seem akin to practices like yoga or mindfulness that have roots in Eastern philosophy but have been coopted and commodified in recent years. Moreover,

⁹¹ Instagram, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bec2fuYhSYX/?tagged=declutter>.

favouring asceticism over greed and accumulation are core to many religions. However, minimalism seems to first and foremost be about critiquing, and offering an alternative to, consumerism and is quite secular in its approach.

Loreau, meanwhile, argues consumerism itself is risky claiming, “We are only just beginning to realize the dangers of excess and opulence. More and more people are seeking the joys and benefits of a simpler, more natural existence, looking beyond the endless temptations of consumerism to devise new, meaningful, contemporary lifestyles” (2016:2-4). Loreau does not specify what the dangers of excess and opulence are, but suggests they should be approached with caution. She is also, as she often does throughout her book, using fear to support her argument on the benefits of minimalism.

In a 2014 *Globe and Mail* interview with a minimalist blogger, writer Dave McGinn asked, “How do you deal with the anxiety of getting rid of stuff that you think you might one day need?”. The blogger responded, “It is scary. But solutions come to you, especially in this sharing culture. We’re getting so much more savvy about using what we have and using services and sharing goods. So it’s not as scary anymore to get rid of things”. As discussed earlier, the ‘sharing culture’ can help mitigate risk, but many of the shared services require money for access, so they do not address risk for everyone. The promotion of the sharing culture is also in line with the notion of an idealized, authentic past as discussed in Chapter 5, wherein minimalism is thought to be similar to the perceived collectivity of the past. Moreover, this exchange points to the connection between risk and mental health with the assumption by the writer that getting rid of possessions provokes anxiety. Anxiety is often mentioned in minimalism discourse and is considered in depth in the following section on physical and mental health.

In another *Globe and Mail* article, Himelfarb (2013) discusses the Edwardian and minimalist trends and speaks to a Toronto shopkeeper who speculates, “‘I think it’s fascinating that the faster we move, technologically, the further we seem to be digging into our past for lifestyle cues,’ ... ‘Maybe it’s that so much is unknown as to our future—technologically, ecologically, economically—that we anchor to things from the past that can steady us.’”. This shopkeeper touches on the connection between nostalgia for the past and fear of the future that is present in minimalism discourse and that links with the broader risk society. Risk, and fear of the unknown, impact consumption both in terms of what people buy, and what they get rid of to become minimalists.

Connecting needs and wants with risk management, one Reddit commenter shared their experience with trying to figure out whether an item was worth keeping:

What’s been a challenge has been trying to figure out the difference between want versus need versus ‘don’t necessarily need it all the time but sometimes I do’ or ‘I suppose I could do without it but I still use it once in a while’.

Some items are very much in a grey area where ... I kinda use it, and it’s kinda useful, but I suppose I *could* do without it, but I’m not sure.

I have a leatherman I keep in the glove box in my car ... I rarely use the thing, but when I need it, I’m super happy that I have it handy because it can be really useful. I suppose I could do without it but I don’t want to be somewhere and thinking ‘fuck I really need that thing right now’⁹².

This passage demonstrates how complex the negotiation between needs and wants can be, and articulates some of the reasons why people hang onto things. Many of the minimalist gurus would tell this person to get rid of the item and simply replace it if it turns out they really need it, but that is not always possible, especially with expensive, ‘one-of-a-kind’, or sentimental items.

⁹² Reddit, accessed June 14, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6exi18/when_you_started_becoming_more_minimalist_what/?ref=search_posts

Likewise, a commenter on the same Reddit thread also discussed the challenge of getting rid of things noting:

The biggest challenge for me was the thought of ‘I might need this one day’.

When I started minimalism via decluttering, I went through the boxes in the garage and wardrobes that I had no idea what was in them. I started to go through them and had that thought of ‘oohh yeah, I remember this, maybe I should keep it’.

I binned it all. Weeks later, I can’t remember what was in them and now I have an empty garage and clear wardrobes.

The next hardest thing was getting my mind out of the consumerist attitude of ‘If I buy this, I’ll be more happy’--it’s like breaking an addiction, but once it’s broken you have this sense of contentment in life and that feeling of ‘keeping up with the neighbours’ disappears entirely.

TL;DR [too long; didn’t read]: binning the clutter, changing my consumerist habit. (2017f)

This comment connects the minimalist critique of consumerism with the claim that it helps change one’s mindset toward risk. According to this commenter, minimalism delivered its promise to change the way they think about consuming and accumulating.

This seems to be because minimalism itself is treated as a way to mitigate risk, because, essentially, risk comes from participation in consumerism. This is demonstrated by an interviewee in the *Minimalism* documentary who asserts, “You think that more money is going to, say, give you security. The problem is, is that you don’t necessarily have control over making more. One thing you do have control over is spending less. What you do have control over is having less, and that by having less, you automatically stretch what you do have” (D’Avella 2015). Ultimately, risk is not a main focus within minimalism discourse, but when it appears it is a feature of consumer culture that can be mitigated through practicing minimalism and altering the individual’s way of thinking about what they own and why they own it. By addressing risk in this way, minimalism becomes an enticing lifestyle offer in the context of an ever-changing risk society.

Physical and Mental Health

The above mention of addiction by a Reddit commenter leads into an exploration of how physical and mental health are presented within minimalism discourse. In short, both are improved by the lifestyle. Many of the minimalist gurus, as well as a number of Reddit commenters, advocate that minimalism leads to improved mental and physical health. Which, given the prevalence of both of these concerns in popular discourse, is not surprising since one of the aims of the gurus is to appeal to as large an audience as possible, if not to spread the minimalist lifestyle, then at least to sell more of their books.

Physical Health and Weight Loss

Weight loss, dieting, and exercise are all areas where governmentality discourse is prevalent in terms of teaching people to be responsible for their own physical health. Again, rather than tackle the root causes of obesity (though some people and organizations do), it is most commonly framed as an individual problem. Often it is claimed the obese person is lazy, or does not know better, but it is up to them to change their behaviour. In line with this and the governmentality thinking that is present in self-help more broadly, many of the minimalist gurus claim the lifestyle will also lead to weight loss. For example, in a section of her first book with the heading ‘your living space affects your body’, Kondo tells her readers, “Once the process of tidying is under way, many of my clients remark that they have lost weight or that they have firmed up their tummies. **It’s a very strange phenomenon, but when we reduce what we own and essentially ‘detox’ our house, it has a detox effect on our bodies as well**” (2014:193 original emphasis). She expands on this by positing:

I think the main reason tidying has this effect is because through this process people come to know contentment. After tidying, many clients tell me that their worldly desires have decreased. Whereas in the past, no matter how many clothes they had, they were never satisfied and always wanted something new to wear, once they selected and kept only those things that they really loved, they felt that they had everything they needed. (Kondo 2014:195)

By claiming the sense of contentment that comes from minimalism is linked to weight loss, Kondo is connecting the desire for happiness with physical health and offering minimalism as the answer to both problems. However, she does not really explain how, physically, decluttering leads to weight loss.

In this regard, Millburn and Nicodemus offer more detail, but it is not minimalism on its own that leads to improved health. These authors draw on their personal experience and state, “weight loss, exercise, dietary changes, and lifestyle changes” (Millburn and Nicodemus 2015a:34), were all part of their minimalism process. Throughout their three books, they repeatedly claim Millburn lost seventy pounds when he decided to adopt the minimalist lifestyle and in one of their books⁹³ he discusses his exercise routine and dietary changes in detail. While they directly connect their improved health with minimalism, it is because their understanding of minimalism includes changing one’s diet and exercise habits along with getting rid of material items. Similarly, Sasaki enthusiastically claims, “I drank beer at my messy table, munched on snacks, and played video games. I gained weight of course. Minimalism helped with that as well!” (2017:4).

