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## SIMPLIFYING LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Abstract.** This article aims to present selected aspects of everyday life of people who define themselves as followers of simplifying life in view of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. The article comprises three parts. The first, in a synthetic form, gives an outline of the idea of a simple life, its main beliefs and manifestations, whereas the second describes the degree and types of changes in the organisation of everyday life of simplifiers at the given time. The third part investigates whether the pandemic-triggered experiences have the potential to modify current consumption attitudes. This point is a reference to voices appearing in the public debate signalling – especially in the initial phase – such a possibility on a wider social scale. The research material was blog entries, fragments of podcasts on the simple life, and other sources (reports, scientific and journalistic texts).

**Keywords:** simple life, voluntary simplifiers, alternative forms of consumption.

### 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup> and the ensuing lockdowns is a situation that has disrupted the rules of social life beforehand considered obvious and tacitly accepted, and thus has made the current social practices and actions the subject of reflection. It has resulted in the necessity to reorganise to a different extent – depending upon the social situation of the individual, their professional activities as well as health and personality conditions – everyday life and ways of experiencing it. A multiplicity of rules aimed at limiting the virus cases have been governing the functioning in public

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<sup>1</sup> I will not recreate the sequence of pandemic events chronologically as I acknowledge them as general knowledge. I treat the COVID-19 pandemic as the time frame to which the described phenomena relate.

space and included (to mention those important in the context of considerations): the need to keep a social distance, limit mobility, stay at home, as well as to restrict access to various places, e.g. shops and goods to be obtained. Both the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the preventive restrictions have triggered emotional reactions – most often anxiety, fear and confusion,<sup>2</sup> but also sometimes hope for changes in the functioning of the social system, mainly the economy. The authors of the report “*Życie codzienne w czasach pandemii. Raport z drugiego etapu badań*” [*Everyday life in times of the pandemic. Report from the second stage of research*] note: “The restrictions have changed the hitherto methods of operation. The world has been turned upside-down by ambivalence. The new conditions required the development of new practices and routines. What had been considered normal and obvious, has been negated during the pandemic” (Drozdowski et al. 2020b: 25). Given this point of view, it is worthwhile to wonder what normality means for those simplifying their lives and how it has been overturned by the COVID-19 pandemic (the context is Polish society). Before I start these considerations, it is important to define what a simple life is.

## 2. Briefly about simple life and simplification

Simple life (a term used interchangeably with voluntary simplicity) is most accurately described using the tangible-intangible dichotomy. It represents a negation of excessive consumption that goes beyond the natural needs, which is opposed to achieving self-fulfilment (greater and more durable gratification) in the non-material dimension. Limitations in the material sphere (reduction of possessions, opting-out from accumulating unnecessary goods, negating unreflective shopping habits and satisfying needs in an irrational way) are accompanied by an axiological change involving a positive evaluation of relationships with others, personal development, contact with nature, spiritual practices, contemplation, creativity (Shi 1985), contributing to an increase in the quality of life.

As life simplifiers, in turn, I describe those people and the actions they undertake of which the common denominator rests with the pursuit of a good life in a way that differs from consumption-oriented patterns (see Zrałek 2015; Burgiel et al. 2015). Voluntary simplifiers “limit expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic resources of satisfaction and meaning” (Etzioni 1998: 619). Simplifying life is – in a broad sense – a lifestyle programmatically opposing consumerism as the dominant paradigm of modern times. It characterises to a greatest extent the metropolitan middle class, people with incomes securing their material standard of living (specialists, free-lance professions, management

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<sup>2</sup> The psychological effects of the pandemic are discussed, for instance, in the publication Duszyński et al. 2020.

staff) allowing for self-realization in a post-materialistic way.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that although it is comprehended by followers as a form of contestation and resistance to hyper-consumption, it can, in fact, be perceived as – initiated by counterculture movements – a commercialised, market-oriented rebellion that absorbs and transforms elements of negation and criticism of the consumption culture of capitalism (Heath, Potter 2010; Barber 2009). Nevertheless, my intention does not involve exposure of the internal contradictions of voluntary simplicity, which I write about elsewhere (see Dopierała 2017). I treat the statements of simplifiers as carriers of – unchallenged by me – individual experience.

