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The Consumer Practice of Minimalism

Bachelor thesis

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Abstract

Minimalism is a consumer practice that was popularized after the 2008 financial crisis. The phenomenon is primarily observable on social media where its portrayal has generated considerable attention, as well as criticisms, over the past years. For the moment, only minimal research has been conducted on the topic. This thesis therefore will contribute to the understanding of minimalism by presenting the consumer practice from a sociological perspective. The research is prefaced by a literature review consisting of the following topics: consumer society, post-consumerism and minimalism. The review of the current literature is then followed by a discourse analysis of popular American minimalist vlogs. The research findings suggest that the consumer practice of minimalism is mainly represented through the discourse of efficiency and personal growth. It begs the questions whether minimalism should be perceived as a post-consumerist movement or as an expression of contemporary consumer society.

Table of content

List of figures

1. Introduction

Is less actually more?

Minimalism is a term used to define movements and concepts in which the principal premise consists in the idea that 'less is more'. This thesis defines the notion as a consumer practice which emerged in the United States after the 2008 financial crisis. The minimalist lifestyle primarily consists in a voluntary downshifting of material possessions motivated by desires to focus on non-material longings. Furthermore, its proponents often claim that the consumer practice allows them to redefine the pursuit of the 'American Dream' in their own terms, and more generally makes them happier. Minimalism is primarily represented on social media, and especially on blogs, YouTube and Instagram where individuals display their understanding of the consumer practice. It appears that, over the past years, minimalism has attracted a lot of attention. It seems that the movement is becoming popular not only in North America but also in Western Europe, Australia, Japan and even in former countries of the Soviet bloc such as Poland. When looking at the impressive amount of views and 'likes' minimalist videos generate, it seems that this consumption practice keeps on gaining popularity. For example, the hashtag *#minimalism* has already generated over 12.5 million uses on Instagram. Moreover, minimalist books such as Fumio Sasaki (2015) "*Goodbye, Things: The New Japanese Minimalism*", Joshua Becker (2016) *"The More of Less: Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own"* or Francine Jay (2010) *"The Joy of Less, A Minimalist Living Guide: How to Declutter, Organize, and Simplify Your Life"* quickly became bestsellers after their release. At the same time, the movement is also often greeted with skepticism. Its detractors often criticize the condescending tone used by minimalists in their videos, as well as the seemingly prevalent aesthetic component of their philosophy. It is not clear whether minimalism is simply a fad, or the expression of a real shift happening in the consumption practices of the Western World.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to take a closer look and study the representation of minimalism on social media from a sociological perspective. The research will then focus on answering the question of how the consumer practice is represented on American vlogs.

The research will be conducted using the theoretical foundations from existing work on consumer culture, post-consumerism, voluntary simplicity as well as studies on minimalism. The theoretical chapters will contain elements from the historic and the

economic literature, since these areas of studies provide complementary contextual information for the study of consumption practices as well as consumer society in general. The empirical section will be based on the vlogs from seven of the most influential American minimalists on YouTube. Tools from the work on *discourse analysis II* from Gillian Rose will then be employed to structure the study of this consumer practice. The main findings suggest that minimalism is represented as a consumer practice primarily expressed through the discourse of efficiency and self-growth. In fact, it appears that the consumer practice is less of an anti-consumerism movement and more of a sort of self-help ideology which can be perceived as a new branching of consumer society.

This thesis will be divided in three main sections. The first part will introduce the notion of consumer society to provide a contextual background on which minimalism will then later be analyzed. It will start by a small lexicon of the terms consumption, materialism, consumerism, consumer culture and consumer society to clarify the understanding of these notion throughout the thesis. Secondly, a historical overview of the evolution of consumerism from the 18th century to the end of the 20th century will be presented. Against this historical backdrop, various theories concerning the dynamics of consumptions will then be introduced. Indeed, consumption will first be analyzed in light of its relationship with social status. Theories from Veblen, Bourdieu and Holt will successively be presented and discussed. Secondly, the link between consumption and identity will be explored from a modernist perspective based on Campbell's essay on the metaphysical basis of modern consumerism. Then, a postmodernist approach will be used to introduce the concept of consumption as commoditization mechanism. This third part will be based on Bauman's book "*Consuming Life*". This approach will be particularly useful to introduce the thematic of consumerism in the age of social media.

Having laid the contextual foundations in the understanding of consumerism and the evolution of consumer society, a second section will be presented. In this section, the topic of minimalism as a consumer practice will be addressed. It will start by introducing the notion of post-consumerism using concepts such as the Easterlin paradox. Then, a chapter presenting the post-consumerist movement of voluntary simplicity will be presented. The third part will consist in a literature review of the current literature on minimalism.

The third section of this thesis will consist in a case study on the representation of this consumer practice of minimalism on the vlogs of American minimalists. The first

chapter will present the specificities of vlogs as representation surfaces. The second chapter will lay the methodology of the *discourse analysis II* according to Gillian Rose and explain its relevance to the current analysis. The third chapter will consist in an analysis of the vlogs of seven of the most popular American minimalists. The vlog analysis will then be followed by a discussion of the results in which the topic of minimalism will be interpreted considering the evolution of consumer culture. Finally, the conclusion outlook will provide further paths of reflection on the possible evolution of this consumption practice.

2. Consumer society

The term 'consumer society' encompasses a large amount of meanings, and the interpretations can be many. Over the years, scholars have shared their different understandings of this societal and economic concept. The hypothesis, analysis, and conclusions reached often differ and sometimes conflict but, as Ladwein (2017, p. 11) points out, it is crucial to keep in mind that consumer society keeps on evolving and that people's attitudes towards it may change over time. Therefore, one must remember that a theory may fit a current part of consumer society but is already obsolete or completely foreign to another segment of it. In fact, there are several factors such as time, geographic location, political environment, class and culture which can influence the social expression of this concept (Restad, 2014, p. 770).

It is now generally accepted that, to some extent, consumerism is a globally widespread phenomenon. Nevertheless, since this thesis focuses on a specific segment of the American consumer culture, most of the theories presented relate to Western societies. This chapter therefore consists of a literature overview of the notion of consumer society in order to provide a solid base for the understanding of contemporary consumption practices such as minimalism. It will start with a small lexicon of the main terms employed. Secondly, a historical outline will be drawn. Then, an explanation of the main dynamics of consumer society will be presented for further clarification. And finally, a sub-chapter about consumer society and social media will be presented.

2.1 Definitions

The terms *consumption*, *consumerism*, *materialism*, *consumer society* and *consumer culture* can take on different meanings depending on the context in which they are employed. Moreover, they tend to be used in interchangeable ways in the public discourse as well as in the literature. This chapter aims to build a concise lexicon of these notions to provide clarity to the concepts that will be used throughout the thesis.

2.1.1 Consumption

Consumption is a phenomenon whose main understanding comes from the field of mainstream economics. It usually refers to the use of goods and services made by individuals or households (Carroll, 2018). Nevertheless, there are other stages which constitute the full consumption process, such as the selection, the purchase, the repairing, the disposal and the repurposing (Woodward, 2014). From a neoclassical perspective, consumption is perceived as the end purpose of any economic activity, and thus, the consumption level of individuals tends to be viewed as the paramount element of economic success (Carroll, 2018). Therefore, it is a practice that absorbs much attention in the public discourse.

Consumption is such a manifold and universal phenomenon that the behaviors associated with it can be analyzed from different perspectives. Consumption studies thus stem from various fields of research such as sociology, economics, history and business (Woodward, 2014). In this thesis, consumption will primarily be understood as a practice which consists in the acquisition, the use and the disposal of goods and services by individuals. Theories concerning the mechanisms of this practice will be presented in the following chapters, and different layers of meaning will be suggested.

2.2.2 Materialism

In this thesis, the term materialism will be used to refer to an economic concept, and not to the philosophical monism. According to Belk (1985, p. 265), materialism is a personality trait which indicates an attachment to worldly possessions on the part of the consumer. Following this understanding, Ladwein (2017, p. 55) notes that materialism relates to the individuals' propensity to acquire material goods and to ostensibly use them. In a more general sense, a materialistic person is usually seen to be an individual who perceives great value in acquiring and possessing objects, and therefore tends to accumulate them. In this thesis, materialism will nevertheless be used in a broader sense, focusing on its social core. Indeed, according to Richins and

Dawson (1992, p. 307), materialism should be understood as a value that guides people's decisions in many situations which include, but also go beyond consumption. A value can be described as "*an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence*" (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). Therefore, a materialistic person will, for example, tend to work longer hours in order to earn more (Richins & Dawson, 1992, p. 307).

2.2.3 Consumerism

The word consumerism can refer to different concepts depending on the context in which it is employed. According to Swagler (1994, p. 348), the notion made its first appearance in the 1940s, and originally referred to the efforts of cooperative movements supporting consumers' interests. But it is in the 1960s and especially in the 1970s that the term started to be used more widely. At that time, the idea of consumer sovereignty was gaining popularity. Clear definitions of consumerism started to be suggested, and in 1973, Craven and Hills depicted the notion as encompassing "*a multitude of group actions concerned with such issues as consumer protection, laws, the availability of product and price information, fraudulent and deceptive business practices, and product safety*" (p. 233). The meaning of the word then gradually shifted to designate a new kind of modern philosophy. Indeed, in the 1980s and until the beginning of the 1990s, neoliberal ideologies were prevalent in the Western world. The consumer was perceived as one of the main fueling forces of economic growth and thus, as a model citizen (Slater, 1997, p. 10). The word consumerism therefore started to designate "*a doctrine advocating a continual increase in the consumption of goods as the basis of a sound economy*" (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989, p. 802). Nevertheless, this new order also generated criticisms. The term evolved towards the derogatory meaning for which it is known nowadays. Indeed, it started to be equated with the self-indulgence and the excessive materialism observable at that time (Swagler, 1994, p. 356). This understanding can be linked with Bauman's perception (2007, p. 28) that, unlike consumption which is primarily an activity of individuals, consumerism should be understood as an attribute of society. Campbell (2004, p. 42) further argues that, when looking at the prevalence of the 'consumer model' in most areas of contemporary society, one should perceive consumerism as a kind of default philosophy of modern life. In this thesis, the understanding to the term will be based on Bauman's definition of consumerism as "*a type of social arrangement that results from recycling mundane,*

permanent and so to speak 'regime neutral' humans wants, desires and longings into the principal propelling and operating force of society, a force that coordinates systemic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of human individuals, as well as playing a major role in the process of individual and group self-identification and in the selection and pursuit of individual life policies" (2007, p. 28).

2.2.4 Consumer culture

A culture can be described as "*the ideas, customs, and social behaviors of a particular people of society*" (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). Following that understanding, consumer culture must encompass ideologies expressed in consistent behavioral consumption patterns practiced by a large number of people. Ladwein (2017, p. 16) argues that consumer culture is the structuring force of the consumerist identity, whose central expression can be observed in the massive use of consumption goods. Therefore, one can understand that consumerism is the social arrangement which ties members of consumer culture through the central value of materialism. The expressions of consumer culture are therefore evidenced in the rocketing levels of consumption as well as the long working hours observable in Western societies. This understanding joins Slater observation that "*consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets*" (1997, p. 8). A following section of this thesis will explore with more detail the issues around the development of markets as intermediaries of consumer culture. It will also address the development of consumer culture and its expressions throughout history.

2.2.5 Consumer society

A society is defined as a "*large group of interacting people in a defined territory, sharing a common culture*" (Open Education Sociology Dictionary, 2018). Following this definition, one can assume that consumer society is a system in which consumer culture is prevalent. Indeed, according to Bauman, consumer society is a particular kind of society which "*promotes, encourages or enforces the choice of a consumerist lifestyle and life strategy and dislikes all alternative cultural options; a society in which adapting to the precepts of consumer culture and following them strictly is, to all practical intents and purposes, the sole unquestionable approved choice; a feasible, and so also a plausible choice- and a condition of membership*" (2007, p. 53). Moreover, consumer society, according to Slater (as cited in Ladwein, 2017, p. 16) is a cultural, social and economic phenomenon. In

fact, its cultural expression can be observed in the prevalence of consumer culture as the leading way of life (Slater, 1997, p. 8). The social aspect refers to the increase in discretionary resources allowing the access to innumerable commodities for a large part of society (Ladwein, 2017, p. 16). And finally, the economic dimension is characterized by the development of capitalism and the worldwide increase in production and trade (Slater, 1997, p. 26).