In line with this, one Instagram user sees minimalism and weight loss going hand in hand. They shared an image of a quote they found inspiring (Image 7) along with a description of how they plan to combine weight loss and minimalism.

⁹³ Millburn, Joshua Fields, and Ryan Nicodemus. 2015a. *Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life* 2nd ed. Missoula, MT: Asymmetrical Press.

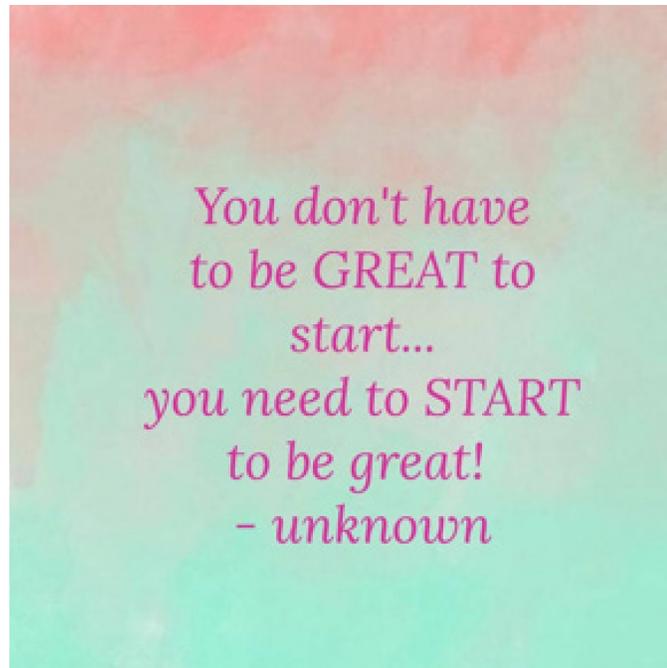


Image 7

The text with this image read:

[Waving emoji] My name is Beth⁹⁴. I'm 33, a wife, a Momma, and my word for this year is DECLUTTER in all aspects of my life! I'm nearly four months postpartum so about 10lbs hanging around is 2nd baby weight and another 10lbs is 1st baby weight. The other 20lbs or so is from turning 21 over a decade ago and getting lazy [Bashful emoji]. I want to be healthier for me and my family. I want to be a role model for my children. I want to impress myself. I want to declutter my body...and my home. The Mr and I have amassed so much stuff from inheritance and items we've held onto since childhood, college, etc. I want to walk into our home and feel more calm, with everything organized and in a single spot. This account will chronicle my journey in both. One thing I am continuously reminding myself is that I have to start somewhere and incorporate changes as I go. It's so easy to feel a natural drive and want to dive right in and, while that can keep me going for a little bit, willpower will keep me going longer. Here's to staying accountable!⁹⁵

In addition to connecting their physical health with their cluttered home, this quote demonstrates the ways in which governmentality permeates both weight loss and minimalism discourse, particularly through the mention of accountability. Importantly,

⁹⁴ This name has been changed.

⁹⁵ Instagram, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BedfejAn7C4/?tagged=declutter>.

social media, principally Instagram, seems to play a role in helping people feel accountable for their ‘minimalism journey’ while also demonstrating the element of confession that is common within self-help. As on Reddit, many people share a lot of personal information within their discussions of minimalism on Instagram, which speaks to the sense of community that seems to be fostered by these online spaces.

Finally, Loreau makes an effort to point to obesity as a societal problem asserting, “Health comes with awareness. We live in a society that has too much to eat, where obesity is a disease of acquisitiveness: the accumulation of sensory pleasure, and food. We want more of everything, all the time, leading to stress—the primary cause of death in the West” (2016:127). Here, in critiquing consumerism, Loreau directly links obesity with consumption, but she also states health comes with awareness, again suggesting individuals must take responsibility for their wellbeing. She continues to use fear, cautioning her readers that their consumption-oriented lifestyle could kill them.

Mental Health

Mental health is mentioned by a number of the minimalist gurus and is also present in some of the Reddit threads and media sources. Within minimalism discourse, mental health is used as a way to critique consumer culture by suggesting it is the root cause for problems such as anxiety and depression. Moreover, mental health links to governmentality in the same way as physical health, but also links to authenticity through a sense of discontent. According to Loreau, who makes an indirect reference to mental health, “Striving for minimalism in this way is a positive response to the deep dissatisfaction engendered by today’s consumer society” (2016:67). Jay also makes indirect reference to mental health, noting:

Here's something else to consider: in addition to crowding us physically and stifling us psychologically, things also enslave us financially via the debt used to pay for them. The more money we owe, the more sleepless our nights, and the more limited our opportunities. It's no picnic to get up every morning and drag ourselves to jobs we don't like, to pay for stuff we may no longer have, use, or even want. We can think of so many other things we'd rather be doing! Furthermore, if we've exhausted our paychecks (and then some) on consumer products, we've dried up our resources for other, more fulfilling pursuits like taking an art class or investing in an up-and-coming business. (2016:31-32)

Jay again uses the enslavement metaphor to problematize the over-accumulation of items common within consumer culture and says this takes a psychological toll. She ties psychological strain to the consumer debt that often accompanies this over-consumption. In particular, she tells her readers over-consumption is psychologically 'stifling' suggesting people are not able to reach their full potential or live authentically through participation in consumerism. She also suggests pursuits she deems more worthwhile, again indicating the cultural elitism of which the lifestyle is sometimes accused.

Walmsley also makes indirect reference to mental emotional wellbeing:

So, there are obvious, practical side effects of too much clutter, yet what about the mental and emotional effects? If we are constantly fighting clutter, we will never be clear enough in our minds to think about what we really want. The day-to-day battle, wasting time fighting clutter, not only wears us down but also robs us of the free time and the peace of mind which are necessary for clear thought and contentment. (2006:2)

Walmsley here connects minimalism with peace of mind and contentment while cautioning her readers about the potential harm of continuing to participate in consumerism. She also makes a vague reference to existential wants, which minimalists prioritize over material wants and artificial needs. She later makes a connection between stress and contemporary consumer society arguing:

In today's society, we are encouraged to constantly strive to have more—to buy more, to get more—and this is more stuff. It is a materialistic world

and we go along with it, working longer and longer hours at more and more stressful jobs, and for what? Often we do it to be able to buy yet another pair of shoes or more furniture or more gadgets. All this new stuff is added to our old stuff and it builds up. It needs caring for, cleaning, storing and protecting. It demands our time and our commitment. And all this at a time when what we really need is more time, more space, less stress and peace of mind. By perpetuating the notion that we need to acquire more and more things rather than more time and space for ourselves, we are denying ourselves a quality of life. We tie ourselves up with getting the things we think we need and then we feel guilty about them. (Wamsley 2006:172-73)

According to Wamsley, material acquisition is distracting us from what is really important in life. In this passage, she places the onus to change on the individual rather than on the system of consumer capitalism, even though she identifies the system as the problem. Wamsley also places the blame for discontent on the individual. As previously mentioned, this passage also contains a rare mention of guilt, which seems to underlie minimalism, but is not addressed because it would mean acknowledging the privileged positioning of minimalists. Additionally, Wamsley points to the seeming lack of autonomy minimalists feel is inherent in consumerism which is often used to support the argument in favour of minimalism—it provides *true* freedom, autonomy, and individualism when consumerism does not. It is these features of neoliberalism that minimalism discourse champions and promotes despite being opposed to consumerism.