The declared disagreement with the ubiquitous consumerist practices manifests itself in many ways; literature includes numerous typologies illustrating this differentiation (see Elgin 2010; Shaw, Newholm 2002; Craig-Lees, Hill 2002; Etzioni 1998; Zrałek 2015). For the sake of clarity of the argument, it is efficiently enough – in my opinion – to place focus on the fundamental division based on the scale of the changes introduced. At this point, one can indicate those comprehensively simplifying – characterised by deeply internalised beliefs and the broadest range of activities (own crops, preferring natural food, living outside the city, resigning from the current job, being family-oriented, practising meditation or other forms of personal development), partially simplifying – using micro-strategies in selected aspects of existence (e.g. vegetarian or vegan diet, making consumption more ecological – avoiding some and preferring other brands, interest in the composition of products, reducing waste production), as well as supporters (showing their interest in the worldview, but at the same time keeping a distance). The voluntary simplicity comprises behaviours characteristic of other anti-consumerist lifestyles, e.g. minimalism, downshifting, zero-waste and slow life (see more: Cobel-Tokarska, Zalewska 2016; Kramarczyk 2018; Kramarczyk 2015; Duda 2016). They function independently on each other, yet many elements inherent to them are – in various proportions – also used in the construction of a simple life. Such a process involving the flow of ideas, values and attitudes, as well as the creative compilation of individual identifications has been – to my belief – increasingly noticeable in the field under discussion.

### 3. Voluntary simplifiers and COVID-19 pandemic

The reflections are based on reports on experiencing the beginning of the pandemic posted on blogs and podcasts by admirers of simple life. Various behaviours can be observed in the blogosphere concerned. This rests with putting the blogging

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<sup>3</sup> I am not concerned with a way of life marked by deprivation due to financial constraints, then it is not a matter of choice, but of necessity. The actions taken may be similar, but they are nevertheless the result of different motivations and life circumstances of the individual.

activity on hold, which is coincided with the pandemic, yet not explained by the author themselves (beforehand, high frequency of publications). Those blogs with a long history of existence included few references – only lapidary recalls to the “difficult” time and moving to another thread or using the general, but also the undeveloped formula of “breakthrough”. New blogs were created, existing about a year, but the pandemic was usually not indicated as the initial moment of their starting (it cannot be ruled out, however, that it played a catalyst role). Starting a blog could be a form of coping with burdensome experiences and emotions during a pandemic, but it also involved spending more time on it. The context of the pandemic in publications was present *expressis verbis* to a small extent. The reasons for this can be only presumed – individual experiences related to isolation/quarantine, health risk, problems in family or work life discouraging disclosure and public reporting. In parallel, the blog could be a space delivering emotional response, filtering through writing one’s own experiences, because the type of content presented depends upon the author’s discretion.

The criterion for selecting the material was the presence of threads related to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the subject was not always reflected in the title of the post. Fragments of four Polish blogs were selected for analysis, namely “My eco ego. Minimalizm i zero waste” [*My eco ego. Minimalism and zero waste*], “Gaja pisze. Mniej, wolniej, lepiej” [*Gaja writes. Less, slower, better*], “Nieco mniej. Mieć nieco mniej, by żyć nieco bardziej” [*A little less. Have a little less to live a little more*], “Wolnym być” [*Free to be*] and a podcast “Ajka minimalistka” [*Ajka the minimalist*], which is a continuation of the “Prosty blog” [*Simple blog*] she has been running for several years. The posts were mostly from the first phase of the pandemic, which was accompanied by the greatest fears and restrictions. This could be interpreted as a reaction to an unexpected event and an attempt to get used to it by sharing experiences with others. The podcast is, in turn, a “summary” of the coronavirus epidemic after a year since its break-out.