In this thesis, the understanding of consumer society will therefore be based on Bauman's argument regarding of the prevalence of consumer culture as well as Slater's perception of the phenomenon, encompassing its economic and social dimensions.

2.2 The path of consumerism

The aim of this chapter is to provide historical and sociological milestones concerning the development of consumer society. As a preamble, it must be noted that the history of consumerism cannot be traced in a fully linear manner, since the concept encompasses different dimensions and changing societal manifestations.

Humans have always engaged in acts of consumption in one way or another, but consumerism is a relatively new phenomenon. Indeed, according to Slater (1997, p. 9), consumer culture, as the dominant mode of cultural representation in the Western world, was developed over the course of modernity and became fully formed in second part of the 20th century. The exact beginning of this societal shift is often discussed, but most historians agree on its emergence around the 18th century (Chessel, 2012, p. 12). At that time, numerous economical, technical, philosophical and social transformations were slowly shaping Western societies. During those years, the whole economic system was starting to go through major revolutions. Working classes were beginning to experience an increase in purchasing power (Ladwein, 2017, p. 16). The emergence of new production, commercialization, distribution and advertising methods were drastically changing the content and the accessibility of the goods and services supplied by the market (Chessel, 2012, p. 15). Colonialism and international trade were also creating new products and ideologies (Slater, 1997, p. 18). Indeed, at that time, the perception of luxury goods and consumption in general was evolving due to the growing spread of mercantilism and liberalism (Chessel, 2012, p. 14). The changes brought by the progress of market-mediated consumption were beginning to completely transform Western societies. According to Slater (1997, p. 22), this era was the commencement of a status revolution in which money and wealth were to become the defining components of a person's lifestyle, slowly undermining the influence of religion, tradition and other social customs. However, this societal shift was neither linear nor seamless. In fact, ostensible consumption was still mostly perceived as a sign of amorality (Restad, 2014, p. 771).

Consumerism as an identity shaping force really started to become a mainstream trend for the bourgeoisie over the course of 19th century (Slater, 1997, p. 14). As Ladwein (2017, p. 16) points out, even if shopping arcades and international fairs were emerging at this period, the lower rural classes were still consuming in a mostly autarkic manner. In fact, the less affluent classes could enjoy the spectacle of modernity but not fully participate in it yet. Nevertheless, this is a crucial period in the development of consumer culture since it pinpoints the historic moment when consumerist norms

were spreading and gradually gaining acceptance (Chessel, 2012, p. 22). In the United States, wealth started to be more and more perceived as a sign of superiority. In fact, this view was often justified in a Darwinist vision of the marketplace (Restad, 2014, p. 772).

In the 1910s, mass production made its first appearance in Ford's car factories, and was soon adopted by other American manufacturing companies, dramatically lowering production costs. However, for the process to become truly economically efficient, the existing markets still had to evolve. Hence, in addition to optimizing the production of goods, the industrial sector made considerable efforts to expand its customer base. According to Ewen (1977, p. 39), this process was carried out by selling products at a larger geographical scale, by producing goods the lower classes could afford, and by actively trying to influence mentalities. The idea of production and consumption as two distinct separate processes gradually gained acceptance.

The ideology of affluence, which linked everyday consumption with modernity, was then generalized in the 1920s (Slater, 1997, p. 12). In the literature, this period is often portrayed as the first consumerist decade, and the United States was the first country to fully embrace consumerism on a wide scale. In fact, mass consumption was satisfying and creating demand at the same time, thus fueling the economy (Chessel, 2012, p. 24). The 'American model', which carried the promise of a fruitful future, was born. In 1929, the home economist Christine Frederick wrote: "*Consumptionism is the name given to the new doctrine; and it is admitted today to be the greatest idea that America has to give to the world; the idea that workmen and masses be looked upon not simply as workers and producers, but as consumers… Pay them more, sell them more, prosper more is the equation*" (as cited in Ewen, p. 35, 1977).

In the middle of the 1950s, mass consumption became a widespread phenomenon in the Western world (Ladwein, 2017, p. 16). This period is often described as an era of conformity through consumption. In the United States, the philosophy of 'keeping up with the Johneses[1]' became a common mechanism to gain and retain social status. According to Slater (1997, p. 12), this time marked the culmination of Fordism and Keynesian economic managerialism. Mass consumption was encouraged. In fact, in the beginning of the cold war, the United States was actively trying to demonstrate a strong correlation between mass consumption and democracy (Chessel, 2012, p. 29).

[1] This idiom, which originated in a comic strip, refers to a principle in which households engage in comparative consumption activities in order to keep the same standards of living as their peers

This ideology, despite generating criticisms, was soon adopted by most Western European countries.

The 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s marked a new era of consumer culture. Indeed, groups of the society, particularly the new generations, started to resist against the order of conformity (Frank, 1997, p. 9). This period is characterized as a time of identity crisis and rebellion against the alienation of mass consumption, and thus, new norms of autonomy were searched (Ladwein, 2017, p. 49). According to Gunderson (2016, p. 378), capitalism responded to these yearns by slowly introducing the production of goods and services specially tailored for individualized lifestyles. However, the form of consumerism which is still prevalent today came into force during the 1980s, with the arrival and mass acceptation of the neo-liberal ideology. As Slater (1997, p. 10) explains, consumer sovereignty was put at the forefront of the political discourse and the economic notion of 'laissez-faire' was implemented in the form of waves of deregulations and privatizations. This period marks a time where radical individualism started to become the norm not only on the political level but also on the societal level. Hence, we can consider this era as the pivotal moment when consumerism fully impregnated society turning it into the consumer society that we know now.

2.3 The dynamics of consumerism

In Western societies, the desire to consume, and even to consume as much as possible, is often perceived as a natural human trait. In fact, even if it is common knowledge that mass consumption has disastrous effects on different spheres, excessively consuming seems to be an activity people are inexplicably drawn to. For example, the notion of an inevitable attraction to consumption goods can be seen in the ecological discourse; the idea of making efforts to reduce consumption seems to imply that consumption is a potent and inherently human force one must resist. This underlying perception of the object's attraction has also impregnated the language, creating new expressions that explain the act of falling for an object the subject did not want before seeing it, and eventually buying it. From a neoclassical economic perspective, individuals gain utility from consumption and they maximize such utility given the resources at their disposal. This thinking goes in line with some contemporary approaches, such as the one suggested by Twitchell (1999, p. 281), who argues that humans are materialistic by nature and that they consume a lot because it simply makes them happy. However, the aim of this chapter is to challenge these assumptions and suggest paths of reflection on the dynamics of consumerism.

2.3.1 Status

Throughout the whole history of consumer culture, critics have tried to understand what drives people to consume. In 1899, Thorstein Veblen presented the idea of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. He argued that the ostensible consumption of goods and leisure served the display of wealth in order to gain or retain social esteem (Veblen, 1899, p. 195). As was previously explained, consumer culture took its roots in a period of profound changes in the core institutions of society. Consuming in a 'good' or 'noble' way allowed individuals to assert their position on the social ladder. Affluence was made visible through wasteful activities such as extensive leisure, as well as luxurious spending on goods and services (Trigg, 2001, p. 101). According to the previously mentioned author, failing to adhere to this system of wealth display, would strip the individual of their decency and social status. Hence, all classes of society, even the poorest, had to engage in some forms of conspicuous consumption and leisure (Veblen, 1899, p. 196). Although this theory has often been challenged by some academics, some if its notions can be used to analyze todays' society. The main reason being it provides some interesting insights concerning the relationship between consumption and the perception of social class.

In 1979, Pierre Bourdieu (p. 206) presented a theory which states that taste is a decisive element to signal social rank. According to the French sociologist, taste is reflected through aesthetic choices which evidence one's adherence or distance to a certain social class. These aesthetic choices are made based on the level of cultural capital and economic capital possessed by individuals. In Bourdieu's model, cultural capital roughly corresponds to the quality and quantity of the education received, and economic capital to the wealth level (Rosengren, 1995, p. 27). Differences in lifestyles thus depend on those two dimensions, and are expressed in consumption choices (Trigg, 2001, p. 104).

Below, a simplified depiction of Bourdieu's model of lifestyles classifications

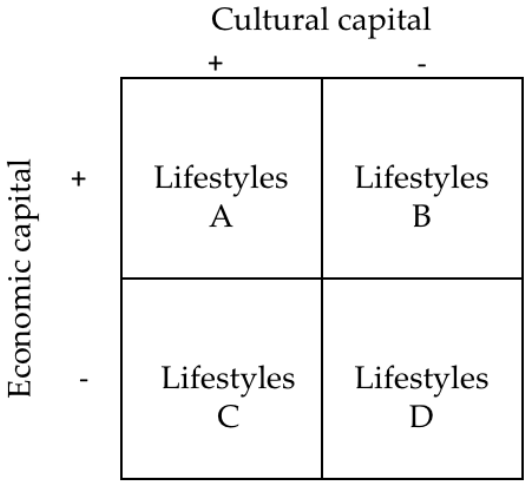

Figure 1: Simplified depiction of Bourdieu's model of lifestyle classifications (Rosengren, 1995, p. 24)

Tastes are primarily used to draw a distinction with the social group to which one is the closest, and ultimately from which the competition is the most direct (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 209). However, the members with the highest levels of cultural capital are more likely to enter in such distinction dynamics. Contrary to Veblen's argument, lifestyles do not follow a tickle-down process from the highest class to the lowest class but rather follow a tickle-round process across the social hierarchy. In fact, the members of the upper class oftentimes re-appropriate tastes from the working class in order to outflank the aspiring members of the middle class whose lack of sufficient cultural capital prevents them from engaging in similar consumption practices (Trigg, 2001, p. 113).

In 1998, Douglas B. Holt drew on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to analyze the relationship between consumption and social class in the USA. At that time, many critics were postulating that, in a postmodern world, identities were becoming so fragmented that consumption objects could not provide indications on social status anymore. However, Holt (1998, p. 220) suggested that class differences were not solely represented in the type of goods consumed, but also in the way they are enjoyed. To test his hypothesis, Holt conducted interviews with people of high cultural capital (HCCs) and low cultural capital (LCCs). The aim was to find out whether variations in cultural capital would lead to differences in consumption practices (Holt, 1998, p. 222). The main findings of his research suggest that taste differences between the two social groups are mainly expressed in the perceived relation between materialism and social status. Holt (1998, p. 247) found that LCCs tended to engage in rather materialistic practices, performing activities related to economic symbolism, in order to seek prestige. Consequently, HCCs were developing anti-materialistic or idealistic tastes to distance themselves, and thus assert their social position (Holt, 1998, p. 248). These differences in behavior provide compelling explanations on the reasons why cultural elites seem to reject mass culture in favor of the development of personal style. However, Holt's research does not postulate that the consumption practices of the LCCs are effectively more materialistic. In fact, according to Holt (1998, p. 232), people with high cultural capital often consume in materialistic ways, but they manage to deny the associated notions of excess and waste by justifying their purchase through the associated metaphysical experience it brings them.

Holt's study support the previous assumptions of cultural capital theory concerning the development of materialistic or idealistic tastes. In fact, the survey points that HCCs tend to come from more affluent economic background than LCCs. It thus shows that the abundance or lack of material security is crucial in the development of values. Indeed, it appears that, for someone who experienced material deprivation growing up, engaging in luxurious spending can signify a successful distance from such moment, whereas someone who grew in a more comfortable economic situation will experience luxury in a different way. Holt (1998, p. 232), and Bourdieu before him, found that people who have never suffered from material deprivation tend to aestheticize material paucity. These notions can provide explanations why, for example, HCCs tend to prefer smaller houses whereas LCCs with similar income levels tend to live in bigger houses.

Holt's study confirms numerous findings of other researches involved in cultural capital theory. Namely, that the level of cultural capital plays a significant role in terms of access to certain professions. This finding provides central insights to the understanding of the replication of class differences; it seems that the type of work practiced by individuals appears to structure their tastes. For example, Holt (1998, p. 234) noticed that HCCs oftentimes have professional occupations which require them to travel and constantly meet new people, which in turn, tend to increase their cosmopolitan sensibilities. Cosmopolitanism can for example be observed in the preference for exotic goods and services.