Like Wamsley, Hill (2013) states in his *New York Times* opinion piece, “But my experiences show that after a certain point, material objects have a tendency to crowd out the emotional needs they are meant to support” (2013). Meanwhile, in a *Slate* article written in response to Hill’s piece, Waldman (2013) contends, “There are those who live in McMansions, cram their garages with unused electronics, glut their closets with clothes. Such conspicuous consumption—and its accompanying waste—not only seems

obnoxious, but it can imply unmet psychic needs”. Here, Waldman passes judgment on those who participate in capitalist over-accumulation and indicates participation in consumerism stems from not being able to meet our existential wants.

Sharing a sentiment similar to Jay and Walmsley, one Reddit commenter said:

Late, but I like this question.

Peace and clarity of mind. Speaking for myself, I have been much happier, less stressed, more financially stable, and more independent since I got rid of most of my possessions. I also sleep like a rock--that was a big deal for me.

What I’m trying to achieve now is to maintain my existing lifestyle, continue to get rid of objects that I don’t need, and focus all my spare time and energy on developing my relationships, my career, and travelling lots⁹⁶.

This minimalist does not directly make reference to mental health but instead refers to their “peace and clarity of mind”. They also demonstrate, yet again, the ways in which mental health and other challenges have been individualized.

Millburn and Nicodemus link consumerism to everything from stress, to depression, to suicide and recount their experiences with consumerism stating:

The flames of consumption have licked at me from a young age. First, consumerism represented all the things I wanted but was too poor to afford as a kid: the video games, the logo’d clothes, the nice car. But when I began to acquire these things, my thirst was not quenched. Instead, the threshold for pleasure changed, the bar raised with each new purchase, each promotion, each bit of faux extravagance. Like a cocaine high, it is never enough; I always want more. (Millburn and Nicodemus 2014:38-39)

As discussed in Chapter 2, consumption is sometimes pathologized and treated as an addiction. Though ‘shopaholic’ is not a diagnosable condition, this is not an uncommon way for consumption to be framed. Related to this, Millburn and Nicodemus are here

⁹⁶ Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6abbnk/what_are_you_trying_to_achieve_in_minimalism/.

making a connection between consumption and drug use. One Reddit commenter made a similar comparison while discussing what they want out of minimalism, noting:

Ability to rent a smaller place and pay less.
Also, cutting the addiction to buying. Kind of like cutting alcohol, caffeine, or hard drugs. It's just a pointless costly addiction. Once I realized that it was cyclical I just said ... no more buying crap. Every once in a while I relapse and blow \$200 on something I don't need, but now that's literally down to maybe once every 9 months or so⁹⁷.

As is typical of self-help, this comment demonstrates an element of confession, not unlike those found in 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Moreover, in line with the minimalist emphasis on individual choice and discipline, this commenter seems to be taking personal responsibility for their behaviour and working to change it. In another confessional post, one Reddit user starts a thread with a photograph of their everyday items and the following description of their reason for pursuing minimalism:

I am an amateur bike racer and math PhD student, so most of what I own falls into two distinct use cases. The left side [of the picture] is what I train with daily on the bike, and the right side is what I bring in my bag to school during the week.
Although it may seem like a lot of stuff, this pile is half the size it was before minimalism happened to me.
I have always been obsessed with cool gear, 'every day carry', et cetera. I have also struggled with OCD and ADHD tendencies from an early age. I never would have thought that the two were related.
About six months ago, I stumbled upon minimalism from the Minimalists' documentary on Netflix. As I started eliminating my physical clutter, I could feel my mental fog begin to lift as well. It's been pretty amazing how much focus and calm I have experienced since getting rid of my excess stuff. My wife tells me that I'm a completely different person now. My performance in grad school has improved noticeably, and my interactions with others are more intentional and less self-centered.
I still get a lot of enjoyment out of cool gear and gadgets, but now I channel that energy into making sure that everything I own fills a specific need, and nothing I own takes priority over the things in my life that really matter.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Reddit, accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6abbnk/what_are_you_trying_to_achieve_in_minimalism/.

⁹⁸ Reddit, accessed June 12 and July 5, 2017, <https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6djv41/>

This Reddit commenter gets quite personal sharing their struggles with mental health, information about their work and intimate relationships, and their experience with minimalism. Throughout their books, minimalist gurus Millburn and Nicodemus also discuss their mental health struggles with Millburn sharing he has had OCD tendencies and Nicodemus sharing his past drug and alcohol abuse. These types of transformational confessions act as testimonials for the lifestyle by suggesting anyone can benefit from, and solve a myriad of problems through, minimalism.

Returning to Millburn and Nicodemus' memoir, the authors reflect:

So why didn't I experience real security? Why was I glazed with discontent and stress and depression? Because I had more to lose. I constructed well-decorated walls that I was terrified to tear down, becoming a prisoner of my own consumption. My lifestyle, equipped with a laundry list of unquestioned desires, anchored me to my self-built burdens. I thought I knew what I wanted, but I didn't know why I wanted it. (2014:114)

This passage illustrates the ways in which minimalism places responsibility for past actions, as well as change, on the individual. It also points to how consumerism is situated as a source of enslavement as well as risk. Lastly, in another of their books, these gurus place even more responsibility on individuals for their own wellbeing claiming:

The economy is not what needs to be fixed, and capitalism is not broken. Neither 'problem' is the real problem; rather, *we* are the problem. We have turned ravenous and self-indulgent, and, as a result, we are less happy than ever. Suicide rates are at an all-time high. Personal debt is at an all-time high. Stress, anxiety, discontent—all at all-time highs. (Millburn and Nicodemus 2015b:114 original emphasis)

In this passage, Millburn and Nicodemus blatantly disregard any structural or systemic causes for the mental health and personal debt challenges many people face in contemporary society, and instead double-down on their contention that individuals cause

[lifestyle_six_months_into_minimalism_heres_what_i/](#).

their own problems and are the only ones who can solve them. While this is in keeping with the sentiment of *self-help*, this is a problematic way to frame mental health.

As stated previously, some of the media sources analyzed for this project are critical of the minimalist lifestyle, particularly for its elitist and judgmental undertones. In one such article Bernstein (2016) argues:

Kondo is unfailingly earnest in her assertion that the first step to having a joyful life is through mindful consideration of your possessions. Emotions throughout both of her books are presented as being as simple as her drawings. You either feel pure love for an object or you let it go. But beneath some of the self-help-inspired platitudes about how personally enriched you'll feel after you've discarded items you don't need, there's an underlying tone of judgment about the emotional wellbeing of those who submit to living in clutter. Those who live in Konmari homes are presented as being more disciplined: invulnerable to the throes of nostalgia, impervious to the temptation of looking back at something that provokes mixed feelings.

Alternatively, in his critique of minimalism, Chayka (2016) suggests the minimalist lifestyle is no better for one's mental health than any other stating:

Today's minimalism, by contrast, is visually oppressive; it comes with an inherent pressure to conform to its precepts. Whiteness, in a literal sense, is good. Mess, heterogeneity, is bad—the opposite impulse of artistic minimalism. It is anxiety-inducing in a manner indistinguishable from other forms of consumerism, not revolutionary at all. Do I own the right things? Have I jettisoned enough of the wrong ones?