### 3.1. Consumer practices – continuity and change

The behaviours described by the bloggers concerned several areas defining the framework of everyday functioning – typical home activities (cooking, cleaning), outdoor activities (shopping and recreation) and the general organisation of the day (time devoted to professional work, as well as allocating and spending free time). I will start with particularly interesting consumption practices related primarily to shopping (all posts are quoted in the form that is closest to their original form in Polish).

My life hasn’t changed drastically since we have been quarantined – after all, I’ve been working from home for over 2 years (I’m a HR process consultant, I’ve been working work on a global project, my entire team is scattered around the world and basically I don’t have to go to the office in Wrocław). So I’m not shocked I have to spend most of my time being surrounded by my four walls. You know, I go shopping much less often and I buy a little more food so I don’t

have to go to the store back and forth. I also go to my garden allotment less often (although the weather is tempting!). I've been trying to spend my free time reading, cleaning, baking or just reflecting and practising gratitude. Recently, I've been thinking about zero-waste and minimalism in the context of the whole covid19 situation.

I still go shopping with my fruit and vegetable sacks (and my own bag, of course), but I no longer carry the jars for pickles that I would always give to the seller in the greengrocer. I do so for my own safety and that of hers. For the last few years, I haven't bought pickles packed in a foil, so I think the world won't collapse if I do it 3–4 times during the pandemic. Additionally, *Bez Pudła* is also temporarily closed, so there's nowhere to buy loose products for my own packaging. So I've been trying to choose oatmeal in paper packages, the flour is almost always in the paper, and the pasta – I bought a kilo of Barilla, which is in a cardboard package and we haven't eaten everything yet.<sup>4</sup>

The analysed materials show that the pandemic and lockdown (as well as quarantine<sup>5</sup>) are treated as factors that have not significantly reorganised the functioning of the individual so far. Lots of those simplifying ones – usually representing the so-called freelance jobs – had worked from home even before the pandemic began.<sup>6</sup> It is one of several dimensions of *à rebours* normality, which in the case of simplifying ones has not been disturbed. Therefore, one can venture an argument that the way of life based on voluntary limitations has turned out to be a good adaptation strategy.

In terms of shopping practices, the author virtually does not problematise restrictions on leaving home to the store and regulations regarding shopping (different opening hours for different age categories, limits of people on a specific space, waiting in a queue to enter the store, rationing of products, e.g. hygiene ones). Intentional reduction of consumption, including programmatically less frequent going to the store and focusing on the utility function of goods (satisfying life needs), is a key characteristic of a simplifying lifestyle. Despite the incidental purchase of larger amounts of food, the reduction on the purchase inherent in the minimalists in the described time was continued (with some exceptions).

In addition to minimalism, zero-waste is also recalled. Its manifestation includes, among others, eliminating the use of packaging whose lifespan is determined by the phases of production -> attracting the customer's attention -> purchase -> throwing away. An alternative to them is the use of fabric-made shopping bags, sacks (usually hand-made from recovered fabrics) and jars. The possibility of their re-use generates less waste, especially when it comes to plastic, disposable bags. Nevertheless, some of these solutions were temporarily suspended for sanitary

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.myeoego.pl/minimalizm-i-zero-waste-w-czasach-pandemii/28.03.2020> (accessed: 27.05.2021).

<sup>5</sup> It is not my role to inquire how legitimate the use of this term is; it can be assumed that it refers to various colloquial expressions of a state of social isolation.

<sup>6</sup> In the case of bloggers, they are: translator, corporate employee, entrepreneurs (investing in real estate and training and real estate, business consultant), a person who edits industry magazines, writes and translates specialist and marketing texts.

reasons during the pandemic. Therefore, “buying pickled vegetables in a foil” manifests itself as a factor that breaks into pieces the attitude integrated beforehand, thus triggering the need for self-justification. The author excuses this act with an extraordinary pandemic situation which makes reasonable the temporary suspension of the previously developed simplification strategies.