Another central finding of the study concerns the production of consumer subjectivity. In fact, Holt (1998, p. 238) postulates that HCCs are more inclined than LCCs to use consumption to cultivate their sense of individuality through authenticity and connoisseurship. For example, HCCs will tend to justify their consumption of commodities through the lens of connoisseurship (Holt, 1998, p. 242).

Holt's interviews were conducted more than two decades ago. Thus, the specificities of the results are probably not fully applicable nowadays anymore. However, Holt's study still bears relevance concerning the understanding of how consumption dynamics are shaped. In fact, it provides compelling analytical tools to study the relationship between the perception of materialism and consumption.

2.3.2 Identity

The previous section of this thesis provided some theory on the relation between consumption practices and status. This chapter aims to provide an additional layer of understanding by exploring the identity shaping aspects of consumption.

In 2004, Collin Campbell tried to understand why consumption had become such a central practice of contemporary life. He based his essay on an observation of modern consumerism. The sociologist noticed that the phenomenon was articulated on two central features, namely the prevalence of emotion over reason, and the individualistic rather than communal essence of its nature (Campbell, 2004, p. 29). Starting his analysis on these two abstract assumptions, Campbell then explored the notion of 'identity crisis' which was preoccupying numerous of his contemporaries. In fact, the modern era can be viewed as a period during which the individual sense of self was becoming less and less bound to class status (Bocock & Thompson, 1992, p. 149). Some sociologists were suggesting, that the anxieties created by the loss of identity markers, ignited by neoclassical ideologies, had created a new form of consumerism in which

the quest for identity was continually exploited and exacerbated (Slater, 1997, p. 85). Campbell, for his part, had a less grim stance on the question. He suggested that, consumption was used a way to solve the modern crisis of identity (Campbell, 2004, p. 30). In fact, the author argued that although general identity markers, such as gender, age or nationality framed the parameters of who people consider themselves to be, they were becoming less central in the definition of personal identity. The defining features of the self were then to be found in a unique mix of preferences, for example, the desires and wants of the individuals (Campbell, 2004, p. 31). However, the author did not claim that identity was for sale. He rather suggested that individuals were continually discovering who they really are by exposing themselves to an extensive range of consumption objects and then monitoring their reactions (Campbell, 2004, p. 32). The sociologist continued his analysis by exploring the individualist dimension of the epistemology related to modern consumerism. In fact, he observed that people seemed to reject the authority of traditional institutions in favor of their own 'inner truth' and 'desires'. This tendency was demonstrated by the success of 'guru-like' people whose mission was to help individuals discover what they truly 'want' or 'desire' (Campbell, 2004, p. 34). Campbell then tackled the issue of the changeability of tastes. He postulated that the plasticity of desires and wants was simply one expression of the human need for reassurance concerning the reality of the self (Campbell, 2004, p. 35). In fact, the sociologist based his postulation on the assumption that modern Western culture embraced an 'emotional ontology'. Consuming was therefore to be understood as one of the intense emotional activities in which people engage to gain reassurance of who they are and temporarily overcome their existential angst.

2.3.3 Consumers as commodities

The previous chapter examined the link between consumption and identity in a context of modernity. This chapter, however, investigates this relation from a post-modernist point of view. This approach can provide compelling analytical tools for the understanding of consumer society in its most recent evolution. One of the most eminent late modernist theorist of consumerism is Zygmunt Bauman. This chapter is based on his book "*Consuming Life*".

Bauman (2007, p. 28) states, that the substance of individuals' needs and desires evolved in the course, and as a consequence, of the transition to consumerism. Indeed, as explained in the historical chapter, society evolved from a producer-focused society

to a consumer-focused society. This transition is described by the sociologist as the transition from the solid to the liquid phase of modernity. Bauman (2007, p. 29) says, that in the society of producers, the acquisition and possession of objects was motivated by a longing for security, power and esteem. In fact, in the solid phase of modernity, gratification was to be found in the potential for a purchase to provide long-term security, as opposed to immediate enjoyment. People thus acquired goods which could stand the test of time. Nevertheless, with the advents of consumerism, the desire for stability began to be replaced by more fleeting cravings. According to Bauman, "*consumerism, in sharp opposition to the preceding forms of life, associates happiness not so much with the gratification of needs (as its 'official transcripts tend to imply), as with an ever-rising volume and intensity of desire, which imply in turn prompt use and speedy replacement of the objects intended and hoped to gratify them*" (2007, p. 31). In fact, liquid modern consumerism is a period in which the meaning of time began to be renegotiated. The sociologist argues that time ceased to be perceived as linear or even cyclical, but as 'pointillist' (Bauman, 2007, p. 32). The author uses the metaphor of the 'poin*t*' to describe an era in which each instant seems full of opportunities which need to be seized immediately. Individuals of consumer society are thus constantly pressured to seize the moment. At the same time, the amount of information as well as the quantity of products keep on increasing. As a result, people tend to develop a new affliction which Bauman describes as 'melancholy'. The author explains it as "*a disturbance resulting from the fatal encounter between the obligation and compulsion to choose/the addiction to choosing, and the inability to choose*" (Bauman, 2007, p. 42). In fact, if each moment is indeed full of promise, then happiness becomes perceived as an individual responsibility. Failing to be happy therefore becomes an excluding factor in the society of consumers (Bauman, 2007, p. 44). However, numerous factors suggest that individuals are not perceiving the amount of happiness they hoped for. Bauman (2007, p. 47) asserts that the perpetual non-satisfaction of individuals' desires is the force which allows consumer society to thrive. The author describes consumerism as an economics of deception which promotes dissatisfaction, and at the same time, offers false promises to cure these feelings of insecurity. He claims that "*the realm of hypocrisy stretching between popular beliefs and the realities of consumers' lives is a necessary condition of a properly functioning society of consumers*" (Bauman, 2007, p. 47). Consumerism further prospers thanks to its capacity to absorb contradictory currents, and then recycle them as the propelling force for its continuous reproduction and expansion (Bauman, 2007, p. 48). The main dynamic which fuels the expansion of consumer

society is what Bauman calls 'individualization'. The author explains that, in a world characterized by the de-routinization of human conduct and disintegrating of human bonds, all choices have become individual responsibilities (Bauman, 2007, p. 49). Life strategies therefore are oriented towards the continuous creation of self-identity. In fact, if identities are created and not given or discovered, the outcome is an extra responsibility that translates into pressure to constantly assert one's place in society. Individual performance thus becomes the principal metric by which people's value is measured (Bauman, 2007, p. 55). Consequently, consumption turns into the public sphere within which performance is demonstrated. As Bauman asserts "*the crucial, perhaps the decisive purpose of consumption in the society of consumers (even if it is seldom spelled out in so many words and still less frequently publicly debated) is not the satisfaction of needs, desires and wants, but the commoditization or recommoditization of the consumer: raising the status of consumers to that of sellable commodities*" (2007, p. 57). This process of self-commoditization is also described by Don Slater. The author asserts that one of the flagrant expressions of consumer culture in the sphere of personal life can be observed in the surge of self-help books and activities which aim to develop the project of the self (Slater, 1997, p. 86). Indeed, these commodities and advices are so popular because they all aim to train the individual to 'get the best deal' out of life. This thinking goes in line with Bauman's postulation (2007, p. 110) that, in liquid modern society, identities are perceived as projects to be undertaken.

2.4 Consumer society and social media

The previous chapter introduced the notion of commoditization and self-commoditization in the context of liquid modern consumerism. This chapter provides further layers of meaning by analyzing the use of social media as self-commoditization tool in consumer society.

Zygmunt Bauman wrote "*Consuming Life*" at a time when Facebook was not accessible by the public, Instagram did not exist, and YouTube had only been active for two years. Nevertheless, the sociologist was already perceiving how liquid modern consumerism was starting to impact and be impacted by the burgeoning of social media. In fact, the creation of these virtual two-ways communication channels had a considerable impact on society, shaping new economies and the users themselves (Wyrwoll, 2014, p. 11).

Since the advent of Web 2.0, the internet is a platform where individuals who do not possess extensive computer programming skills can share content. The platforms on which this user-generated content is broadcasted are called social media. These applications endow their users with a double role: first as consumers, and second as producers. Indeed, when individuals access social media, they take the active role of making user-generated decisions which relate to the consumption or production of content, such as uploading videos and photos, giving 'likes' and 'upvotes', following other users, etc. The way in which people use social media can vary a lot. As Jauréguiberry (2015, p. 196) points, the technological tools provided by these platforms are used in different ways depending on the needs of the users. The French sociologist asserts, that user-generated decisions follow three different types of operating logic. The first logic of action relates to individuals' need to be integrated to different networks in order to exist economically and socially speaking (Jauréguiberry, 2015, p. 199). As explained in the previous chapter, in liquid modernity, the pressure to catch every opportunity to create one's identity is central. People therefore require social networks to have access to the resources contributing to the creation, maintenance and display of their identity. Social media allows for the creation of what Bauman calls 'cloakroom communities'. This notion describes communities which can easily be accessed and left without strong involvement from the user (Bauman, 2007, p. 111). For example, subscribing to a Facebook page only requires a click to let the individual become a member of a specific association. Bauman (2007, p. 112) postulates that the defining feature of 'cloakroom communities' is the experience of community that is felt by its temporary member. Indeed, being part of this type of communities enables

the user to take up an identity for the time he or she needs it, and then discard it without consequences. The second logic of action concerning the use of social media relates to the constant necessity to be efficient (Jauréguiberry, 2015, p. 200). These new communication channels enable the user to simultaneously engage in different activities. The pressure or even necessity to constantly be performant is a central characteristic of liquid modern consumer society (Bauman, 2007, p. 55). For example, in present times, busyness is perceived as a sign of status symbol because it shows that the individual is highly demanded (Belezza, Paharia, & Keinan, 2017, p. 120). Finally, the third logic of action relates to the necessity of individuals to assert their identity (Jauréguiberry, 2015, p. 200). In fact, social media reshaped the way people communicate their identity and their relation to others. In 2007, Bauman stated that "*in the internet games of identities, the 'other' (the addressee and the sender of messages) is reduced to his or her hard core of a thoroughly manipulable instrument of self-confirmation, stripped of most or all of the unnecessary bits irrelevant to the task still (however grudgingly and reluctantly) tolerated in offline interaction*" (2007, p. 115). More than ten years later, this observation still bears relevance. It appears that the use of social media keeps on strengthening the processes of self-commoditization. People are now constantly confronted with the image they project on social media. As Jauréguiberry (2015, p. 207) asserts, these virtual reflections pressure individuals to constantly succeed by being performant, efficient and socially admired.

3. Post-consumerism and minimalism

The first part of this bachelor thesis presented the topic of consumerism as a ubiquitous phenomenon of Western societies. It provided a historical outline to understand the different ideologies and societal changes which led to the current expression of our contemporary consumer society. It then examined in more depth the implications of consumption in social class differentiation and the identity shaping process. A late modernist approach was then used to explore the process of self-commoditization and its relation to the use of social media.

This chapter draws on these conceptual foundations to present one of the current movements of consumer culture called *Minimalism*. Minimalism is a lifestyle which became popular after the 2008 financial crisis (Dopierała, 2017, p. 70). It is usually expressed by a voluntary down-shifting of possessions following the idea that 'less is more'. It appears that the topic has generated a lot of attention on social media over the last years. The hashtag *#minimalism* has already been used more than 12.5 million times on Instagram and videos from self-proclaimed minimalists abound on YouTube. The enthusiasm which this consumer practice generates leads to believe that minimalism is a movement which deserves attention. The goal of this chapter is therefore to examine the foundations of this lifestyle, using the analysis tools developed by contemporary sociologists. It will consist in a literature overview of post-consumerism as well as existing work on voluntary simplicity and minimalism. The aim of this chapter is to lay the theoretical foundations for the empirical study which will then be conducted.

