

## Welfare and Challenges of Malaysian Adults who Adopt Voluntary Simplicity Lifestyle

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### Abstract

*This study reports a qualitative phenomenological investigation of motivations, practices, and impacts of voluntary simplicity lifestyle (VSL) in the context of the lives of Malaysian voluntary simplifiers. Semi-structured interviews with eighteen adults are analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. This inductive approach aims to capture the richness and complexity of the lived experience of voluntary simplifiers in Malaysia. Two analytic themes are presented here: (1) issues in real-life practices in the personal and social context, and (2) positive outcomes, in particular emotional and financial perspectives. The findings were further discussed by using Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory and well-being theory. The report concludes by reviewing the analytic observations, taking phenomenological thinking into account.*

**Keywords:** voluntary simplicity; qualitative; Malaysian; interpretative phenomenological analysis

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Motivations and Benefits of Voluntary Simplicity Lifestyle (VSL)

Etzioni (1998) has defined VSL as “the choice out of the free will to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning rather by being coerced by poverty, government austerity programs, or being imprisoned” (p. 620). Numerous factors have been identified as motivators to embrace VSL. They are: (1) environmental concern (Aydin & Kazançoğlu, 2017), (2) personal values (Kozinets et al., 2010), and (3) spiritual motivation (Roy, 2017). The environmental concern is an important factor of adopting VSL (Balsa-Budai et al., 2019), which is explained by a distinct trait of the individuals, and nature-relatedness (Redondo et al., 2021). Next, VSL arises from the subjectivity of the individuals and their individual needs (Black & Cherrier, 2010), which includes personal well-being (Ziesemer et al., 2021). Likewise, Roubanis (2008) has indicated that voluntary simplifiers are seeking to gain a sense of authenticity that could be explained as a function of the highest order of needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Furthermore, religious belief is also one of the motivations of practicing VSL (Ulosoy, 2015) as consumer ethical beliefs are often determined by religiosity (Vitell et al., 2007; Vitell, 2009). For instance, Islam criticizes wasting behaviors and excessive consumptions (Jafari & Süerdem, 2012; Ali, 2016).

Recent studies have proved that VSL positively affects personal well-being (Chowdhury, 2018; Kan et al., 2009; Rich, et al., 2017; Seegebarth et al., 2015). Some voluntary simplifiers have reported that they are happier and more content than the consumers (Walther et al., 2016), while some have gained genuine wealth and freedom (Alexander, 2011). It could be interpreted that by reducing consumption through voluntary simplicity, some voluntary simplifiers have enjoyed other things that are more vital in their life such as family, friends, hobbies, and nature (Ezell, 2020; Tosun & Sezgin, 2021), and some have reported growth as they acquired new knowledge and skill set while practicing VSL (Osikominu & Bocken, 2020).

#### 1.2 Real-life Practices and Challenges of VSL

The VSL is often self-determined, and the changes involved by voluntary simplicity are according to the situations and priorities in their lives (Papaoikonomou, 2012). Previous studies have found that the four unique yet correlated behavioral descriptions of VSL are (i) clutter removal, (ii) cautious buying, (iii) the longevity of products, and (iv) self-sufficiency (Akdağ & Demir, 2021; Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002; Erdoğan & Karapinar, 2015; Kang et al., 2021; Shaw & Moraes, 2009; Wata, 1997). However, the real-life practices of VSL in Malaysia could be different from the findings of previous studies which were done in the other countries. Hence, it would be interesting to investigate the practicality of VSL in the Malaysia context.

To become a successful voluntary simplifier is not solely impacted by personal values and faiths, but also by the factors of socio-culture and the institutions (McGouran & Prothero, 2016). Some voluntary simplifiers reported that they faced the difficulty of managing collective group identity due to their decentralized and layered participant base, and very individualistic moral principles (Sandlin & Walther, 2009).

Hence, it would be vital to give a voice to those who embrace VSL in Malaysia, making known the challenges that they encounter and how they manage and/or overcome these challenges.

## **2. The Present Study**

Numerous studies on VSL were conducted in developed countries (Reboucas & Soares, 2020), specifically Western Europe and the United States (Etzioni, 2004), have given us much insights to this sub-group. However, little research was conducted among this sub-group in Malaysia, a developing country with collectivistic culture and patriarchy as the norm (Tamam, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the welfare and challenges of those who adopt VSL. This study aims to answer the following research questions: (i) What are the views of voluntary simplifiers in Malaysia on their lifestyle? and (ii) What are the changes after practicing the VSL in Malaysia? The data were transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Osborn, 2003).