A simple life is also guided by the practices of purchasing goods from stores offering loose products, which, however, have been closed due to pandemic restrictions. It has forced the simplifying ones to modify their hitherto habits, however, while maintaining compliance with the professed system of values. People would choose products in paper packaging enabling its further processing, or would avoid those that were difficult to decompose. It shows the pursuit of a circular economy and the application of the principles of sustainable development – maintaining a balance between the individual, the economy and the environment (see Zalega 2015). Shopping “in a greengrocer” is, in turn, a manifestation of ecological consumption and ethical (conscious) consumption, involving, *inter alia*, buying seasonal products in local, small stores and avoiding shopping in large-format stores and those requiring a long supply chain.

### 3.2. Consumer practices – anxieties and ethical dilemmas

Some of the consumption behaviours were continued by the simplifying ones, while some required making corrections and coming up with excuses for them. With the departure from everyday routines, concerns and ethical dilemmas have arisen for the general public as well.

[...] we bought some preserves in glass and various sorts of canned beans. So, there’s no tragedy – we happen to buy something in plastic, but these are quite negligible amounts (two days ago I bought a huge packet of nachos! They were delicious, its packaging will serve as a bag for our sparse rubbish – according to the “reuse” principle). We’ve also been trying to eat what we have at the time, so that it doesn’t get expired. My greatest fear is that the nation has been buying enormous amounts of food while in panic and then it’ll all be thrown away. Hope I’m wrong!

This stockpiling isn’t necessarily consistent with my understanding of minimalism, because I always try to have as much food as we can eat in 5–7 days, not in 2 weeks like these days. Nevertheless, the situation is extraordinary, so I’ve decided not to torture myself too much. However, this situation has made me see another side of minimalism, quite close to me – limited consumerism. We no longer run around shopping malls, cinemas, pubs, cafes, we basically only buy basic necessities. This testifies to the possibility of living without this constant shopping and consumption frenzy. Sure, we can still shop online, watch Netflix, and so on. And if someone feels like doing so in this difficult time, that’s okay – especially if you’re not, like me, used to spending a great part of your life at home. But maybe it’s worth spending this time while reflecting and asking yourself the following questions: Do I really need this? Will it make me happy? What do I have now for what I’m grateful for?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.myeoego.pl/minimalizm-i-zero-waste-w-czasach-pandemii/28.03.2020> (accessed: 27.05.2021).

Stockpiling during the pandemic was nothing unusual to the followers of simplifying life, yet the scale of the resources deemed essential for survival is – judging from the measures of a few cans and jars – smaller than average. It is essential on this occasion – as described earlier – to pay attention to the type of packaging and to treat it as an equally important product parameter (apart from nutritional and taste values) when making purchasing decisions. Glass and metal containers (also paper cardboards) are highly valued and treated as prospective not only due to the possibility of recycling, but also upcycling (see Izdebska 2017). From this perspective, the necessity to justify the purchase (even a small amount) of products “in plastic” is comprehensible,<sup>8</sup> as it is treated as a departure from pre-pandemic patterns marked with care and concern for the environment (preferences for sustainable development). However, according to the doctrines of zero-waste, namely reducing waste and reusing things, it can be used otherwise (in this case, as a rubbish bag). The author mentions one of the principles – reuse, which is complemented in the basic 3R version by the already mentioned “recycle” and “reduce”, and in the extended 5R version by “redistribute”, “repair”, “refuse”, “rot” (Michniewska, Grodkiewicz 2017).

Behaviours shared with others determined by a pandemic situation – not only in this aspect – have disrupted the attitudes developed by those simplifying life. Buying larger amounts of food that is supposed to last for longer<sup>9</sup> (previously limited) is in conflict with de-consumption (a rational, determined by real needs, form of consumption),<sup>10</sup> that those simplifying life follow. It is illustrated by non-excessive stockpiling, controlling the food items (quantity that can be eaten in a few days and respecting the use-by date) to avoid potential food waste.