Here, Chayka points to the idea that minimalism is simply an alternative form of consumption rather than a rejection of it. And, because of this, it induces many of the same sentiments, including anxiety, that minimalism is attempting to critique.

When it comes to mental and physical health, both are said to improve through minimalism, allowing the lifestyle to be linked to two prominent discourses within contemporary society. In terms of physical health, it is claimed decluttering one's superfluous possessions can lead to weight loss, while mental health concerns, such as

depression and anxiety, are also linked to consumerism. In this way, minimalism discourse critiques consumerism as the cause of some of the biggest health concerns facing contemporary society. And, like the existing discourses on physical and mental health, minimalism discourse places the responsibility to change firmly on the individual.

‘Luxury’ versus ‘Enough’

Within the minimalist distinction between needs and wants is the challenge of determining between luxury and enough. One of the main goals of minimalism is to be content with what one has and to not want for more. However, within contemporary consumer society, it can be quite difficult to know where to draw this line. For example, in a piece for CNN.com about a well-off woman who became a minimalist, Jenkins quotes (2015) her as saying, “‘People don’t know what they actually need. A need is electricity⁹⁹; a want is cable’”. Like some of the other minimalism discourse analyzed, this quote is filled with judgment about how people choose to spend their resources. While judging others’ needs and wants for them may seem antithetical to the minimalist valuing of autonomy, judging the tastes of others is very much part of defining a lifestyle.

Like Johnston and Baumann (2010) on foodies, the minimalist lifestyle is, in part, about distinguishing minimalist consumption from mainstream consumption, and differentiating between needs and wants is one of the main ways this is achieved. By making this distinction about ‘luxury’ and ‘having enough’, minimalists are able to claim a moral high ground over those they think cannot control their consumer desires for

⁹⁹ Some voluntary simplifiers, particularly those who live ‘off-grid’, might argue electricity is actually a luxury. And, while they don’t say as much, both Jay (2016) and Becker (2016), who encourage their readers to compare their lives with those living in developing nations, kind of imply as much by making such a comparison. However, given that these two authors also run popular minimalist blogs, they would likely prefer their readers to have electricity, computers, and Internet access.

excessive items. In my reading of the discourse, the distinction between luxury and enough relates to both governmentality and authenticity. First, this distinction is about exercising individual control over one's desires and consumer practices. And second, being content with enough is situated as being more authentic than succumbing to the desire for luxury because needs are real and wants are artificial. Moreover, being content with enough is, according to minimalism discourse, a better way of achieving one's existential wants, particularly happiness, freedom, and authenticity.

In the documentary *Minimalism*, Patrick Rhone, author of *Enough*, argues that consumer society has altered what we think of as enough:

We think we need those things, because we've been told we need those things. We've been told we need those things by our society. It's been this kind of slow, little thing that's just kind of trickled in and suddenly it becomes the thing you do. It really does come down to a value-based ideal. You want to do the most amount of good and get the most amount of value with exactly what you need. Having too little is not going to give you that and having too much is not going to give you that, right? Having that balance, having enough, that's what you're looking for. (D'Avella 2015).

Because this is a sound bite he does not get to expand on how he defines enough beyond implying that it has to do with meeting one's basic needs. Moreover, like others discussing minimalism, Rhone seems to suggest that consumerism has led to a false consciousness wherein we mindlessly consume things we do not actually need.

Of the minimalist gurus, Jay is most vocal about focusing on having enough. For example, when outlining her book she tells readers, "We'll learn to see our stuff for what it is, weaken any power it may hold over us, and discover the freedom of living with just 'enough' to meet our needs. We'll even get a little philosophical, and ponder how our newfound minimalism will enrich our lives and effect positive change in the world" (Jay

2016:8-9). In keeping with the underlying neoliberalism shaping minimalism, Jay uses the language of freedom to entice people into the lifestyle. Furthermore, Jay's use of quotation marks around 'enough' suggests that what constitutes enough is not clear and likely differs for everyone, again reinforcing the individualism underlying minimalism.

Jay expands on this sentiment noting, "Enough—it's a slippery concept. What's enough for one is too little for the next guy and too much for another. Most of us would agree we have enough food, enough water, enough clothing, and enough shelter to meet our basic needs. And anyone reading this book probably feels that they have enough things. So why do we still feel the urge to buy—and own—*more*?" (2016:53 original emphasis). Perhaps, though Jay does not make this speculation, we feel an urge to consume because it is about more than simply acquiring items. Jay offers a different solution to her readers, contending:

Cultivating an attitude of gratitude is far more conducive to a minimalist lifestyle. If we recognize the abundance in our lives and appreciate what we have, we will not want for more. We simply need to focus on what we have, rather than what we don't have. If we're going to make comparisons, we have to look globally, as well as locally; we have to look down the ladder, as well as up. While we may feel deprived relative to the more affluent in our own country, we're living like royalty compared to many others around the world. (2016:56)

The sentiment that contentment can be found by focusing on what we already have was echoed by one Reddit commenter in a discussion about minimalism and deprivation. The commenter shared, "For me minimalism is the opposite of deprivation. It's the opportunity to have exactly what you want and not feel obligated to keep the excess. It's about finding out what is enough and being happy right there"¹⁰⁰. Like Jay, Becker (2016) also talks about gratitude and taking a global approach when comparing one's

¹⁰⁰ Reddit, accessed June 15, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6dun02/is_minimalism_deprivation/?ref=search_posts.

accumulation of wealth and objects to others. However, this approach is problematic because it can easily be interpreted as flaunting one's wealth or fetishizing others' poverty. It is also problematic because little thought is given to helping those 'down the ladder'. Rather, they are a symbolic benchmark by which minimalists can feel good about themselves and their reduced accumulation of items. Jay also infers it is up to the individual to change their mindset about what they own and to whom they compare themselves, again making minimalism an act of enterprising work on oneself.

Millburn and Nicodemus also advise their readers to be content with what they have rather than coveting more. As discussed in Chapter 5, they point to advertising as the reason so many of us want more than we already have. They claim, "Advertisers spend millions of dollars to create a sense of urgency to make us drool over their products, but we can refuse to play the game. We can turn down the noise. We can focus on *what we have* instead of what we don't have. We already have everything we need" (Millburn and Nicodemus 2015b:76 original emphasis). Like Jay, Millburn and Nicodemus say all that is required to be content is a change in attitude. While it is likely the case that the people reading their books are doing so because they feel they own too many things and want to become minimalists, it goes against their argument that anyone can be minimalist to state 'we already have everything we need'. This was true for these authors who both had six-figure salaries and access to credit, but not everyone can consistently meet their basic needs, and in this way, minimalism is not for everyone.

Loreau is one of the only gurus to mention luxury, but she remains rather vague as to what counts as luxury. Early in her book she asserts:

Only once we have eliminated waste can we catch a glimpse of new possibilities ahead; only then can our everyday, essential activities—

dressing, eating, sleeping—take on new meaning, a different and deeper dimension. We do not seek perfection, but a life more richly lived. Opulent luxury brings neither grace nor elegance. It imprisons and destroys the soul, while simplicity offers the solution to so many problems. (Loreau 2016:7)

Loreau hints at degrees of luxury when she says ‘opulent luxury’ is a problem, but elsewhere in her book recommends what some would consider luxury items such as designer accessories. Loreau also tries to pin down what it means to have enough suggesting, “What are our essential needs? Just whatever we need to live, and then, enough to live well”. On the same page she tells her readers, “The most basic human needs are, first, to live in conditions that allow us to maintain our health, equilibrium and dignity; and second, to have access to quality clothing, food and surroundings. Sadly, in today’s world, even quality of life has become a luxury” (Loreau 2016:29). This is one of the few points where a minimalist guru acknowledges not everyone is able to consume at an excessive level. Similarly, an interviewee in the documentary states, “We all need to have our basic needs met. Having a house, food on the table, you know, being safe, that’s really important to recognize, because not everyone has those things” (D’Avella 2015). Later in her book Loreau states, “We need only enough to live: adequate financial security to ensure our independence and dignity” (2016:219). Again, this is vague because what is adequate for one, may be luxury for another.