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Design**

The study is a qualitative, phenomenology design, with interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) to explore the welfare and challenges of Malaysian adults who adopt VSL. Using IPA methodology allows for an in-depth analysis of how the participants make sense of their personal experiences, and the researchers seeking to understand the meaning in order to make sense of what the participants are trying to express (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Ten Malaysian adults who adopt VSL took part in an in-depth, semi-structured interview, in which open-ended questions were used, encouraging detailed experiential accounts.

### **3.2 Participants**

The demographics of the participants include 18 Malaysians aged 18 to 42 years old, an appropriate age scope to study as this age group is most likely to practice a VSL liberally (refer Table 1). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, selective of the criteria that they are Malaysians and reside in Malaysia with legal status, aged 18 or above, and adopted VSL for at least six months. Prior communication were carried out on mobile apps, such as WhatsApp, to set interview dates and in some cases, emails and calls may be required to ease the process. To protect anonymity, the names of all participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Taylor's University Human Ethics Committee (reference no. HEC 2021/185). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior data collection. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted via online communication platform, Zoom. In total, 10 open-ended interview questions were asked. Given the sensitive nature of the study, questions were tailored to be sensitive and respectful, whilst being clear and concise for the interviewee to easily understand. Interviews lasted on average 32 minutes and audio recorded. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended with the aim to obtain as much descriptive information from the participants. At the end of the interview, all participants were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and given the opportunity to ask questions. The data was collected from the 12th of October 2021 to 16th of March 2022 to reach data saturation.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Small sample size adhered to IPA's purpose since its idiographic nature allows exploration of each case specifically to produce deep and detailed descriptions of the participant's individual experience before classifying commonalities of all cases. The analytic process involved several stages. Firstly, the data were transcribed verbatim. Secondly, the transcripts were reviewed after we listened to the recordings repeatedly. The review was done to obtain similarity in the way the recorded interviews were transcribed thereby we had control over the quality of the process, and to familiarize the data. Thirdly, the interviews were screened for topics or arguments that could be applied as a centralizing formation idea for a theme. Eventually, different emergent themes were generated after they were found to have a certain level of pattern or significance in connection with the research questions in the data. Then, these emergent themes were grouped together into four superordinate themes. Actual quotations from participants are written alongside each emergent theme for clarity purposes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Meanwhile, the inter-coder agreement is 80.9%.

#### 4. Results

Two superordinate themes derived from the IPA are presented. The superordinate themes are identified as "issues in real-life practices" and "positive outcomes". The structure of the superordinate themes is reflected in Table 2.

##### 4.1 Issues in real-life practices

###### *Personal challenges and disagreement in social circle*

Some participants expressed that in the journey of practicing VSL, they encountered personal challenges. For Tyra, she mentioned that she is still in the process of parting with the sentimental items. Therefore, Tyra came out with a creative solution, which is limiting the amount of sentimental items. Apart from Tyra's response, some participants also stated the challenges they faced and described the effort they had put in to overcome the problems. For Kelly, she specified that adjusting her with tactfulness in the collectivistic context could be one of the solutions:

*"Sometimes it's hard to persuade others to follow our pace, it will bring some negative emotions to ourselves. But we need to adjust ourselves from time to time because we can't force people to do the same thing like us."* (Kelly)

In essence, the participants described the effort they put in to overcome the problems. Most importantly, our sense was that they do not recognize those issues as huge hindrance in the journey of VSL.

Some participants acknowledged that the people in their social circle, sometimes even their family members are unsupportive of their practices, in which group harmony is of utmost importance in the collectivistic community. For Kate, her colleagues misunderstood her practices of VSL were due to financial difficulty. Additionally, Kate also felt frustrated when her husband did not agree with her decision of avoiding purchases. It took Kate much reflection and perseverance, as Malaysia is a patriarchal country:

*"I think there's a bit of frustration when it comes to couple relationship, like getting your partner to understand, because different value."* (Kate)

This study shows that the society with collectivistic and patriarchal features does bring challenges to those practicing VSL, and that tactfulness and perseverance are needed to face these challenges.

##### 4.2 Positive outcomes

###### *Positive emotions and financial benefits*

Most of the participants expressed that they experienced positive emotions. For Cheryl, she indicated that she felt more peaceful after no longer chasing material possessions. In line with Cheryl's response, Felicia also reported that she felt the joy of knowing herself after practicing VSL. Their responses mean that not being obsessed with material possessions leads them to be happier, liberated and satisfied.

Some participants stated that VSL helped their finances since they own less or spend less on purchasing items. In essence, the participants admitted that they know better about their finances and hence, manage them much better after becoming a voluntary simplifier.

#### 5. Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the challenges and benefits of those who adopt VSL in Malaysia, a collectivistic and patriarchal country. This section includes a discussion of important findings related to the literature on values, daily activities and outcomes of practicing voluntary simplicity.