From this point of view, attention should be paid to the formulated concerns about the excessive purchasing behaviour of other people (and subsequent mass throwing-away), which were fostered by the fear of pandemic-triggered uncertainty (whether the stores will be open, will the continuity of supplies be ensured, will there be no shortage of basic necessities, will production maintained, etc.). Considering the statistics pertaining to the scale of wastage of food products, the fear that

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<sup>8</sup> However, during the pandemic, the consumption of food packed in plastics and plastic disposable products (cutlery, gloves) increased.

<sup>9</sup> The initial phase of the pandemic witnessed the increased purchases of food products and cleaning products – 56% of Poles declared that they had bought various products “for a rainy day”, of whom 66% bought pasta, 55% flour, and 53% toilet paper. The greatest number of purchases in terms of the variety of products and the amount of money spent on them were made by people who were most afraid of the new virus and felt that the situation at that time was out of control (Maison 2020).

<sup>10</sup> De-consumption manifests itself in three forms, the common feature of which is a knowing limitation: 1. of consumption due to increased uncertainty of households (the so-called assurance consumption); 2. of quantity in favour of quality (e.g. giving preference to more durable, more expensive items); 3. in the material sphere and the valuation of what is intangible, e.g. servitisation of consumption (Rachocka 2003; Bywalec, Rudnicki 2002).

these practices would be intensified was real.<sup>11</sup> What is interesting in this context is a reference to the findings presented in “*Życie codzienne w czasach pandemii. Raport z pierwszego etapu badań*” [*Everyday life in times of the pandemic. Report from the first stage of research*]: “Buying large amounts of food ‘for a rainy day’ was treated by the respondents with understanding or jokingly (almost 70% of the respondents approached it standoffishly and did not disapprove it)” (Drozdowski et al. 2020a: 17). Therefore, one can notice a clear difference in opinions – the attitude of the simplifying ones has a clearly negative emotional resonance (it is treated as an unacceptable violation of the principles they profess and implement).

In the quoted post, not only does the author mention limiting consumption but also cultural activities and focusing on the domestic sphere. The next section is devoted to this issue; I write more about reflection and gratitude in the fourth part.

### 3.3. Consumer practices – cocooning and DIY

It was pointed out – on the basis of the topic concerning purchases and work already done at home – that those who simplify their life have not experienced any significant change due to the introduction of mobility restrictions. Others have joined this activity during the pandemic.

[...] children at home (we strived for this ourselves, thinking about, for instance home education), working from home, car used only when needed, almost no contact with the “comforts” of the city, such as cinemas, restaurants, etc., and a lot of walking and appreciating the possibility of a simple walk or a run amid the fresh air. I think a lot of people have also been trying various DIY initiatives, such as baking their own bread. In addition, uncertainty about the future, which discourages people from spending money like water, or rather makes them save and not take out more loans. Well, spitting image of the world of the Free Ones, which – as we realise – not everyone has to like it, and certainly should not be enforced top-down in such circumstances as we have to experience.<sup>12</sup>

As part of the simplifying lifestyle, many activities carried out conventionally by institutions are situated in the home space (such as the aforementioned professional work) or at least such a location is thought of (planned home education for children). This “transfer” of services (including consumption) from the relevant institutions to the private sphere, within the household, is referred to as cocooning (Kowalska

<sup>11</sup> In Poland, approx. 9 million tonnes of food waste are generated, which is 235 kg per person per year. At the production stage, 6.4 million tonnes are wasted, while in households 2 million tonnes (54 kg/person per year). The data presented in the publication *Nie marnuj jedzenia* (2019) shows that the respondents indicated the following reasons for throwing food away: spoilage of food (65%), overlooking the expiry date (42%), too large portion (27%), too large purchases (22%), ill-considered purchases (20%), too large packaging (17%), improper storage (14%), low-quality purchases (11%), no idea how to use an ingredient (10%). It seems that running awareness-raising and educational campaigns (e.g. how to use leftover food, how to rationally buy) is necessary and justified. On the various aspects of wasting food, see Modrzyk 2019.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.wolnymybc.pl/koronawirus-update-21-03-2020-dysonans/> (accessed: 27.05.2021).