As part of distinguishing between needs and wants, minimalism discourse attempts to distinguish between luxury and enough. This is a somewhat contentious distinction to make because luxury for one person may be the bare minimum for another. Nevertheless, the effort is made to focus on having enough rather than giving in to over-accumulation as is encouraged through consumerism. Moreover, the concern with luxury

seems to be related to the previously discussed concern with greed wherein both are presented as critiques of consumerism.

Environmental Impact

Related to meeting basic needs instead of consuming to meet artificial needs, is concern for the environment. This is not as large a part of the minimalist lifestyle as I thought it would be when starting my research, but it is present within the discourse. For example, Becker argues, “Overconsumption accelerates the destruction of natural resources. The less we consume, the less damage we do to our environment, and that benefits everyone, including our children’s and grandchildren’s generations” (2016:9). He later encourages his readers to use the time and money they will save through minimalism to benefit others claiming, “Serving others is really a natural follow-up to minimalism, if you think about it. Minimalism in itself is an unselfish act, because it uses up fewer resources that others need. So investing the dividends of minimalism in the service of others is a logical extension of the same ethos of selflessness” (Becker 2016:211). Importantly, Becker and other minimalist gurus are promoting themselves and selling books, blogs, and documentaries, but no mention is made of this. Much like mental health, concern for the environment is pervasive in popular discourse so linking minimalism and sustainability is another way to reach a broader audience, while possibly also making a positive impact by encouraging others to consume less.

Similar to Becker, Jay also asks her readers to consider future generations when considering the impact their consumption has on the environment:

Now that we’re thinking globally, let’s consider this: we share the world with more than seven billion people. Our space and our resources are finite. How can we guarantee that there’s enough food, water, land, and

energy to go around? *By not using any more of it than we need.* Because for every ‘extra’ we take, someone else (now or in the future) will have to do without. That ‘extra’ may not add significantly to *our* well-being, but to someone else, it may be a matter of life or death. (2016:58 original emphasis)

Like some of the other gurus, there are elements of fear and guilt present in this passage from Jay. She also argues we need to exercise self-control and take sustainability into our own hands. Moreover, both Jay and Becker use the frame of an imagined future to support their critique of the consumer capitalist present.

The environmental impact of consumerism was mentioned in a few of the TED Talks, particularly those about living in smaller spaces (e.g., Morrison 2014), and was also present in a few of the interviews featured in the documentary *Minimalism*. First, Colin Beavan, author of *No Impact Man*, claims, “This mindless consumption, this same thing that’s not making us happy, is also causing the degradation of our habitat. We can afford to have 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. We’re closing in on 400 parts for million. It’s caused by the burning of oil, of natural gas, of coal, of all the fuels that we use to power our consumer economy, to power the making of crap we don’t need” (D’Avella 2015). While the same tiny house designer quoted earlier states, “We’re not going to ever be able to achieve the environmental gains that we’re seeking while still expecting our lives to be the same. We’re going to have to give up a lot. The secret is that a lot of that we’re not actually going to miss” (D’Avella 2015).

Finally, in a Reddit discussion about the compatibility of minimalism and parenthood, a number of commenters discussed the environmental impact of having children, amongst other concerns. At times, this became heated when it turned to the impact of population growth. Emblematic of this discussion one commenter proffered:

I would hazard a guess that being conscious of ‘living lightly’ in general easily extends to choosing not to have kids. You’re more conscious of the impact of ‘stuff’ on your life, the environment and society—and the impact that making more people will have on all of those things!

At the very least, I think we should aim to avoid exponential growth. The fewer people there are, the more easily we’ll be able to live on the resources we have available. It’s pretty simple maths, but very difficult for most people to grasp.

When you have three kids or more, you’re—unconsciously—betting that someone will have no children in order to offset your own. If we all had three children, the surface of the Earth would be covered in a generation or two. More likely, we’d all be destroyed as resource wars escalate.

I was only planning on having one child. But, hey--now I’m expecting twins! It’s helped me really pare down my (already pretty slim) possessions. I want to be an example to my kids. I want to show them that you don’t need to keep chasing ‘stuff’ to be happy. Your home and life can be beautiful if it’s filled with people you love and only things that you really like and use¹⁰¹.

This Reddit comment is similar to both Jay and Becker in that it asks that we think about the future when considering the environment. It also offers minimalism as the answer to one of the biggest problems of our time. Moreover, it again puts forward individual action as the best response to a problem that has systemic causes, further demonstrating the pervasiveness of neoliberal thinking within minimalism discourse.

While it would seem that concern for the environment would be a tenet of the minimalist lifestyle, it receives comparatively little attention within the discourse I sampled. Unlike other forms of voluntary simplicity such as urban homesteading or off-grid living, the environment does not seem to be of great concern within decluttering minimalism, despite the possibility for large-scale consumption reduction to be part of the solution to environmental degradation. Further demonstrating the pervasiveness of neoliberal thinking within minimalism discourse, rather than situating the lifestyle as part of the solution to a global problem, the individual benefits of the lifestyle are emphasized.

¹⁰¹ Reddit, accessed June 13 and 14, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6fkcep/minimalism_vs_having_no_kids/?ref=search_posts.

Natural and Artificial Needs

Within the distinction between needs and wants, minimalism discourse also distinguishes between types of needs based on their authenticity. Illustrating this, Kondo declares, “I believe that owning only what we love and what we need is the most natural condition” (2014:197). It is alluded to within the discourse that some needs are more real than others. The idea that some needs are artificial has been seen throughout this chapter where reference is made to ‘basic needs’ or focusing on ‘what really matters’. Millburn and Nicodemus, for example, again go after advertising stating, “The solution, then, is to consume deliberately—to ignore the bullshit advertisements and determine what we need based on our own lives, not what we’ve been told we need” (2015b:19), demonstrating a number of the ways neoliberal thinking permeates minimalism, particularly in terms of consuming deliberately and making choices based on our own lives, not input from others. Similarly, Loreau states, “... train yourself to evaluate the objects around you. Your peace of mind will grow as, gradually, the things that make up your everyday world come to reflect your true needs and personal tastes” (2016:34).

Like Millburn and Nicodemus, Jay also points to advertising as the source of artificial needs and material wants, arguing:

The compulsion to identify with consumer products reaches deep into our lives—from our choice of homes to what we put into them. Most people would agree that a small, basic house more than satisfies our need for shelter (especially compared to accommodations in developing nations). However, aspirational marketing decrees that we ‘need’ a master suite, bedrooms for each child, his-and-her bathrooms, and kitchens with professional grade appliances—otherwise, we haven’t quite ‘made it.’ Square footage becomes a status symbol, and naturally, it takes many more sofas, chairs, tables, knickknacks, and other stuff to fill a large house. (2016:20)

To support her argument, Jay emphasizes the artificiality of ‘needs’. She also doubles-down on her suggestion to compare our wealth with those who have far less than we do.