3.1 Post consumerism

Consumerism, as explained in the first part of this thesis, has become a widespread phenomenon in the Western world. It quickly changed numerous aspects of the public and personal sphere, having a strong impact on the planet as well. As Szejnwald Brown and Vergragt (2015, p. 310) point out, the consumerist economy has benefitted some individuals, but it has also proven to have disastrous effects on various spheres. There is now a sustainability crisis which can be observed in the acceleration of climate change, the dramatic exploitation of natural resources, the growth of inequality, the rise of populism, etc. (Blühdorn, 2017, p. 42). On a more individual level, Pal (as cited in Drapińska, 2017, p. 105) observed that the stress and chronic fatigue brought by the demands of the modern consumerist life provoked an increase in lifestyle-related diseases such as depression, anxiety, and heart diseases. These findings support Bauman's postulation (2007, p. 86) that consumer society has turned into a society of speed, excess and waste.

It now appears that more and more people are beginning to feel uneasy with the consumerist paradigm. According to the philosopher Kate Soper (2007, p. 34), there is a growing number of individuals who are starting to feel overwhelmed by the amount of possessions they have accumulated over the years. This argument is reflected in the popularity of self-help books and services aimed at helping people declutter their homes. For example, Marie Kondo's book "*The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*" has been sold in more than 6 million copies in the last four years (Williams, 2017). Moreover, it seems there is an increasing sense of nostalgia for certain products and practices which the consumerist lifestyle had deterred (Soper, 2007, p. 33). Blühdorn (2017, p. 43) also notices that there is a rebirth of anti-consumerist ideas which were long consigned to the margins. It appears that there is a bottom-up cultural shift slowly happening in the realm of consumption (Szejnwald Brown & Vergragt, 2015, p. 309). In fact, it seems that the disenchantment with consumerism is creating alternative ways of living. The adoption of these lifestyles is not only driven by altruistic motives, but also by an aspiration to live a more meaningful life (Soper, 2017, p. 20). In fact, post-consumerist lifestyles appear to be characterized by a desire to increase one's well-being by adopting non-materialistic attitudes such as slowing down, working less, and enjoying more spiritual practices in order to live the 'good life'.

3.1.1 The 'good life' and the Easterlin Paradox

In the contemporary Western world, the perception of the 'good life' is still strongly associated with the reputation and quality of the material goods that people can acquire and possess (Drapińska, 2017, p. 10). In fact, it seems that materialism is, to a certain extent, still a central value which works like a template influencing the behavior of individuals in various situations (Ladwein, 2017, p. 10). As Richins and Dawson (1992, p. 304) point out, materialistic people are drawn to the acquisition of material possessions because they view them as essential to their well-being. They therefore tend to work longer hours to have the necessary financial means to increase their consumption.

In the United States, income per capita experienced a threefold increase since the 1960s, but the measured happiness level has not risen (Sachs, 2017, p. 179). This observation can be an illustration of a concept called the Easterlin paradox. This paradox is an empirical generalization which states that, after having reached a certain wealth threshold, there is no clear link between an increase in material well-being and happiness (Drapińska, 2017, p. 106). An explanation to this phenomenon is, according to Diener (as cited in Ladwein, 2017, p. 76), that individuals tend to evaluate their level of satisfaction by comparing their situation to the one of their peers. Therefore, if overall consumption increase, happiness levels will tend to stay the same, but the individuals whose level of consumption stayed the same will experience a decline in happiness (Bauman, 2007, p. 45). Therefore, people seem to engage in a 'hedonic treadmill' where they spend in order to keep up with the consumption level of others (Soper, 2017, p. 14).

Even if the concept of the Easterlin paradox has existed for over 40 years, the idea that an increase in economic growth will bring back the 'American Dream' is still largely pervasive in the political discourse in the United States (Sachs, 2017, p. 179). However, it seems that a growing number of Americans are questioning this so called 'American dream'. In fact, recent studies show that most Americans agree that their consumption level is too high and consider that fact as problematic (Bowerman, 2014, p. 14). As Szejnwald Brown and Vergragt assert (2015, p. 309), younger generations seem to be more and more attracted to emerging lifestyles which are oriented towards sustainability, meaningfulness and well-being.

3.1.2 Alternatives to consumerism

It would be incorrect to assume that consumerism has never generated skepticism. In fact, there were concerns about the consumer-centered society throughout history. For example, in 1944, Adorno and Horkheimer (p. 18) were already criticizing how the phenomenon was penetrating the cultural sphere and creating false expectations. In 1969, the sociologist Jean Baudrillard (p. 74) was asserting that consumerism had not 'liberated' the consummative force of the people but had rather induced a necessity to need and to consume for this new order to prevail. In fact, for a long time, many sociologists and philosophers have expressed their concerns about the evolution of consumer society. And, even if their theoretical analysis provided valuable insights, they also generated controversy and have often been considered classist.

On a more practical scale, there have been previous social movements which have adopted non-consumerist lifestyles. In fact, the sociologist Amitai Etzioni (2013, p. 382) notes that many communities within capitalist societies have oriented their life pursuit towards anti-materialistic ideals. Oftentimes faith was the motivating element which led people to follow ascetic lifestyles. In fact, most religions, such as Christianism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism are based on non-materialistic precepts (Ulusoy, 2015, p. 52). Following are some examples of previous movements formed in opposition to consumer society. In the 1960s, some counter-cultural movements emerged against the order of mass-conformity that the previous decade had brought (Frank, 1997, p. 10); the hippies promoted non-materialist values such as communal living and environmentalism (Etzioni, 2013, p. 382). A decade later, debates about the limits of economic growth emerged in France under the term 'décroissance' (D'Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015, p. 215). The thinking behind degrowth consist in a "*socially sustainable and equitable reduction (and eventually stabilization) of society's throughput*" (Kallis, 2011, p. 874). On a practical level, degrowth aims at reorganizing life around anti-materialistic values such as simplicity and sharing. Degrowth, as an activists' movement, emerged in the early 2000s (D'Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015, p. 32). Proponent of degrowth are calling for changes both at political and individual level. At personal level, they often engage in anti-consumerist practices such as non-monetary exchange systems and subsistence organic farming (Kallis, 2011, p. 876). Degrowth, can be considered as an anti-consumerist movement. Anti-consumerist movements seek to completely replace capitalism by establishing new systems (Etzioni, 2013, p. 383). Post consumerist movements, on the other hand, aim to move beyond consumerism by using the mechanism of consumer culture in order to put

more emphasis on non-materialistic values and practices (www.postconsumers.com, 2016). In fact, proponents of post-consumerist lifestyles call for a shift in the way consumption is perceived. Post-consumerism is not about ceasing to consume, but about finding human gratification and personal development through activities and practices which are not commoditized (Soper, 2017, p. 44). Etzioni suggest not to replace consumption but to "*cap it and channel the resources and energy thus freed into other pursuits*" (2013, p. 383). As Soper (2017, p. 7) further emphasizes, post-consumerism is about challenging the depiction of the 'good life'. It is about reducing one's consumption and emphasizing alternative life pursuits such as engaging in social and spiritual activities and increasing one's involvement in community life.

3.2 Voluntary simplicity

Voluntary simplicity is a post-consumerist movement which rejects abundance and excess of material goods in favor of more spiritual and emotional experiences (Ladwein, 2017, p. 100). The term *voluntary simplicity* and *minimalism* are often used interchangeably. In fact, it appears that these two movements are closely related and many of the practices and values they promote overlap. Voluntary simplicity takes its origins in the 1970s contrary to minimalism which originated in 2008 (Dopierała, 2017, p. 70). According to Kasperek (as cited in Dopierała, 2017, p. 69), minimalism can be understood, to some extent, as a continuation of voluntary simplicity. This chapter therefore aims at providing theoretical foundations about the values and practices of the movement on which minimalism was later founded.

The concept of voluntary simplicity was coined in 1936 by the social philosopher Richard Barlett Gregg (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 46). In his book, "*The Value of Voluntary Simplicity*", Gregg (1936, p. 1) referred to the religious precepts of the most renown prophets, historical thinkers and leaders to promote the deliberate choice to live a simple life. Voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle started to be popularized in the 1970s by books such as Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* and Elgin's *Voluntary Simplicity* (Bowerman, 2014, p. 21). The movement, nevertheless, lost some of its momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, when neoliberal policies were fully enforced (Etzioni, 1998, p. 619). It first seemed that this lifestyle was meant to be casted as some sort of consumer utopia from the past. However, it now appears that voluntary simplicity, or some variations of the movement, seem to have been generating more and more attention over the past years (Ladwein, 2017, p. 100).

3.2.1 Voluntary simplicity as a loosely-bounded cultural movement

Voluntary simplicity can be described as loosely-bounded cultural movement characterized by a flexible and evolving ideology (Grigsby, 2004, p. 7). In a sense, it can be perceived as a self-help type of movement where individuals find their own path to simplicity. According to Elgin, voluntary simplicity constitutes "*a manner of living that is outwardly more simple and inwardly more rich, a way of being in which our most authentic and alive self is brought into direct and conscious contact with living*" (1993, p. 398). It is based on the notion of 'less is more' and thus calls for a reevaluation of priorities. A central feature of this movement is the deliberate nature of its adoption. In fact, voluntary simplicity is based on inner motivations and not on outer constraints

(Ladwein, 2017, p. 108). It is therefore not to be mistaken with precariousness or poverty.

Voluntary simplicity appears to have been adopted mainly in the Western World. It seems that the movement finds echo in societies where the rhythm of capitalism, oftentimes described as the 'rat race', has disenchanted many people (Etzioni, 1998, p. 627). For most of its adherents, this lifestyle is mainly perceived as a way to resist the oppression caused by the increasing demands of the labor market, as well as the resulting pressure to engage in status consumption (Grigsby, 2004, p. 50). This oppression is reflected in the lack of free time and the excess of clutter which people experience before simplifying their life. By engaging in downshifting activities and reorienting their lifestyle, voluntary simplifiers seek to attain a feeling of well-being by having just enough (Etzioni, 1998, p. 630). Oftentimes, voluntary simplicity is also pursued to live in a way which corresponds to the ethical and ecological values of the person (Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek, 2007, p. 149).

This lifestyle is mostly practiced by individuals from middle and upper classes with a higher education (Ladwein, 2012, p. 101). Moreover, it appears that voluntary simplicity is mostly favored by women (Cordeau & Dubé, 2008, p. 34). Using terminology from the cultural capital theory (Bourdieu 1979; Holt 1998) most voluntary simplifiers can be perceived as high cultural capital individuals. According to Grigsby (2004, p. 8), the practice of voluntary simplicity resonates with the feelings and values of this segment of the population, and helps them find meaning in their life. As explained in the first part of this thesis, high cultural capital individuals have a strong desire to distance themselves from materialistic practices. Voluntary simplicity is thus a movement which corresponds to their perceived values. Moreover, it allows them to construct and assert their own identity (Grigsby, 2004, p. 8). As Roux explains, by engaging in oppositional consumption behaviors, consumers often find a way to reassert their individual personality (2007, p. 74). Therefore, at the individual level, voluntary simplicity can be understood as a practice to attain a more authentic and coherent version of oneself. Moreover, Cordeau & Dubé (2008, p. 35) found that voluntary simplicity is often used as a tool for self-actualization.

3.2.2 The consumer practice of voluntary simplicity

Scholars have tried to determine the exact practices of voluntary simplifiers but it seems that each individual has a personal way of applying the concepts of this movement. Moreover, as explained in the first part of the thesis, consumption patterns tend to evolve over time. It is therefore tricky to pinpoint the exact behaviors of voluntary simplifiers. Nevertheless, it appears that the practices and values of voluntary simplicity relate to two main domains, namely consumption and disposition. In fact, as Ladwein (2017, p. 111) points out, voluntary simplicity does not only consist in changing consumption patterns but also parting with a number of objects.

The model from Ballantine & Creery is therefore useful to provide a big picture of the consumption and disposition aspects of this lifestyle.