2015). Its wide-spread is conditioned by the easy availability of electronic devices (RTV and household appliances), whereby many products can be manufactured at home, as well as of information and communication technologies that enable the independent performance of various operations defined as virtualisation of consumption (e.g. electronic banking, running administrative errands, online shopping). The closure of institutions during subsequent lockdowns has intensified these actions and favoured

the wide-spread and inventing new types of services delivered to home or enabling the performance of specific practices without leaving it. [...] A large portion of everyday inventiveness was caused by the necessity to do things that are usually entrusted to others (teaching children, producing food, creating hygiene stuff), which resulted in not only coping with something but also increasing self-sufficiency (Drozdowski et al. 2020b: 16).

What is an emblematic factor in this context is baking bread, popular during the pandemic, which is also mentioned by the author of the post. Researchers interpret this phenomenon manifold: primarily as a need to regain control, a sense of subjectivity and perpetration, but also as an example of resourcefulness and the pursuit of self-actualization in free time. Similar stabilising and therapeutic functions were delivered by planting vegetables and plants, caring for them and observing their growth (Drozdowski et al. 2020b: 16). DIY, self-manufacturing and processing practices, are a permanent and durable element of a simple lifestyle as a counterbalance to the consumptive sourcing of essential goods. Once again, they have the status of constitutive action in the everyday life of simplifiers, both in the self-realization and the pragmatic dimension. Not only are these activities undertaken for the purpose of managing an excessive amount of time or as a substitute for pre-pandemic normality, but they are also of fundamental self-identification importance.

The restriction of consumption practices, so typical of simple life, also applies to traditional cultural and social activities. The ways of spending time are dominated by “domesticated” forms of participation in culture, thus displacing going to the cinema, theatre, restaurants, etc., not only during the pandemic. It goes without saying this sphere has been intensified by the lack of alternatives to participation in cultural and artistic events other than mediated ones. Streaming services, platforms with films and music – for the general public – have become at this time the only form of communing with cultural products, thus making this form of reception even more popular.

An almost universal drive during the closure period accompanying the pandemic was to turn towards nature, one of the dimensions of voluntary simplicity. Walking, running, recreation on the allotment garden (when not subjected to the restriction), mentioned by bloggers, refer not only to practising a healthy lifestyle but – more broadly – to the need to live in harmony with nature (many voluntary simplifiers live outside the city). Reinstating the balance between the individual and the environment, their mutual attunement as the foundation of a simple life, is a continuation of the counter-cultural theme of escape from the technicised and materialised world.

The pandemic-driven “discovery” of nature, in connection with the described “domesticated” and virtual cultural practices, can be interpreted as “returning to experiencing the world in such a way that is not mediated by the media, and expressed by careful observation of animals, plant growth, the immediate vicinity that earlier, amidst the multitude of other impressions, had disappeared from sight completely” (Drozdowski et al. 2020c: 96). Again, it can be said that these activities had been beforehand “in the field of vision” of the followers of voluntary simplicity. All sorts of alternative consumption that distinguish a simple way of life – eco-consumption, ethical consumption, de-consumption – illustrate the interest in the “well-being” of the universe (see Wilczak 2016). The implementation of ecological consumption is evidenced, for example, by less frequent use of one’s own means of transport. One may say that the possibility of unlimited communing with nature by living on the outskirts of the city is a form of luxury and non-ostentatiously positioning good (Kozłowski 2013a; 2013b).

Again, there is a topic of re-thinking the hitherto purchasing habits and financial management, of limiting the spending of money due to the uncertain future and the need to secure it – at least partially – by having savings.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the postulated restraint of consumerist practices is not formulated in the directive mode.