To complicate the differentiating of needs further, one of the needs that really matters is being able to meet one’s existential wants such as finding happiness and fulfillment. This is demonstrated by Sasaki who, like Jay, identifies some consumption as being for appearances, and comments, “My feeling is that minimalists are people who know what’s truly necessary for them versus what they may want for the sake of appearance, and they’re not afraid to cut down on everything in the second category” (2017:44). Sasaki elaborates on this thought sharing, “As social animals, we feel the need to have value to society. We’re unable to live without feeling that there’s some meaning to our existence through the recognition or acknowledgement of others” (2017:70). In other words, in addition to our needs for food and shelter, we also have social, emotional, and cultural needs, and minimalists argue these are best met through the lifestyle.

In an interview with cosmopolitan.com to promote his book, Sasaki describes the minimalist lifestyle thusly:

Minimalism is about the absolute minimum that you need—not want, but need—and is the self-reflective process of learning what is your absolute minimum for you personally. It’s also about what is the absolute minimum you need to eat, for example, or anything that you consume, not just the material things that you buy. Minimalism is just a principle you could apply to all areas of your life and not just for tidying your home. (Kim 2017)

Sasaki’s minimalism is of the ‘own as few things as possible’ variety and this is reflected in his description of the lifestyle, but he also allows that this will differ for everyone—again making sure to reach a large audience. His call for self-reflection is also in keeping with self-help and the enterprising subject who must constantly work on him or herself.

Writing for [businessinsider.com](https://www.businessinsider.com) about her experience trying minimalism

Loudenback reflects, “This day really felt like minimalism to me. I was able to determine what I really *needed* versus what I *thought* I needed or may possibly use in the future. For example, that tanning spray I used once? Or the dozens of headbands and flower crowns (embarrassing but true) that I haven’t worn in over a year? I’ll be just fine without them” (2016 original emphasis). Loudenback further demonstrates the distinction between real and artificial needs while also suggesting consumerism caused her to accumulate things she only thought she needed. As in previous chapters, this again offers a critique of consumerism as keeping us in a state of false consciousness.

In a Reddit thread asking for advice on how to get started with minimalism, an exchange took place that further demonstrates the complex differentiation between needs and wants within minimalism discourse:

Commenter 1:

Make sure you have everything you need.

Once I realized I had everything I needed, the only thing left to do was upgrade from easily broken items to high-integrity items. (Where applicable)

Feels great to walk into a store and not care about browsing because you already have everything.

Also, Throwing away crap you’ve accumulated over time but never use. I’ve found a nice zone where I don’t need to buy more crap. Good chance to pay any debts and/or invest.

Commenter 2:

I never really liked shopping, and I was always too broke to buy much anyway, but since going consciously down the path of minimalism I’m amazed at how little I even think about browsing anymore. When I need something I go get it or order online, but any residual temptation to poke around for other stuff is gone. It is such a freeing feeling! I haven’t actually set foot in a clothing store or department store yet this year simply out of recognizing that I didn’t truly need anything, and deciding to wait until I did¹⁰².

¹⁰² Reddit, accessed June 15, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/minimalism/comments/6c7j21/whats_your_helpful_starter_pack_for_someone_that/.

These two commenters share their personal experiences with minimalism and how they deal with meeting needs and mitigating wants. The second comment uses the language of freedom and hints at adopting minimalism as a rationalization for not being able to consume at a higher level, while also demonstrating that they have the resources to acquire things as needed rather than having to hold onto things just in case.

The distinction between real and artificial needs serves as a further critique of consumerism. By situating consumerism as the source of artificial needs it is critiqued as being both inauthentic and the cause of false consciousness. Moreover, because of its emphasis on meeting basic needs and existential wants, minimalism is positioned as an authentic alternative to consumerism.

Summary

Like past and present, and objects and experiences, the minimalist distinctions between needs and wants are complex and ultimately serve to critique consumerism. Consumer culture is inauthentic because it promotes artificial needs leading to over-consumption, and because it stifles the pursuit of existential wants such as happiness and fulfillment. Moreover, consumerism is positioned as detrimental to physical and mental health, though both are situated as individual problems rather than societal concerns.

In terms of the three broad empirical themes identified, needs and wants was by far the most prevalent within the Reddit threads. While users touched on the other themes, speaking about addressing needs and wants was dominant. This seems to be because of the highly personal nature of the posts wherein people were speaking from a place of personal experience with the lifestyle.

The environment does not garner a lot of mention within the minimalism discourse analyzed, yet it is the area where the lifestyle could have the most impact as well as potentially the broadest appeal. Nevertheless, there is some mention of the environmental impact of mass-consumption and production as part of the discussion around meeting basic needs rather than consuming to excess. As in Chapter 5, reference is made to an imagined future in which we have run out of resources as a way to promote minimalism in the present as well as to critique consumerism. Similar to linking minimalism discourse to physical and mental health, linking it to environmental concerns makes it part of a larger conversation, though concern for the environment is again situated in terms of the individual or their future family, as opposed to addressing environmental degradation for the benefit of others.

The following chapter revisits my research questions and argument and lays out potential future research. In the process, it also links my empirical findings to broader structuring discourses that can be seen to shape and inform minimalism discourse. In doing so, the final chapter ties together all of the loose threads laid out thus far.

Conclusion: Critiquing Consumerism

On the surface, contemporary minimalism is about ‘decluttering’. However, underlying this is a critique of consumerism as the cause of the contemporary crisis of authenticity. As it relates to contemporary minimalism, authenticity can be read in two ways. First, it can be seen as a moral judgment of consumerism, which is deemed to be unnatural, alienating, and therefore inauthentic. Second, it can be seen as a justification for participating in minimalism that is not based on one’s financial ability to do so, and is more palatable than outright elitism. Authenticity is compatible with neoliberal governance because it is a strong argument in favour of individualism and freedom and is tied to the notion of the autonomous self.

As discussed in the opening chapter, minimalism has gained popularity against a backdrop of economic recession, precarious labour, and rising personal debt levels. All of which helps to contextualize the lifestyle. Minimalism, in its contemporary form, can be read as both a moral critique of, and a rationalization of behaviours in response to, recent economic and environmental strains. For many practitioners, it acts as a critique by highlighting the superfluous nature of consumerism. For others, minimalism may be a way of rationalizing reduced consumption induced by financial strain stemming from the 2008 Recession, growing debt, or precarious employment. While it may be the case that some minimalists had to reduce their consumption out of financial necessity, the minimalist lifestyle offers a reason to ‘opt out’ rather than being forced out. Furthermore, while contemporary minimalism is part of an ongoing desire for simplicity, particularly in the United States (Shi 2001), its current discursive formation focuses on reducing individual consumption and accumulation in the pursuit of happiness and freedom.

In this final chapter I begin by revisiting my research questions and argument. I then move on to discuss what can be gained from studying minimalism, with a particular emphasis on the contradictions present in the discourse. Finally, I discuss some of the limitations of the present project and possibilities for future research.

Research Questions and Argument

There were two guiding questions for this project: (1) how is the concept of authenticity mobilized within minimalism discourse?, and (2) how does the notion of authenticity contribute to governing the minimalist lifestyle and shaping the minimalist subject? Together, those two questions addressed my core concepts of authenticity, governmentality, and lifestyle. Additional questions addressed by my project include: why are people pursuing minimalism in the twenty-first century? And, what purpose does the concept of authenticity serve in contemporary consumer society?