The findings of the views of voluntary simplifiers and the changes after practicing VSL are comprised of two themes: (a) issues in real-life practices, and (b) positive outcomes. Some sentiments relate primarily to the individual, some to the external environment, and some are a combination of both. Each theme is discussed in detail in the following sections.

##### 5.1 Issues in real-life practices

###### *Personal difficulties and misunderstanding within social circle*

The findings of this study highlight the issues of being a voluntary simplifier has encountered in both the individual and social contexts. One of the remarkable differences in the findings of this study, as compared to previous studies, was the challenges that the voluntary simplifiers met in real-life practices. None of the previous research has reported real-life issues that the participants in this study described, which could be directly linked to group harmony and respecting male dominance in one's family life.

Nonetheless, the main issue is similar to what the literature has indicated, which is there would be some issues of practicing VSL in which their daily practices and social ties are strongly embedded (Ballantine et al., 2011; McGouran & Prothero, 2016). In essence, the challenges of practicing VSL are tied to the features of the community, and showing a positive attitude on resolving the problems is crucial.

## **5.2 Positive outcomes**

### ***Positive emotions and financial benefits***

Almost all participants conveyed that after practicing VSL, they were more contented and happier. Besides, some participants indicated that they felt less anxiety and more at peace since they were free from external pressure and more in control of their own life. This finding is in line with previous studies that proposed VSL positively affects personal well-being (Chowdhury, 2018; Kan et al., 2009; Rich, et al., 2017; Seegebarth et al., 2015). As such, the most significant benefit of adopting VSL that participants reported is increased positive emotions and well-being.

In this study, the participants highlighted the financial benefits of adopting VSL. This is consistent with the literature that revealed voluntary simplifiers to have a lower inclination to get into debt since reducing consumption benefits individuals' financial stability (Nepomuceno & Laroche, 2015). In essence, the adoption of VSL benefits the participants financially.

## **5.3 Researcher's Interpretation of Participants' Lived Experiences**

### ***Challenges on maintaining family harmony***

In this study, some participants have received negative comments from their family members on their practices. It shows that embracing VSL to simplify and purge the clutter can be challenging if living with other people, especially in the collectivistic society. Great divides may occur when one pursues VSL that their family members do not support and understand. Hence, it is crucial to have healthy conversations and respect the boundaries of the family members while practicing VSL to maintain family harmony.

### ***Life perspectives of the participants***

The participants changed their life perspectives which led to changing their lifestyle. Most of them expressed their regrets and gave some negative comments about their daily habits before they adopted VSL. Some participants had experienced negative feelings as they felt that they could not control their lives, specifically their possessions, consumptions, and schedules. It may be explained by self-determination theory (SDT), which suggests that having in charge of their behaviors and goals helps people feel self-determined to achieve psychological growth (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Additionally, the positive outcomes of adopting VSL have boosted their self-determination. Eventually, they are more passionate with VSL which aligns with their life goals.

### ***Gender differences on VSL***

Majority of the responses given by both genders are similar, except for two perspectives. Most of the male participants gave very simple responses such as "less stress" regarding positive emotions while most female participants gave a different variety of answers such as inner peace and reducing anxiety. It could be explained that male participants have less desire to discuss their feelings when compared with female participants, which aligned to the patriarchal culture of Malaysia (Hirschman, 2016). There is also another clear difference between both genders when it comes to decluttering, as none of the male participants reported decluttering in the VSL. This can be due to factor that housework norm is equated to be the females' responsibility rather than males in a patriarchal culture.

## **6. Implications**

The above findings contribute to the knowledge of practicing voluntary simplicity in Malaysia and fill an important gap in the literature. It contributes to an understanding of struggles and benefits of being a voluntary simplifier in Malaysia – a collectivistic and patriarchal country. From the theoretical perspective, this qualitative research promotes voluntary simplicity theory by exhibiting insights to validate different features of the voluntary simplifiers (e.g. McGouran & Prothero, 2016). This study shows that a VSL is related to personal psychological needs and positive emotions. Therefore, the findings might be able to contribute to certain theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and well-being theory (WBT). All participants tend to identify their true potential and become the "ideal self". It implies practicing VSL could satisfy self-actualization, the highest need in Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1943) despite challenges from the social contexts. Research can further investigate the correlation between self-actualization and tendencies toward a VSL, and interactions with one's social context.

This study indicates that choosing VSL means having control over life, specifically, possessions and activities engaged. Hence, it leads to positive emotions. The implication is that one needs to have the capability to make decisions and manage their own life, which explains self-determination theory that values a sense of control (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Future research should deploy different research methods to prove or oppose this. Besides, the findings of this study show that VSL has a positive impact on well-being. It implies that when people choose a lifestyle that aligns with well-being theory that values positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments high (Seligman, 2011) could lead to better well-being. Further investigation into the relationship between VSL and well-being theory may provide more understanding.