#### 4. Pandemic – stopping by and reflecting

I believe (or rather hope) that the coronavirus will change our lifestyle for the better, in particular our shopping habits. Fact – some have gone nuts and buying up toilet paper for a rainy day. As for me, I must admit I momentarily got carried away and bought a few cans of chickpeas and a kilo of rice – just in case.

But once these shopping emotions subside (or the cash just runs out) – we may notice that we do not need at all many of the things we buy so eagerly. That maybe in the back of the cupboard I have an entire bag of dry chickpeas, which I bought in the hope that I would cook it myself instead of buying cans. And that we don’t have to visit a shopping mall every weekend in search of bargains. That it’s better to reflect on what we already have in our homes. Whether we like spending time there and whether they have what we need to feel good. This is what prompted me to reflect on this whole situation.<sup>14</sup>

The situation of a pandemic suspension – in the belief of those simplifying ones – should become an impulse to reflect on the social and economic order and the possible reorganisation of some of its areas. They consider it crucial to change

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<sup>13</sup> The report KPMG (2020: 4, 5) implies that half of Poles withhold expenses other than necessary. 25% of respondents declare that as a result of the pandemic they will start buying local and national products and will be willing to pay a maximum of 10% more for them than for a similar product produced abroad. At the same time, support for local communities increased by 29%.

<sup>14</sup> <https://gajapisze.pl/wszystko-co-jest-potrzebne-o-pracy-zdalnej-i-nie-tylko/18.03.2020> (accessed: 28.05.2021).

purchasing habits, which would become more reflective and take into account the level of real (in line with the assumptions of de-consumption), instead of created and imposed (by a consumerist approach) needs. This is related to the departure from making impulsive purchases that deliver functions other than utility ones, as well as to not succumbing to marketing-induced whims leading to nothing but excess (“buying unnecessary stuff”). Minimising spending on consumer goods and services also means avoiding excessive accumulation (however, the narrator recognises as such “a few cans and a kilogram of loose items”). One can venture a statement that these expectations were partially made realise, although it is not known whether they were permanent. The report “*Życie codzienne w czasach pandemii. Raport z drugiego etapu badań*” [*Everyday life in times of the pandemic. Report from the second stage of research*] says about modifications in the ways of planning the day, customary activities, including shopping – the respondents began to prepare lists and plan purchases (Drozdowski et al. 2020b: 103), as postulated by minimalists.

The reflection should also be paid to forms of spending free time otherwise than in a shopping centre providing multiple stimuli, and to not treating shopping as a form of alternative experiences. It is related to wondering about one’s possessions, which is also a form of consideration of what is genuinely important and what can be reduced. The essence of minimalist life strategies rather rests with limiting the possessed things or new purchases in favour of the effective use of existing items (things) instead of wasting them, e.g. through collaborative consumption (see Lipowski et al. 2020). The dichotomy of “what’s at home” versus “feeling good in it” is in line with the counter-cultural (and continued by contemporary “anti-consumerist” lifestyles) opposition to having and being. These dimensions do not have to be treated separately and in opposition to each other, although they fit in with the findings of psychologists, according to whom materialistic aspirations coexist with depressed mood, increased anxiety, and decreased level of spirituality and religiosity (Zawadzka 2014). The postulated shift towards post-materialistic values and those associated with well-being is manifested by recalling, *inter alia*, gratitude, humility, postponement of gratification, kindness and a sense of community (Kozłowski 2013a; Zawadzka 2014); although cocooning and self-sufficiency due to DIY encapsulate the individual rather than socialise it. The author of the next statement refers to these and other values included in the well-being repertoire.

I’d like to relieve you a little of the anxiety that accompanies all of us and encourage you to make sensible use of the situation in which we’re living. Many of us will stay at home this weekend, which gives us a chance to deal with relations with our loved ones and with our inner selves (just to be clear: I endorse a responsible approach to the situation).