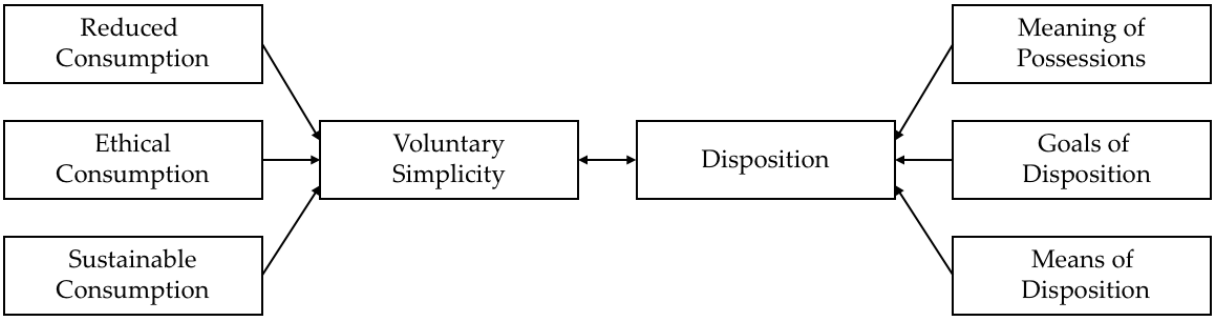

Figure 2 :Key themes from the voluntary simplicity and disposition literature (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 47)

As was previously explained, the adoption of voluntary simplicity stems from a feeling of having an excessive amount of material possession. One of the first steps towards a simpler life therefore consists in parting from a certain number of objects (Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek, 2007, p. 144). This process is often described as decluttering. Since there are no precise guidelines on how to proceed, aspiring voluntary simplifiers must make individual distinctions on what they want to keep, and what they want to dispose. They thus analyze the meaning of each individual item.

The meaning of possessions, in this case, relates to the signification and status individuals assign to their belongings (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 48). Meaningful possessions are commodities which carry public and/or private meaning (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005, p. 813). Since voluntary simplicity is about having an inwardly richer and outwardly simpler life, individuals will therefore try to focus on the private meaning of their belongings.

The notion of 'goals of disposition' as presented in the model, then refer to the reasons which motivate voluntary simplifiers to part with some of their possessions (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 48). According to Ladwein (2012, p. 102), voluntary simplifiers seek to keep functional items and break away from objects which do not fit in their future simpler lifestyle. They will therefore attempt to distance themselves from status conferring items (Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek, 2007). On a psychological level, parting from some possessions is an instrument to assert one's identity. In fact, as Lastovicka & Fernandez (2005, p. 816) explain, disposition can assist in the self-enhancement process of individuals in a similar way that acquisition does. By separating themselves from some items, voluntary simplifiers therefore 'liberate' themselves from their old identity.

The means of disposition are determined by the types of disposition choices faced by people (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 48). The model from Jacoby, Berning, & Dietvorst is therefore useful to have an overview of the disposition alternative.

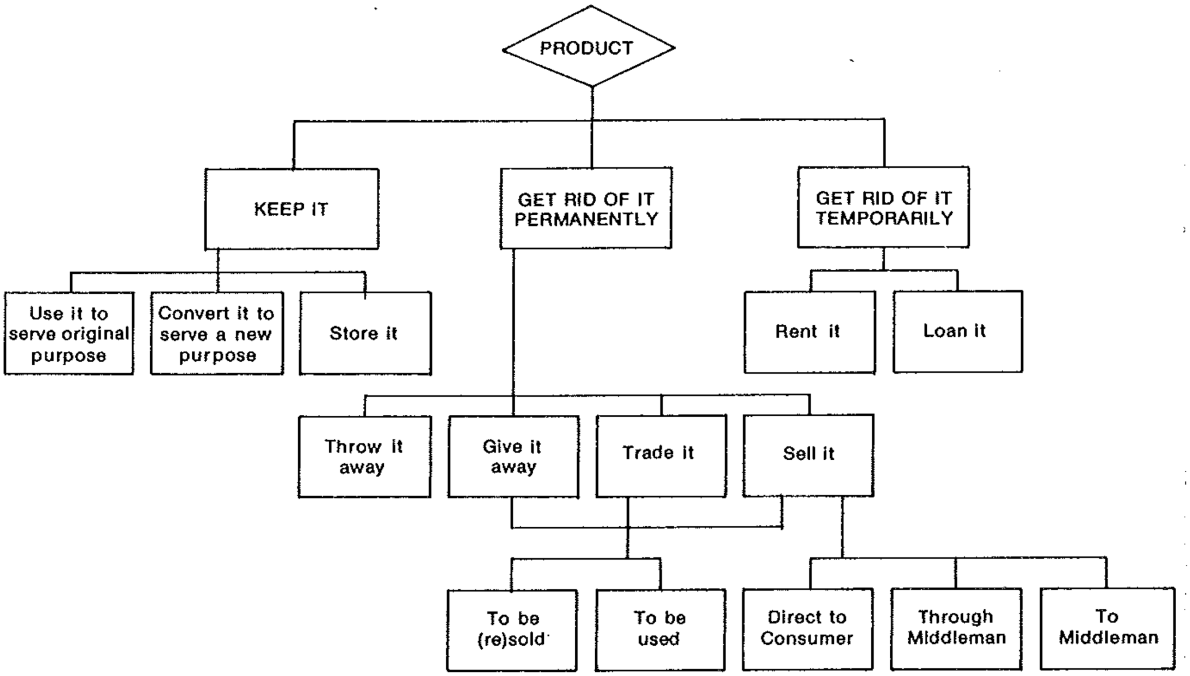

Figure 3: Overview of disposition alternatives (Jacoby, Berning, & Dietvorst, 1977, p. 23)

When adopting the practice of voluntary simplicity, individuals often sell their house to pay off their mortgage debts and then move in to smaller place (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 49). The less valuable possessions are then often given away or recycled. In fact, in the process of downshifting, voluntary simplifiers tend to favor donating possessions than throwing them away or selling them (Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek, 2007, p. 152). When voluntary simplifiers get rid of meaningful items, they tend to

engage in different forms of divestment rituals. According to Lastovicka & Fernandez (2005, p. 814), these rituals are employed to manage the public and private meanings of items in order to facilitate the detachment from the identity of the person disposing of the belonging. Ballantine & Creery (2010, p. 50) noticed that voluntary simplifiers often remove physical aspects of items and but manage to keep the essence of them. This ritual, called *iconic transfer*, consists in transferring the private meaning from a disposed vessel to another object, called the icon (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005, p. 817). For example, iconic transfer is performed when voluntary simplifiers scan pictures and documents to keep digital versions. In the process of decluttering, voluntary simplifiers also often store the objects they want to dispose of in a specific location before getting rid of them. This location, called *transition-place*, allows for trial disposition and helps the individuals to detach themselves from the objects (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005, p. 817). In fact, downsizing is perceived as a highly emotional process for individuals adopting voluntary simplicity (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 50). Rituals, which accompany individuals on their path towards simplicity, give them a feeling of agency and reassure them.

When the process of downsizing is completed, voluntary simplifiers tend to be inclined to engage in activities which prolong the lifespan of their belongings. Elgin (1993, p. 402) points out that an important part of the voluntary lifestyle often consists in developing skills which contribute to reducing waste. For example, learning how to mend one's clothes or do some simple repairs around the house are competences which the adherent of this lifestyle often perform.

As was previously explained, voluntary simplicity is usually perceived as a post-consumerist movement. The adherents of this lifestyle therefore still engage in market-related practices. They nevertheless adopt new types of rationale when it comes to their consumption choices. Grigsby (2004, p. 14) notes that people who engage in voluntary simplicity reduce and change their consumption patterns. Reduced consumption refers to the activities which help voluntary simplifiers limit their consumption (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 48). In fact, keeping a life free of material clutter is a central motivation of the movement. However, as Ladwein (2017, p. 109) points out, voluntary simplifiers buy less material goods, but they do not always reduce their spending. In fact, for many individuals, buying less means being able to buy better quality items. Voluntary simplifiers are also inclined to engage in activities such as sharing or buying second-hand items to save money or respond to their inner values (Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek, 2007, p. 145). Indeed, for many of its adherents,

voluntary simplicity is about living a more sustainable and ethical life (Elgin, 1993, p. 398). Ethical consumption refers the consumption activities which take into account environmental and social considerations (Ballantine & Creery, 2010, p. 48). Thus, for some voluntary simplifiers, buying fair trade and environmentally friendly products can also be a central part of their lifestyle.

The adherents to voluntary simplicity can be involved with the movement on different levels of intensity. Etzioni (1998, p. 621) postulates that there are three distinct variations in which this lifestyle can be observed. Firstly, there are the moderately involved followers which are referred as *downshifters*. These consumers tend to adopt concepts of voluntary simplicity only in some areas of their life, such as reducing their working hours to spend more time with their family (Ladwein, 2012, p. 102). The second type of consumers are called *strong simplifiers*. This group usually has undertaken serious lifestyle changes and given up on high income streams and social status to live a simpler life (Grigsby, 2004, p. 11). And finally, the third group of individuals is called *holistic simplifiers*. This group is the one who undertook radical changes and adopted voluntary simplicity as life philosophy (Ladwein, 2012, p. 102).

3.2 Minimalism as second-wave movement of voluntary simplicity

According to Dopierała, minimalism[2] is "*a lifestyle that is characterized by an anti-consumerist approach combined with the demand for seeking meaning in life by means other than consumerism-oriented attitudes*" (2017, p. 67). This explanation, at first glance, appears to be just another variation of the many definitions explaining voluntary simplicity. In fact, the two movements are, at many levels, very similar. Minimalists seem to adopt similar attitudes towards clutter as voluntary simplifiers. Moreover, the terms minimalism and voluntary simplicity are often used in interchangeable ways. However, in this thesis, minimalism will be understood in accordance to Kasperek's definition of this lifestyle as a 'second-wave' of voluntary simplicity (as cited in Dopierała, 2017, p. 69).

The first chapters of this thesis shed light on the emergence of consumerism, on its developments, and on its dynamics. This theoretical background provided valuable insights which contributed to understand the changeability of this phenomenon. Therefore, one can assume that post-consumerist movements also evolve and vary over time. This chapter will thus present minimalism as a contemporary expression of voluntary simplicity. The differences and similarities between the two movements will be explained and certain specificities of minimalism will be presented in further details. Since there is still little academic research on the topic, most of the theories about minimalism will be based on the work about Polish minimalists from Dopierała, on the studies from Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska and on the websites of famous minimalists.

3.2.1 Emergence and geographical spread

Minimalism seems to have emerged in the years which followed the 2008 financial crisis (Dopierała, 2017, p. 70). Rodriguez (2017, p. 286) presents it as a loosely-connected grassroots movement which was first popularized in the United States. Although the movement gained traction in that country, it appears that the lifestyle does not only concern Western societies anymore. In fact, minimalism is, for example, gaining popularity among young adults from countries of the former Soviet bloc. Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska (2016, p. 500) have observed that the topic has been trending on the Polish blogosphere over the past years. However, the two authors state that the Polish version of the movement nevertheless took its inspiration from the

[2] In this thesis, *minimalism* is understood as consumer practice, and not as the artistic movements or the judicial philosophy which are also referred under the term *minimalism*

publications of American minimalists such as Leo Babauta (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016, p. 500). Babauta is often cited as being one leading proponent of minimalism. In fact, his website, mnmlist.com, is considered one of the most popular websites in the world (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 288). It also looks like minimalism is finding echo in Japan. In fact, many famous minimalist books, such as Fumio Sasaki's *goodbye, things: on minimalist living* (2017) have been written by Japanese authors. However, it is important to mention that many aspects of the lifestyle are practiced in Japan without necessarily being labelled as minimalist. In fact, many proponents of minimalism, similarly to voluntary simplifiers, are inspired by Buddhist concepts. It is therefore not surprising that many elements of this lifestyle are to be found in countries where Buddhist values are prevalent.