Regarding the first question, authenticity is mobilized as a critique of contemporary consumer culture and as a justification for participation in the minimalist lifestyle. The use of the rhetoric of authenticity within minimalism discourse takes the form of critique in three primary ways: (1) minimalists often express nostalgia for a pre-consumerism past, (2) minimalists tend to prioritize experiences over objects and (3), minimalists tend to distinguish between needs and consumer culture-created artificial wants in such a way that wants are deemed superfluous to living a fulfilling and meaningful life. Contained within these distinctions is a nuanced, and at times contradictory, critique of contemporary consumerism. These contradictions are explored in more detail below.

Within minimalism discourse, authenticity is also mobilized as a technology of the self through which people are to judge their consumer behaviour. Minimalism sets out a series of practices and ways of thinking that make up the lifestyle and are in turn used to shape the minimalist subject. These practices include ridding oneself of superfluous items, exercising control over future consumer behaviour, and emphasizing individual happiness and freedom. There is also the sense within minimalism that consumerism is alienating us from our human nature, particularly in relation to how people lived in the past, and that minimalism can help to restore this sense of lost authenticity. Minimalism discourse also demonstrates a complex orientation toward material objects suggesting that consumerism has alienated us from the material world insofar as many of us own things that we do not need or care for. In this way, while we live in a material culture, we no longer practice ‘true materialism’ (Schor and Thompson 2014) that values objects for their functional and emotional worth. This amounts to the minimalist critique of consumerism as contributing to the contemporary crisis of authenticity.

In addition to the rhetoric of authenticity, this discourse is couched in the language of neoliberal governmentality, particularly individual choice, and freedom. Based on my data, the minimalist lifestyle seems to be both counter-cultural and yet firmly entrenched in neoliberal ways of thinking. Through their lifestyle oriented around personal opposition to the status quo of consumerism, minimalists are fashioning themselves as neoliberal subjects. However, this does not appear to be the intent of the lifestyle. Rather, minimalism is a prime example of the ways in which governmentality seeps into our everyday discourse and ways of thinking. The sites of minimalism discourse I have engaged with illustrate how authenticity is mobilized through practices

of governmentality both internally and externally. Within minimalism discourse, the cultivation of personal authenticity is used as a justification and rationalization for participation in the lifestyle and helps to reinforce the notion of the individual responsabilized self, while also critiquing consumerism for inhibiting authenticity. Ultimately, while it offers a critique of consumerism, minimalism mobilizes authenticity in a way that helps to naturalize governmentality and consumer culture.

Limitations and Future Research

With any research project boundaries have to be drawn around what will be included and excluded from study. This project used purposive sampling, meaning there are other sites of minimalism discourse that have not been analyzed. Like the broader self-help industry, minimalism discourse happens across many sites. While I have cast a fairly wide net, there are ultimately sites that have not been included. These other sites may contribute additional understandings into the lifestyle and its framing of authenticity.

Future research can more directly interact with the minimalist experience perhaps through ethnography or phenomenology in order to flesh out the lived experiences of minimalists. This could include looking at the motivations behind the lifestyle in order to determine if there are connections to social concerns such as the environment and the economy. Speaking to minimalists first-hand could also address how participants view the lifestyle in terms of its potential as a social movement. There is also the possibility for comparative analyses to take place across cultures to understand reasons for engaging in minimalism in contexts outside of North America. Additionally, more demographic information could be gathered to explore in more depth who is practicing minimalism. The suggestion within my data is that the lifestyle is popular with millennials who

possess the social and cultural capital to withdraw from the mainstream in this way, but the makeup of the ‘minimalist population’ is likely more nuanced than this.

Why Minimalism Matters

Minimalism matters for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the identification of a subjectivity and population. By identifying the minimalist subject they can then be acted upon, not only by themselves, but also by outside forces. For one thing, they can become a targeted group of consumers who can be marketed to based on their desires for experiential consumption and simplicity. For another, they could be encouraged by government for their sustainability actions, perhaps through tax rebates or other incentives. There is also the potential for minimalism to grow into a fully formed social movement with a more overtly collective and political purpose. Additionally, there is evidence of community through the existence of online spaces for learning about and discussing the lifestyle, and some of the gurus seem to promote this potential, but there is currently very little effort to affect broad social change. Moreover, minimalism is not an isolated occurrence, but is instead taking place within the context of other discourses that contribute to shaping the lifestyle.

Structuring Discourses

As mentioned throughout the empirical chapters, there are a number of structuring discourses that appear to shape or influence minimalism discourse. These discourses include, but are likely not limited to, spirituality, wellness, addiction, the American Dream, risk, consumerism, and citizenship. Elements of these discourses, while not necessarily explicit, can be seen to influence minimalism.

As mentioned previously, there are elements of spirituality present within minimalism discourse despite it being an outwardly secular lifestyle. This includes the valuing of asceticism and discouraging acquisitiveness. Furthermore, and in keeping with the spiritual elements of self-help more generally, minimalism discourse contains notions of transformation and awakening, as well as confession. As discussed by Walters (2012) Foucault saw the confessional elements of Christian pastoralism as influencing later governmental practices. The minimalist emphasis on owning little can also be seen to relate to the Protestant Ethic in that it discourages material possessions but does not appear to have any problem with wealth accumulation. As Cushman (2015:11) argues, this “dialectic of acquisitiveness and asceticism” is a core contradiction of capitalism, and also, it would seem, the minimalist lifestyle.

Within our increasingly secular culture, spirituality is often being categorized as ‘wellness’ along with a variety of other practices such as exercise, dieting, and mindfulness. As discussed in Chapter 7, minimalism is not unlike yoga and mindfulness in that it seems to have originated in Eastern practices. As discussed elsewhere, Japanese culture has been particularly influential within decluttering minimalism. Like these other Eastern spiritual practices that have become popularized in North America, there seems to be an element of what Koontz (2010) refers to as ‘otherizing’ wherein the perceived exoticism of a product or practice is emphasized as a sign of its authenticity relative to North American (colonial) practices. Moreover, there is an air of Orientalism (Said 2003) present in the popularity of these practices insofar as they are seen as being available for co-optation by Western cultures. With regards to minimalism, wellness discourse can be seen in discussions of breaking free of the ‘work-and-spend cycle’ and pursuing freedom

and happiness. Wellness can also be seen as an umbrella category within the self-help industry and is steeped in governmentality in terms of its emphasis on working on oneself. Further related to wellness is addiction discourse through the minimalist concern that we are addicted to consuming, and that this is responsible for the growth of mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. Again, these challenges, which often have external causes, are framed as individual problems.

Tangentially related to wellness through the work-and-spend cycle is the American Dream discourse. Essentially, it is believed that anyone can become successful (read: wealthy) in America if they are just willing to work hard. Unsurprisingly, there is a growing disenchantment with this idea as it is shown over and over again to be untrue. The political economy factors outlined in the first chapter including precarious labour, structural inequalities, as well as economic and class disparities that have worsened since the 2008 Recession mean that the American Dream is out of reach for most people. For some, minimalism presents an opportunity to rethink what it means to be successful in contrast to the fabled American Dream.