### 7. Limitations

The limitation of this study is lacking perspective of senior citizens as all participants in this study are below 50 years old. Therefore, there are some unanswered questions due to the lack of their perspectives, such as the similarities and/or differences among older and younger generations, holding on versus giving up traditional practices, in terms of challenges and benefits of practicing VSL. Future research could recruit more elder participants to determine if there is any difference in young and old perspectives.

### 8. Conclusion

Voluntary simplicity contributes to low-material consumption, which is against materialism. This study extends the scope of voluntarily reduced consumption by exploring the benefits and challenges of being voluntary simplifiers. The insights from these in-depth interviews suggest that the voluntary simplifiers in Malaysia could benefit from their VSL practices with perseverance and not giving in to the challenges mentioned. Further, VSL allows individuals to manage self-identity hence they are less likely to be influenced by the external environment, which eventually leads to positive emotions and well-being. The voice of voluntary simplifiers, their passion and struggles, are being heard, and should continue to echo among the Malaysian community and the rest of the world.

### Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Mr Ng Jin Jack for sponsoring the publication fee.

**Table 1** Participants' demographic details

Participants' ID	Age	Gender	Religious group	Durations of practicing VSL	Career
Nina	42	Female	Muslim	14 years	Social media manager
Tiffany	34	Female	Buddhist	2 years	Design engineer
Alicia	33	Female	Buddhist	4 years	Bank executive
Jane	26	Female	Buddhist	3 years	Professional organizer
Tyra	24	Female	Buddhist	2 years	Clerk
Kate	38	Female	Christian	4 years	Social worker
Kelly	42	Female	Buddhist	15 years	PhD student
Cheryl	29	Female	Atheist	3 years	Practicing lawyer
Wendy	32	Female	Muslim	5 years	Businesswoman
Felicia	42	Female	Muslim	7 years	Financial planning advisor
Edison	22	Male	Buddhist	More than 6 months	Fresh graduate (unemployed)
Jason	22	Male	Christian	2 years	Fresh graduate (unemployed)
Bryan	24	Male	Taoist	11 years	Fresh graduate (unemployed)
William	21	Male	Buddhist	4 years	Intern
Steven	22	Male	Buddhist	14 years	Graphic Designer
Jacky	24	Male	Buddhist	6 months	Student
Barry	22	Male	Buddhist	4 years	Graduate research assistant
Jenny	22	Female	Buddhist	3 years	Student

**Table 2**  
*List of superordinate and emergent themes*

Superordinate Theme 1: Issues in real-life practices	
Emergent Theme 1: Personal challenges	
Nina, 42	control the urge of consumption
Tyra, 24	difficult to sell off clutter, part with sentimental clutter
Kate, 38	detach from cosmetics
Kelly, 42	waste segregating while living with family, compost food waste
Cheryl, 29	part with valuable item
Wendy, 32	part with sentimental item
Bryan, 24	control the urge of purchasing
Steven, 22	less desire to try new things
Jacky, 24	buying dilemma
Emergent Theme 2: Disagreement within social circle	
Nina,42	unsupportive spouse, colleagues don't understand why
Tiffany,34	friend doubted the practicality of the concept
Alicia,33	hard to get my spouse on board
Jane,26	people around misunderstood the underlying reasons
Tyra,24	parents stop me from decluttering
Kate,38	hard to get my partner to understand, friends misunderstood and felt weird about my practices
Kelly,42	family members and some friends do not understand
Felicia,42	grandmother and cousins do not agree with it, the clients doubted my capability based on my material possessions
Edison, 22	family and friends advised me to buy more clothes
William, 21	less topic to chat with friends
Superordinate Theme 2: Positive outcomes	
Emergent Theme 1: Positive emotions	
Tiffany, 34	reduce anxiety and negative emotions, less stress, gain inner peace
Alicia, 33	inner peace
Jane, 26	feel happy, achieve a positive mindset
Cheryl, 29	feel good, more relaxed and happy, peace of mind
Wendy, 32	calmer mind
Felicia, 42	joy of knowing myself
Edison, 22	happy with it
Jason, 22	less stress
Bryan, 24	more positive and happier
Steven, 22	less stress, less overthinking
Jenny, 22	feel better
Emergent Theme 2: Financial benefits	
Alicia, 33	financial independence
Kate, 38	save more money
Wendy, 32	save a lot of money
Edison, 22	spend less
Bryan, 24	cost saving
William, 21	less financial burden
Jacky, 24	not wasting money
Jenny, 22	more savings