3.2.2 The path to minimalism

Voluntary simplicity, as was previously explained, originated as a reaction against the 'rat race' lifestyle of Western capitalist countries. The philosophy behind the voluntary simple lifestyle focused on finding one's optimized amount of possessions, getting rid of the unnecessary, and then reorienting one's life pursuit towards non-materialistic ideals. In fact, for many voluntary simplifiers downshifting was meant to help them become more mindful and enjoy the present moment (Grigsby, 2004, p. 61). The environmental and ethical dimensions of the movement, although not being the primarily driving factors, play an important role. The path to minimalism is quite similar. It also usually consists of four stages: feeling of excess and disarray– turning point – decision to change one's lifestyle – beginning of minimalism journey (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016, p. 501). However, the starting point is slightly different for minimalists than for voluntary simplifiers. In fact, minimalism is often adopted by individuals who find themselves dissatisfied by the current state of consumerism, short of time, disillusioned by the pursuit of the 'American Dream', and in debt (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 287). The last two points, even if only partially mentioned in the scientific literature, are central to the practice of minimalism. In fact, it appears that minimalists often grew up in working class environments. They then climbed up the corporate ladder and followed the 'American Dream' but ended up surrounded by clutter, in debt, and profoundly unhappy. For example, the two authors and producers of the website theminimalists.com and documentary *minimalism*, both describe having followed this life trajectory (Milburn & Nicodemus, n.d.). The Polish bloggers studied by Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska (2016, p. 502) also describe a social trajectory from

financial vulnerability to relative affluence. Moreover, even if the backgrounds of American and Polish minimalists are not fully comparable, they both reflect a feeling of disillusion in the promises of mass-consumerism and a sentiment of inability to cope with the mechanisms of the system. This observation goes in line with the findings of Jeffrey D. Sachs (2017, p. 179) on his study around the topic of happiness in the United States. In fact, as explained earlier in this thesis, it seems that the 'American Dream' is less and less delivering its promises. According to Rodriguez (2017, p. 291), minimalism can actually be perceived as a reaction to the particularities of American capitalism. Indeed, most proponents of the minimalist lifestyle claim that it 'cured' them from the affliction of their past lives and then allowed them to develop their inner potential. This allegory is relevant in the present case because minimalists tend to employ the language used to describe illness to explain their pre-minimalism situation (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016, p. 505). Minimalism is therefore perceived as a remedy. This lifestyle encourages its adherents to redirect their aspirations towards non-materialistic values, and contributes towards that goal by providing tools to restructure their old lifestyle (Dopierała, 2017, p. 67).

3.2.3 Minimalism and social media

The scientific literature on minimalism, as previously explained, is limited. Moreover, previous researches on this phenomenon have, for the moment, been mostly carried out by analyzing public expressions of this lifestyle. In fact, it appears that minimalism has only been studied through its representation on blogs, books and websites of self-proclaimed minimalists. Since minimalists' books mainly function as a compilation of topics of their website or blogs, we can assume that most of the expressions of minimalism are on display on social media platforms. As explained earlier in this thesis, social media function as two-ways channels (Wyrwoll, 2014, p. 11). They thus allow interactions between users and consumers. In the context of minimalism, social media (and more particularly blogging) plays a crucial role. In fact, according to Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, blogging is used as a discursive practice which "*anchors constitutive rules of the community of minimalists and minimal consumption practice*" (2016, p. 500). We can therefore understand that minimalism is not only primarily expressed on social media, but also shaped on these virtual platforms.

As was explained earlier in this thesis, social media allow for the formation of 'cloakroom communities' (Bauman, 2007, p. 111). This notion describes communities which can easily be accessed and left without strong involvement on the part of the

users. In the case of minimalism, blogs in particular function as 'cloakroom communities'. In fact, minimalist bloggers, by sharing their worldviews and copying each others, have created and are still creating minimalist communities (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016, p. 504). Due to the individualistic nature of this lifestyle, there are no formal requirements to enter and be part of the community. According to Dopierała (2017, p. 69), a characteristic of minimalism is that all adherents have their own understanding of the practice and they can thus choose freely what elements they want to integrate to their life. Therefore, as Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska (2016, p. 500) explain, by emotionally connecting to the story of minimalist bloggers, readers can enter the minimalist community. However, the ease of adhesion to the movement does not mean that all members of the community necessarily enjoy the same level of legitimacy and leverage. In fact, it seems that bloggers often play the role of influencers in the minimalist community. Influencers are people who play a role of reference in terms of attitudes, values, and practices by displaying attractive content on social media (Puteri, 2018, p. 2).

According to Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska (2016, p. 505), the aim of minimalist blogs is to provide guidance on various aspects of everyday life. As Rodriguez (2017, p. 292) observed, bloggers advices focus on helping people find freedom and happiness through minimalism. The life strategies put forward in order to pursue a life of minimalist well-being are expressed in terms of rationalization processes. In fact, Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska (2016, p. 509) found that minimalists tend to put forward their sense of rationalization of everyday activities and emotions. Minimalists thus present themselves as individuals who have managed to become highly efficient and autonomous.

3.2.4 Minimalism as self-commoditization practice?

At first glance, minimalism may appear as a movement focused on freeing individuals from the pressures of today's consumer society. In fact, the practices displayed by minimalists are very similar to the concepts put forward by voluntary simplifiers or even adherents of anti-consumerist movements such as degrowth. Moreover, minimalists often express their discontent with consumer society and tend to exhibit how little material possessions they need (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 287). However, some aspects of minimalism suggest that this lifestyle is tantamount to an expression of modern-day consumerism. In fact, several elements from the movement can be understood through the lens of self-commoditization. The notion of self-

commoditization was introduced in the first part of this thesis, referring to an understanding of consumer society in which consumption primarily serves the purpose of commoditization and recommoditization of the consumer (Bauman, 2007, p. 50). In fact, according to Bauman, liquid modern consumerism is characterized by a setting in which *"becoming and remaining sellable commodity is the most potent motive of consumer concerns, even if it is usually latent and seldom conscious, let alone explicitly declared"* (2007, p. 57).

It appears that the practice of minimalism seems to have 'enhanced the market value' of its adherents in many ways. In fact, as explained earlier, the social trajectories of minimalists tend to follow similar journeys, starting from disillusion with the 'American Dream' to discovery of the individuals' life purpose and happiness. Minimalism, as they often explain, is a tool which frees them to become their best self. For example, Millburn & Nicodemus (n.d.) claim that the practice enabled them to eliminate their discontent, reclaim their time, discover their mission, focus on their health, and grow as individuals. Moreover, minimalism is often perceived as a form of self-help movement (Dopierała, 2017, p. 71). Indeed, this lifestyle is primarily motivated by a personal desire for self-improvement and independence rather than by environmental or ethical concerns (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 294). The life skills presented on blogs of minimalists also appear to be attributes highly valued in consumer society. Renown minimalists also seem valued outside their online communities. For example, Joshua Becker appeared on national televisions and has published best-selling books on minimalism (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 290). Becker is not the only minimalist whose books depicting minimal lifestyles generated an impressive amount of attention. In fact, Francine Jay's "*the Joy of Less*"(2010) or Millburn & Nicodemus "*Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life*" (2011) have also become worldwide bestsellers. Some minimalists also use their found notoriety to commodify the pursuit of minimalism by making partnerships with brands on their websites or YouTube channel (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 292).

4. Case study

The theoretical part of this thesis provided a contextual background to the understanding of present-day consumer society. It started with a historical outline and then continued with the explanation of some of the central dynamics of the phenomenon. It later explored the topic of post-consumerism, and presented the movement of voluntary simplicity. This introduction allowed for a literature review of the understanding of the consumer practice of minimalism. Minimalism was then explored in light of its identity shaping aspects by investigating the relation between the consumer practice and social media. The existing literature on the topic suggests that the consumer practice of minimalism is not only represented on social media, but also shaped by the discursive practices of these virtual communication channels (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016, p. 500). The present case study will therefore be based on this assumption. It will contribute to broaden the research on the topic by investigating how the consumer practice of minimalism is represented on American vlogs.

The methodology of *discourse analysis II* by to Gillian Rose, will be employed to analyze this case study. It appears that this type of analytical tool, which is based on Michel Foucault's concepts, is particularly well-suited for the present case. In fact, it focuses on "*the site of production and audiencing, in their social modality*" (Rose, 2016, p. 224).

This chapter will be divided in three main sections. The first section will present the specificities of vlogs as research material. Their relevance concerning the analysis of the consumer practice of minimalism will be explained in detail with help from the existing literature on vlogs. The second section will present the methodology of the *discourse analysis II* by Gillian Rose. The particularities of this analytical tool will first be presented and then adapted to the present research material. The research will then be conducted in the third part of the case study. Finally, a discussion of the results will be presented and further path for reflection will be suggested.

4.1 Specificities of the research material

The research material of the upcoming case study come from vlogs from seven of the most influential minimalist American YouTubers. Vlogs are blog posts in video format. They are usually uploaded on YouTube and sometimes later published as part of blogs or websites articles (Gunelius, 2018). The vlogs which will be analyzed in this thesis are all public and can be found on YouTube.

YouTube is a social media that allows for the creation of channels on which users can freely broadcast videos. Channels can be made public or private. Public channels can be accessed and subscribed to by any user on the platform. Moreover, subscribers can enable notification alerts when a new video is uploaded. Videos can be compiled into playlists and thus be classified into categories on the channel of the author. Other users can also make private and public playlists of their favorite videos. Videos can primarily be accessed by entering key words on the search bar. They can also be recommended by the platform in function of the channels the user is subscribed to, or the type of videos previously watched. YouTube also allows for the viewers to 'like', 'dislike', comment, share, and save videos. YouTube can be used in numerous different ways, making it the ideal platform to spread minimalist practices. In fact, it appears that users take ownership of the possibilities given by the communication channel according to their needs, wishes, and skills (Jauréguiberry, 2015, p. 196). The practices enabled by the specificities of this social media platform therefore also shape their future uses. Nowadays, it appears that YouTube increasingly serves as a platform on which the public construction of life narratives and identities are carried (Kennedy, 2017, p. 409). In fact, the relative ease of use of the social media, as well as the increased communication potential it conveys seem to propel YouTube as an attractive platform for self-representation (Aran, Biel, & Gatica-Perez, 2014, p. 215). It is therefore not surprising that vlogs have become some of the most popular video styles watched on YouTube. Indeed, it seems that over 44% of internet users are watching vlogs each month (Young, 2016).

According to Biel & Gatica-Perez vlogs are "*video collections that serve both as an audiovisual life documentary, and as a vehicle for communication and interaction on the internet* " (2010, p. 211). They usually take the form of video diaries in which the person directly speaks to the camera (Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, & LaGoue, 2018, p. 93). Vlogs can serve different purposes. One common type of vlogs is the instructional vlog. Instructional vlogs often serve the display of self-taught skills and personal opinions. The type of discourse usually employed on these vlogs is therefore the one of the

'ordinary expert' (Tolson, 2010, p. 283). The ordinariness conveyed by the type of language used increases the perception of authenticity on the part of the audience (Gannon & Prothero, 2018, p. 612). It further seems that the direct address of vlogs allows for the development of strong parasocial relationships on the part of the audience (Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, & LaGoue, 2018, p. 89). Some charismatic vloggers sometimes even become 'micro-celebrities' and therefore enjoy increased levels of legitimacy and influence in their domains (Cocker & Cronin, 2017, p. 458).

In this case study, we consider the authors of the vlogs analyzed as micro-celebrities since they all have videos counting over 500.000 views and have subscriber bases ranging between 21K and 788K followers[3]. Moreover, it appears that, for most of them, their activities on YouTube constitute a source of revenue. We can therefore assume that the vlogs which will be analyzed are representative and relevant for the understanding of the consumer practice of minimalism in the United States. The research material consists in vlogs from seven famous American YouTubers who expressively identify with the minimalist movement by using the term "minimalism" and "minimalist" on their video titles. The videos analyzed are the ones which generated the highest amount of views. The videos which consider minimalism solely as an interior design trend are voluntarily left out of the research. The vloggers described in this research are four women and three men. They are all in their early twenties to late thirties.

[3] A detailed presentation of the vloggers and their videos is given in the appendix

4.2 Methodology

In this thesis, the case study will be based on analytical tools from the *discourse analysis II* from Gillian Rose. The sociologist's methodology is based on Michel Foucault's theories on discourse. According to Rose, discourse refers to "*groups of statements that structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking*" (2016, p. 187). As explained earlier in this thesis, minimalism emerged as a grassroots movement. The concepts and ideas behind the understanding of this lifestyle consist in the narratives of people who went on a journey towards a more minimalistic way of living. As Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska (2016, p. 504) explain, the minimalist movement was, and still is, created through minimalists' online sharing of their life trajectories and current practices. The online representation of these personal stories, as well as how minimalists communicate the manner in which this lifestyle is practiced, constitute a discourse of minimalism. Analyzing the elements which shape the discourse of minimalism on social media is therefore particularly relevant to the understanding of this consumer practice.