Another discourse that can be seen to influence minimalism is that of risk. As Beck (1992) argues, modern society is increasingly shaped by the notion of risk and its management. And, as explored in Chapter 7, minimalism is presented as a way to reduce the risks brought onto the individual through consumerism. More specifically, minimalism highlights the artificiality of risk as it relates to consumption through purchasing and keeping items 'just in case'. However, what much of the minimalism discourse analyzed fails to acknowledge is the monetary cost of getting rid of items and replacing them as needed. Nor does this way of thinking help to address the disposability

mentality that drives consumerism and is one of the main reasons for a real risk we face, that of environmental catastrophe.

In minimalism discourse, risk is situated as originating from consumerism, and minimalism is critical of our consumer culture, but it is also shaped by it. In this way, I have framed minimalism as alt-consumerist rather than anti-consumerist because it does not seek to fully escape or alter consumer capitalism, but instead to reduce individual consumption. Therefore, the minimalist subject is still also a consumer subject.

Lastly, minimalism is related to discourses on the roles and responsibilities of citizens within consumer society. As discussed earlier, citizenship is increasingly shaped and determined by participation in the market. Minimalism, while not a social movement (yet), can be understood as a form of lifestyle politics (Giddens 1991), and may contain the potential to offer real social change in terms of how people consume and how they relate to their communities. The hybrid identity of ‘citizen-consumer’ could apply to minimalists who shape their consumer behaviour based on the greater good, but for the time being, much of the lifestyle seems to be focused on individual wellbeing.

Contradictions and Tensions

Although minimalism discourse is consistent about the desire for freedom, happiness, and authenticity, there are also a number of underlying contradictions present in the lifestyle. Through my analysis, I have identified three primary tensions within minimalism discourse. First, minimalism is presented as a challenge to some of the tenets of neoliberalism, yet it remains very firmly entrenched in this way of thinking. Secondly, and related to the first, minimalism places an emphasis on the individual, but also seems

to be building a community, if not a social movement. And lastly, minimalism seems to value both asceticism and luxury.

Neoliberalism is based on prioritizing individual freedom and choice so as to diminish the responsibilities of the state. The system of consumer capitalism is directly related to this, and is the target of minimalism's critique. However, as demonstrated throughout my analysis, minimalism also prioritizes individual freedom and choice. In this way, minimalism discourse, while offering a challenge to neoliberalism, also helps to reinforce it. This is the power of neoliberalism and the hold it has on our ways of thinking about ourselves and society, and its ability to shape and influence points of its resistance.

Another tension present in minimalism discourse is between individualism and community. While the lifestyle is focused on the individual, it has also created a community for many people. Moreover, most mentions of community and sharing within the discourse seemed to position these as beneficial to the individual, rather than as ways for the individual to benefit the collective. Additionally, because minimalism falls under the umbrella of self-help, with its emphasis on the individual, it is missing the "inherent sociality of being" (Rimke 2000:62), which was identified by Taylor (1991) as lacking within the modern search for authenticity. According to Taylor, without a shared understanding of the concept and its pursuit, we cannot truly achieve the authenticity we desire. Furthermore, as outlined by Rose (1996), community is increasingly positioned as a site of governmentality as people are taught to take responsibility for their communities as well as themselves, making this yet another way minimalism reinforces neoliberalism.

Lastly, there is a class-based tension present in minimalism that few seem to acknowledge. At times, though it claims to desire 'simplicity', minimalism amounts to

little more than poverty fetishism, yet there is nearly no acknowledgement of the cost of the lifestyle. Along with encouraging minimalists to discard their excess objects, are the appeals to invest in quality, own functional items, and seek experiences—all of which rely on temporal, financial, social, and cultural capital. In this way, minimalism is not unlike foodie culture that celebrates ‘street food’, or gentrification of neighbourhoods with ‘character’. These tensions are not unique to minimalism, nor do they cancel out its potential to drive positive social change. Rather, understanding how these tensions operate in minimalism can help illustrate their presence elsewhere, and point to areas of concern or social anxieties that may be shared by people outside of the lifestyle.

Minimalism, Governmentality, and Authenticity

Minimalism, as a research site, offers rich ground for exploring both authenticity and governmentality. Throughout this project I have demonstrated how authenticity and governmentality come together to shape contemporary lifestyles. In particular, my analysis of minimalism discourse has focused on the ways in which the notion of authenticity runs through the lifestyle, and how this is governed by mundane and underlying neoliberal ways of thinking. It is my contention that through the incorporation of the rhetoric of authenticity, contemporary minimalism embodies neoliberal ways of thinking about the self as a project requiring continuous work. Decluttering is a highly complex process relying on social and cultural capital, and demonstrating the hegemony of neoliberalism within contemporary consumer society. At the same time, it allows for an ideal entry point into the ongoing contemporary concern with authenticity because of its emphasis on the individual and its critique of consumer culture. For these reasons, I have focused on this seemingly insignificant, and under-researched lifestyle.

Governmentality and authenticity are related through notions of the individual self, and this is particularly evident when looking at self-help discourses. Within self-help, the individual is called upon to maximize their potential by working to improve the area(s) of their life thought to be lacking. In the case of decluttering minimalism, over accumulation of material items resulting from participation in consumerism is deemed problematic and in need of improvement. Through the various pedagogical lifestyle resources analyzed in this project, people learn how to alter their behaviours and attitudes toward consumption with the goal of attaining personal happiness and freedom. In my reading, this process is demonstrative of both governmentality in the form of the ‘conduct of conduct’ and authenticity in the desire to remove oneself from the ‘artificial’ world of consumerism. Placing the responsibility to address shortcomings or improve circumstances on the individual means self-help is firmly aligned with neoliberalism (Foster 2016; Lewis 2008; Rimke 2000; Varga 2011), particularly through the notion of the enterprising subject (Rose 1998) which has been central to my understanding of minimalism discourse. This work takes place through the shaping of the lifestyle.

Within minimalism discourse, authenticity is ultimately presented as a critique of consumer capitalism, which is seen to present the individual with a false sense of freedom and choice. Minimalism, therefore, is discursively situated as an authentic antithesis to contemporary consumerism. This is achieved through the use of the rhetoric of authenticity including nostalgia for the past, preference for experiences, and prioritizing needs over wants. It is also seen in the touting of minimalism as delivering true individual freedom and fulfillment in contrast to the artificiality of consumerism.

I have utilized governmentality as a way of thinking about power relations, specifically, the persistence of neoliberalism as a set of political rationalities—freedom, choice, and individuality—that come to shape everyday life, particularly within contemporary consumer societies. As Guthman (2008) found when looking at an attempt to establish a sustainable food project, efforts to challenge neoliberalism are often shaped by its thinking and assumptions. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, a governmentality analysis allows for an exploration of power relations within discourse. And, along the lines of Guthman’s findings, my research suggests that minimalism discourse is a site in which the underlying power of neoliberalism becomes visible through its ability to shape points of its resistance. However, there is also agency present within minimalism discourse insofar as practitioners are finding a way to cope with and challenge consumer capitalism from within its confines. In this way, my analysis of minimalism offers insight into how power is contested and negotiated through discourse.

While minimalism is, at present, about addressing individual discontent, it does contain the potential to be a collective endeavour aimed at sustainability, reducing income inequality, or fostering community, while also providing individuals with a sense of authenticity. In an era characterized by ‘reality’ television; lives increasingly spent online; inescapable advertising; and ‘fake news’, authenticity is of growing concern. Moreover, in light of the 2008 Recession, it appears people are increasingly disenchanted with status quo consumer capitalism. The result being a crisis of authenticity wherein it is becoming more difficult to distinguish genuine from artificial, or true from false. Minimalism seems to be one way of coping with, and critiquing, this crisis.

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