The public discourse can be analyzed in many ways. Nevertheless, in the present case study, the methodology will be based on the theories of *discourse analysis II* by Gillian Rose. This methodology is chosen for its usefulness when it comes to study visual materials and spoken texts, more particularly when the research focuses on "*their production by, and their reiteration of, particular institutions and their practices, and their production of particular human subjects*" (Rose, 2016, p. 220). As was explained earlier in this thesis, the consumer practice of minimalism is produced and reflected on social media and more particularly blogs and vlogs. Moreover, it appears that 'minimalist' as an identity mark is produced on these platforms. Therefore, *discourse analysis II* seems to provide useful analytical tools to examine the representation of the consumer practice of minimalism on American vlogs.

Since there are no specific indications on how *discourse analysis II* is to be conducted, this case study will use the example given by Rose as a template for the understanding of the main concepts of this methodology. The sociologist illustrates *discourse analysis II* by examining how 'art' is represented by museums and galleries, and how subjective elements such as the 'curator' and the 'visitor' are produced. A parallel is therefore made between the role of museums in the representation of 'art' and the role of vlogs in the representation of 'minimalism'.

Both museums and vlogs seem to function as *institutional apparatus*. In fact, they appear to hold some *power/knowledge* in the institution they constitute (Rose, 2016, p. 223). The

notion of power/knowledge, is to be understood as the intersection in which claims to truth lie (Rose, 2016, p. 190). Museums, for numerous reasons, are widely recognized as places where 'art' is displayed. Vlogs, for reasons that have been explained in the last chapter, seem to be recognized as platforms on which 'minimalism' is represented. In fact, vlogs of influential minimalists appear to hold a central place of power in the representation of the consumer practice of minimalism.

In both cases, practical techniques, called *institutional technologies,* are used to affirm certain forms of power/knowledge of the institutional apparatus (Rose, 2016, p. 233). Indeed, in museums as well as on vlogs, numerous types of technologies, such as technologies of display, or technologies of interpretation are employed to further affirm the power/knowledge held by their institutions. Moreover, the discourses articulated through museums and vlogs produce subjective roles of 'curators' and 'visitors'. In fact, vloggers can be considered curators of the consumer practice of minimalism and their audience can be understood as having roles similar to museum visitors.

The upcoming chapter will therefore present the main axis on which the discourse of minimalism is represented on American vlogs. An explanation of the institutional technologies employed to affirm the power/knowledge of the vlogs will be provided. Then, a discussion concerning the production of the subjective role of the 'minimalist' will be conducted. The analysis will be based on thorough observations of vlogs of minimalists. Particular attention will be given to the recurring visual themes, to the type of verbal and non-verbal language used, the values expressed, to the relationship between the vloggers and their audience as well as to the interplay between the previously mentioned elements.

4.3 Analysis

On American vlogs, minimalism is represented through the narratives of their authors, as well as through the interplay of discourses conveyed by the visual aspects of their videos. On each vlog, a vast array of techniques is employed to present different aspects of this consumer practice. The present case study will present two central elements appearing in recurring manners on the vlogs of American minimalists. For each finding, an explanation of the institutional technologies employed will be provided. And finally, a discussion about the identity marker of 'the minimalist' will be presented.

4.3.1 Efficiency

In the vlogs analyzed, minimalism is primarily represented as a pathway to efficiently restructure areas of one's life. In fact, even if the authors analyzed tend to differ in their understanding of the consumer practice, they all emphasize how minimalism is bringing more efficiency in their life. For example, Tara White, in her video "WHAT "MINIMALISM" MEANS TO ME" starts by saying:

> *"The first thing that minimalism means to me is efficiency."*

The notion of efficiency is usually portrayed through three focuses: financial efficiency, time-efficiency, and mental efficiency. Personal finance is a topic often brought forward by the American vloggers. Indeed, most of them often put forward how minimalism helped and still helps them make financially wise decisions. For example, some minimalists, such as Matt D'Avella, make vlogs entirely dedicated to the benefits of minimalism in money-related topics. In his video "A Minimalist Approach to Personal Finance", the vlogger explains how the minimalist lifestyle allows him to keep his spending habits low. Moreover, he presents how being a minimalist helps him feel confident enough to refrain from engaging in 'hedonic treadmill' activities. The financial advices presented by the vlogger are all framed as ways to efficiently reach a financially stable situation that allows the individual to take business risks and become richer. By integrating clips of confident-looking business men and citing financial experts in his video, D'Avella further affirms his power/knowledge on the topic.

On vlogs of American minimalists, time management is presented as another crucial aspect of the lifestyle. In fact, the consumer practice is often portrayed on videos which contain time-efficiency tips. Common topics of minimalist vlogs are decluttering tutorials, creation of capsule wardrobes, packing tips and 'minimalist essentials'. All these videos present the consuming practice as allowing the minimalists to efficiently use their time. For example, in her video titled "MINIMALIST LIFEHACKS!" Sarah Nourse explains how having a curated closet (i.e. a closet only constituted of versatile pieces in similar color schemes) helps her save time in the morning. She then continues by explaining that she has become much more efficient since she became a minimalist. For her, the efficiency benefits of the consumer practice are central. She states:

"Minimalism for me is not a lifestyle, minimalism is a tool that helps me reach my goals."

All minimalist vloggers, whether they consider the consumer practice as a simple tool or as a life philosophy, promote the notion of mental efficiency. In fact, the authors of the videos analyzed state that minimalism helps them focus on their priorities by having less decisions to face. The clean, tidy and simple background of their vlogs further emphasize their claims. Indeed, most of the vlogs are shot in the YouTubers' personal home. The background is usually their bedroom or their living room. The sleekness of their decoration, combined with the perception of privacy that the location conveys, contribute to give the viewer an impression of organization and efficiency.

4.3.2 Individual Growth

Minimalist vloggers tend to present their life as two main chapters: 'life before minimalism' and 'life as a minimalist'. In fact, elements of the life trajectory of these YouTubers are always shared when they talk about minimalism-related topics. The vloggers highlight how the consumer practice helped them grow personally by enthusiastically talking about their personal life. For example, in a video called "Q&A with The Minimalists", Joshua Field Millburn answers a question about the changes minimalism brought in his life by saying:

"I have never been happier. I'm 32 now, and I've never been happier in my entire life. I'm less stressed. The people around me say I'm much calmer than what I was in my life of yesteryear. And my relationships are a lot more meaningful. I'm a lot more healthy. And most important, I'm growing and I am contributing to other people."

Many of the other YouTubers claim similar benefits to the practice. In fact, all of them assert that they have been able to improve their health since becoming minimalists. They further explain that minimalism has helped them regain ownership of their life. Minimalism is often represented as a practice that allows its adherents to break free from the pressure to pursue the classical perception of the 'American Dream' and redefine it in their own terms. For example, Matt D'Avella in a video called "Why I became a minimalist" explains that, by seeing on TV one of his all times favorite idols renouncing to a life of luxury to live a simpler life, he realized that he could also redefine his own goals and then continues by saying:

"When I closed my eyes, when I imagined what success would look like to me in the future, it was no longer a big house, a nice car, fancy things, the white picket fence… I saw me doing work I loved, I was sharing time with family and friends, I was contributing and I was making an impact… It's crazy, but sometimes all it takes is just an idea, whether it be on late night TV or otherwise, to completely change your future."

Often, vloggers mention how adopting the consumer practice has contributed to the development of their true passion or even life purpose. Indeed, the discourse of the vloggers suggest that, by becoming minimalists, the YouTubers have been able to feel more confident in their decisions and found ways to assert themselves. It seems that this increase in self-esteem has given many of the minimalists the courage to become

more adventurous and, for example, start traveling. Alyse Brautigam explains in her video called "HOW I BECAME A MINIMALIST // RAW ALIGNMENT" how the consumer practice helped her achieve her dream of moving to Hawaii.
Another benefit that vloggers put in the forefront relates the development of their true preferences. Indeed, by only keeping items that add value to their life, minimalists manage to feel surrounded almost entirely by possessions they really like. The consumer practice therefore allows them to further develop their personal tastes. For example, Janell Kristina, in a video called "Things I STOPPED Buying & Owning | Minimalist for 5 years" mentions an art piece she has just purchased and says:

"I am shopping for these items slowly and only buy when inspired."

Janell Kristina is not the only one who mentions inspiration when talking about her buying decisions. In fact, when presenting their possessions, most of the vloggers either describe them as being high-quality items, as possessing strong emotional qualities or as being value-enhancing. This thinking is sometimes even applied concerning life decisions in general. For example, Ryan Nicodemus from the Minimalists states that for him minimalism is:

"not just about the stuff, it's about how you spend your time. It's about the people, the relationships you bring to your life. Are you hanging out with people? Are you associating with people who are supporting you? Who are adding value to your life?"

On many vlogs, minimalism is not solely represented as a consumer practice. Sometimes it is represented as a tool, sometimes as a lifestyle and sometimes as a life philosophy. Nevertheless, all minimalist vloggers present the practice as helping them become the best version of themselves, although their definitions of the best self vary consistently from minimalist to minimalist. For some of them it means starting their own business, for others it means inspiring other people, and for most it means travelling as much as possible. Nevertheless, their central message is always the same: minimalism freed them to become their best selves.

4.4 Findings

The aim of this case study was to further contribute to the existing literature on minimalism by investigating how the consumer practice is represented on American vlogs. The research was conducted using a type of discourse analysis which takes into account the specificities of the research material. The methodology was based on concepts of *discourse analysis II* put forward by Gillian Rose. It focused on the practical techniques used by YouTubers to display their interpretations of minimalism. It also investigated how this consumer practice was presented as contributing to the identity-shaping process of its adherents.

The analysis suggests that minimalism is represented as a consumer practice which, by optimizing the life quality of individuals, helps them maximize their inner potentials. In fact, the two of the most recurring discourses employed by YouTubers related to the notions of efficiency and personal growth.

The discourse of efficiency was articulated on three main axes: financial efficiency, time efficiency and mental efficiency. This first finding suggests that, even if the consumption and disposition practices of minimalists are very similar to those of voluntary simplifiers, their motives tend to differ. Although, in the existing literature, voluntary simplicity and minimalism are often presented as belonging to the same post-consumerist current. The present study however suggests that, even if there are some deliberate elements to the adoption of minimalism, American minimalists tend to adhere to this consumer practice rather due to outer constraints like debt. In fact, some of the vloggers describe the adoption of this lifestyle as a difficult choice they had to take but is now paying off. Some even suggest that they will probably not continue practicing minimalism when they get to a more stable situation. However, none of the vloggers directly complain about the difficulties of this consumer practice. They rather present their inner strengths and rationalization aptitudes to circumvent the possible frustrations resulting from this type of lifestyle. Furthermore, they tend to emphasize their ability to fully enjoy the minimalistic number of items they possess. This finding goes in the same line as the observations of Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska concerning mechanisms of rationalization of emotions of Polish minimalists in their consumption and disposition behaviors. In fact, all the authors of the vlogs analyzed repeatedly describe how much happier they have become since adopting this lifestyle. The analysis conducted in this thesis also suggests that minimalism is often used not only as a consumption practice, but also as a mean for self-development. In fact, on American vlogs, the discourse of personal growth is repeatedly mentioned when

talking about minimalism. This discourse is often articulated in relation to health improvement, increase in confidence, development of new preferences and discovery of freedom. Minimalism is thus often presented as a life-changing practice which allowed its adherents to tap on their inner potential. Becoming a minimalist is therefore presented as an identity-shaping process which helps individuals becoming their best selves. When they present themselves as minimalists, YouTubers legitimize their consumption behaviors. Subsequently, it allows them to display their life as inspiration.

The present case study contains a few methodological limitations. It focused on vlogs from a limited number of authors and did only concentrate on two recurring themes. It would therefore be interesting to conduct additional studies using a larger sample of vlogs authors and see if the findings are similar.

4.5 Discussion of the results

The findings of the present case study seem to indicate that the values expressed on American vlogs follow the main dynamics that define present-day consumerism. This analysis therefore states that the consumer practice of minimalism can be understood as a contemporary expression of consumer society.

Minimalism, as portrayed on the vlogs analyzed, is often represented as a self-commoditization practice. This concept, which was introduced in the first part of this thesis, refers to a mechanism that pushes individuals to undertake a process of creation of their own identity (Bauman, 2007, p. 110). On social media, it appears that minimalism goes beyond consumption, adopting characteristics more aligned to the self-help discourse. This observation can be seen in the emphasis put on personal growth in the advices given by the minimalist YouTubers. Furthermore, minimalists tend to put individual performance at the forefront of their preoccupations when they employ elements of the discourse of efficiency to describe the benefits gained from the consumer practice. This finding appears to rejoin Bauman's postulation (2007, p. 55) on consumer society that presented performance as the central metric by which individuals' value is measured in the liquid phase of modernity. In fact, vloggers tend to present their path towards minimalism as a strategy individually undertaken to gain a sense of agency over their life. As presented on their videos, becoming minimalists appears to have increased their personal value.

Moreover, even when the discussion is not conducted from a postmodernist perspective, the consumer practice of minimalism, as presented on American vlogs, can still be perceived as an expression of consumer society. In fact, on the videos analyzed, minimalism is always presented as a practice that can be adjusted according to the individual preferences of its adherents. Minimalism is therefore also expressed by what Campbell (2004, p. 28) described as the two defining features of modern consumerism: the individualistic essence of its nature and the importance granted to emotions. Furthermore, the analysis conducted in this thesis showed that vloggers present themselves on YouTube as evangelizers of minimalism, helping their subscribers discover what adds value to their life. The message put forward by YouTubers is thus akin to Campbell's (2004, p. 34) description of the practices of 'guru-like' or 'enlightened' individuals whose mission is to help other people find what they truly 'want' or 'desire' in life. Moreover, it seems that minimalists also discover their identity by exposing themselves to consumption objects and monitoring their reactions. In fact, the advices put forward in decluttering videos consist in assessing

one's relation to one's belongings before keeping or discarding them. The same line of thinking is also put forward when discussing acquisition activities. Indeed, the minimalist vloggers of this case study present their consumption choices as reflection of their inner self or inspiration. Furthermore, the analysis showed that taste seems to hold a central role concerning the representation of the consumer practice of minimalism on American vlogs. In fact, the YouTubers tend to present how the consumer practice helped them develop their sense of taste. The strong emphasis put on preferences by American vloggers can be further be perceived as a way to assert one's social class. Indeed, it seems that minimalists employ numerous techniques to present their lifestyle in a way that allows them to retain their social status despite downsizing. The analysis conducted in this case study seems to show that minimalist vloggers tend to present their 'minimalist essentials' through a lens of connoisseurship and that they emphasize the metaphysical experience brought by their belongings. Furthermore, they strongly reject mass consumption objects and tend to favor unique items. These observations are consistent with Holt's study (1998, p. 232) which postulates that people with higher levels of cultural capital tend to express their unique preferences in the ways they enjoy goods as well as with their attitude towards materialism. And finally, the analysis suggests that minimalist vloggers, even if they do not buy a lot of material items, consume a lot of services. Moreover, they all tend to travel a lot which can be perceived as a form of conspicuous leisure.

5. Conclusion and outlook

This thesis presented the subject of minimalism from a sociological perspective. A contextual basis was first laid by presenting the topic of consumer society. Then, a literature overview of post-consumerism, voluntary simplicity and then minimalism contributed to get a clearer picture of the current understanding of the consumer practice. Finally, a case study presented further lines of thoughts by investigating the representation of minimalism on American vlogs.

The findings of this thesis suggest that minimalism is primarily represented as a consumer practice helping its adherents to efficiently restructure their life, and further develop their inner potential. This thesis thus encourages a reflection on the nature of the minimalist movement as well as on its place in consumer society. In fact, in the current literature, minimalism is still presented as a second-wave of the post-consumerist movement of voluntary simplicity. This thesis, by presenting minimalism in light of the principal dynamics of consumerism, rather suggests that the consumer practice should be perceived as a current expression of contemporary consumer society. In fact, it seems that the movement is primarily portrayed as being driven more by self-commoditization desires and less by post-consumerist ideals. Furthermore, the strong emphasize put on individualization, as well as the lack of preoccupations for outer responsibilities expressed by the proponents of this consumer practice further distance it from anti-consumerist and post-consumerist movements.

It would therefore be interesting to conduct complementary researches to find out how the consumer practice is exerted outside of its social media representation. By studying the private expression minimalism, other aspects of the lifestyle could be further understood. Moreover, it would particularly be interesting to analyze how personal attributes such as age, gender or income levels influence the understanding of this consumer practice.

Minimalism, as it is represented on social media, is still a relatively new phenomenon. It is therefore most likely that this consumer practice will continue to evolve with the future uses of these communication channels.

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Support and aid

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Appendix

Channel name	Main topics presented	# subscribers	YouTubers' actual name	Gender	Age
The Minimalists	Minimalism Personal growth E-Business advices	161K	Joshua F. Millburn	M	37
			Ryan Nicodemus	M	37
Matt D'Avella	Minimalism Filmmaking Personal growth	438K	Matt D'Avella	M	30
Janell Kristina	Minimalism Travel Personal vlogs	66K	Janell Kristina	F	early 20s
Sarah Nourse	Personal vlogs Minimalism Travels	169K	Sarah Nourse	F	27
Raw Alignment	Health & Food Personal growth Minimalism	788K	Alyse Brautigam	F	23
TaraWhiteTalks	Travels Natural Alternatives Minimalism	21K	Tara White	F	mid 20s

The Minimalists
https://www.youtube.com/user/jmillburn

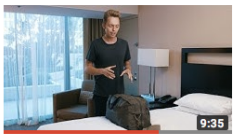
Matt D'Avella
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJ24N4O0bP7LGLBDvye7oCA

Janell Kristina
https://www.youtube.com/user/SimpleCentral

Sarah Nourse
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDbGw5fdxTLjRsNnD7_Jwvw

Raw Alignment
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzLQ_5hu5fuVSEHkMGEq7Vg

TaraWhiteTalks
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCevuUNcaj_cr6HxrJp3aHEA

Channel name	Most popular video	👍	👎
The Minimalists	 What's in a Minimalist's Travel Bag? 540K views • 1 year ago About the bag: https://gopakt.com By now you probably know we're making our first physical good—the travel bag from our documentary, MINIMALISM—but you might not know how we personally use the 541K views	6.3K	969
Matt D'Avella	 A Day in the Life of a Minimalist 3.8M views • 3 weeks ago https://www.patreon.com/mattdavella Support this channel & get all my unlisted videos New videos every week. New podcast every Wednesday. Podcast: http://groundupshow.com Newsletter: CC 3,9M views	134K	10K
Janell Kristina	 Things I STOPPED Buying & Owning | Minimalist for 5 Years 1.5M views • 2 months ago I solemnly swear to never caffeinate before a video again, sorry guys! I already talk fast as it is but wow. Hopefully that means I just got to fit in more content haha. This video is some of the m... 1,5M views	41K	3.1K
Sarah Nourse	 MINIMALIST LIFE HACKS! 495K views • 2 years ago Check out my minimalist hacks! :) Thanks for checking out my NEW channel! Click to subscribe! https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDbGw5fdxTLjRsNnD7_Jwvw?sub_confirmation=1 I upload at 500K views	8.3K	560
Raw Alignment	 Everything I Own // Minimalist ☆ 1.9M views • 2 years ago → EVERYTHING I OWN IN ONE VIDEO!← ◇ Not included in the video: (2 blankets, 1 pillow case, 1 towel) ◇ The little wooden box in the back left corner is where I have been storing all of my belongings... 1.9M views	21K	3.1K
TaraWhiteTalks	 MINIMALIST HOUSE TOUR 2: Japan 581K views • 2 years ago WE MOVED! Our new apartment is 312 sq. ft. (29 m2). Although it is smaller than our first Japanese apartment, we feel MORE comfortable here! This minimalist style home is organized with Marie CC 581K views	7.2K	290

Channel Name	13 most viewed videos on minimalism
The Minimalists	"Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things (Official Trailer)" "What's in a Minimalist Travel Bag?" "Travel Bag from The Minimalists' Documentary" "Nothing: Smartphone App from the Minimalists" "Podcast 001 ǀ Declutter" "Q&A with The Minimalists" "Pack Like The Minimalists" "Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life (Audiobook)" "The Minimalists Seattle Meetup" "What steps must you take for the minimalist life to happen?" "How do The Minimalists spend their money?" "How much stuff should you get rid of?" "How do you get the whole family on board with minimalism?"
Matt D'Avella	"A Day in the Life of A Minimalist" "My Minimalist Apartment" "A Minimalist Approach to Personal Finance" "How Minimalism Can Make You More Productive" "How to Pack like a Minimalist" "You Can't be a Minimalist If.." "My Minimalist Wardrobe" "The Benefits of a Simple Wardrobe" "Everyday Minimalist Carry" "Living with a Non-Minimalist" "Simple Ways to Declutter Your Phone" "Why I Became a Minimalist"
Janell Kristina	"Things I STOPPED Buying or Owning ǀ Minimalist for 5 Years" "Minimalist Studio Apartment Tour" "Minimalist Apartment Tour!" "Is Your Fantasy Self Toxic? ǀ Minimalism Series" "Why I Got A Hamster After College ǀ Minimalism & Pets" "The BEST decluttering tips EVER." "Five Years of Minimalism" "Minimalist Apartment Tour // 2015" "Closet Tour ǀ Simple & Minimal" "Signs you have TOO MUH STUFF." "My Toiletry Bag ǀ Minimalist travel" "Why Minimalism'" "Minimal Travel Packing ǀ New REI Ruckpack 40L Review"
Sarah Nourse	"MINIMALIST LIFE HACKS!" "Minimalism: What I Stopped Buying!" "APARTMENT TOUR ǀ Simple Studio" "MINIMALIST APARTMENT TOUR!" "WHY I STOPPED MAKING MINIMALISM VIDEOS" "MY MINIMALIST CLOTHING COLLECTION"

	"MINIMALIST CLOSET TOUR! BRANDING YOURSELF" "MINIMALIST APARTMENT TOUR" "Major Minimalist Closet Cleanout!" "MINIMALIST PACKING | Packing Light" "EXTREME DOWNSIZING | All I Own!" "ALL I OWN | Minimalist Move to NYC" "OUR MINIMAL WEDDING | Wine Wednesday"
Raw Alignment	"Everything I Own // Minimalist" "Living In A Van || A Day In The Life" "MY MINIMALIST WARDROBE! (less than 30 items)" "MY MINIMALIST WARDROBE UPDATE >> how I declutter" "MY MINIMALIST WARDROBE || Updated!" "MY MINIMALIST WARDROBE! + Tips For Downsizing" "5 MUST HAVE MINIMALIST ITEMS" "MINIMALIST BEDROOM TOUR IN HAWAII" "My Minimalist Skin Care Routine!" "My Minimalist Wardrobe!" "BATHROOM TOUR >> minimal | natural | vegan" "AM I STILL A MINIMALIST? >> Q&A!" "MINIMALIST WARDROBE >> does it even matter?"
TaraWhiteTalks	"MINIMALIST HOUSE TOUR 2: Japan" "MINIMALIST PACKING: 3 Weeks in Europe" "MINIMALIST HOUSE TOUR 1: Japan" "MINIMALIST HOUSE TOUR 3: Japan" "5 THINGS I BUY MORE | Minimalism" "MINIMALIST CLEANING PRODUCTS: Simple and safe!" "MINIMALIST PACKING: Jogasaki Coast, Japan" "Minimalist House Tour: Malaysia (Post KonMari)" "WHY THE KONMARI METHOD IS NOT MINIMALISM" "MINIMALIST MAKEUP | Natural" "MINIMALIST EVENING ROUTINE" "MINIMALIST PACKING: Ski Trip" "5 WAYS MINIMALISM IMPROVED MY HEALTH"

Declaration of authorship

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