Perhaps the time ahead is a unique gift. Not only a sort of test of responsibility, but also a new cause for many contemplations and reflections. Maybe this is the time when your adventure with minimalism and the search for moderation will begin. Maybe this is the time to clean the

wardrobe and think about what I “really” need to live. Every now and then there’re event in our lives that changes our priorities permanently. “Time for yourself” favours such reflection. I wish you to reflect for a moment on what is important.<sup>15</sup>

In the quoted fragment, the author firstly draws attention to the blog’s function – supporting, allowing to tame difficult emotions (mainly uncertainty), but also informative and activating. Secondly, the pandemic is treated – on a larger social scale – as an opportunity to not only redefine the current consumer lifestyle, but also to appreciate social networks created by individuals (these threads are interconnected according to a simplifying interpretation of less materialism/more postmaterialism). Contacts with others – family, friends, acquaintances, spending time in these groups are of crucial importance in the hierarchy of values for those simplifying life. Apart from interpersonal relations, an essential role rests with introspection processes important for self-actualisation, self-knowledge, and, consequently, also for the subjective feeling of happiness.

The author also proposes to consider whether we need all the things that sign consumption keeps telling us; whether they reflect our real needs; and whether the individual’s life should be limited to possessing and identifying ourselves through this aspect. Consumer culture, although it offers a promise of happiness and fulfilment (see Baudrillard 2006; Bauman 2009), in fact does not ensure their achievement, as it would undermine its own mechanisms of functioning. The “breakdown” of the consumer order and the exposure of the illusions they produce – according to the blogger – renders it possible to modify the lifestyle to reflect moderation in terms of material goods. The described context may, therefore, foster a biographical metamorphosis, or at least prompt reflection on the identity and tools (other than positioning/status goods) with which it is constructed. The proposals of the minimalists are considered to be as such. This resonates with the attitudes emerging from the cited reports: “Individuals stop focusing on prestige, status, and success, yet focus on what can provide them with security. Therefore, they celebrate closeness, contacts with others, taking care of health and mental balance” (Drozdowski et al. 2020b: 20). A special role in this case can be played by the therapeutic and counselling discourse, “suggesting how to make use of the lockdown time, for example for development, bonding, or noticing what was previously overlooked” (Krajewski, Kubacka 2020c: 72).

In this context, it is interesting to recall the voice of the minimalist podcast “Ajka minimalistka” [*Ajka the minimalist*], who summarises the pandemic time and points to several factors inherent in a simple life, which – in her opinion – determined its final “positive” assessment. She did not find it burdensome to stay at home as a consequence of the lockdown and to “transfer” many activities to the home space. This was due to the beforehand (re-)organisation of the private

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<sup>15</sup> <https://niecoznacz.pl/2020/03/13/co-jeszcze-moze-sie-zdarzyc-czyli-czy-koronawirus-zmieni-nasze-priorytety> (accessed: 28.05.2021).

sphere and designing it according to minimalist patterns. The author felt comfortable in her home – although it is a small area, the space is functionally furnished, consciously arranged and does not overwhelm with an excess of equipment. Despite physical separation, relationships with loved ones – from her perspective – became strengthened, emotionally-wise; gestures of caring for relationships and remaining important despite being remotely contributed to this. Characteristic factors for simplifying life is the feeling and exercise of gratitude – present in this and earlier statements – for everything that happens, what we have and also what we do not have, but the lack of it is not subject to problematising. The author derived joy from travels and social contacts undertaken when it was possible; they were appreciated more than ever before. In the end, she places an emphasis on enjoying what is ordinary in everyday life, on focusing mindfulness on simple and cliché things, while (through experiencing them in such a way) highlighting everyday life – rituals, conversations, and walks. All of this – namely behaviours and values associated with well-being – allowed her to “come out” of the pandemic smarter. The authors of “*Życie codzienne w czasach pandemii. Raport z trzeciego etapu badań*” [*Everyday life in times of the pandemic. Report from the third stage of research*] also point out these aspects:

In the ways of dealing with the moods accompanying the pandemic and isolation, various forms of appreciating small things and small pleasures were dominant, constituting peculiar gaps in the monotonous, but also fearful time of waiting for a change of situation. Such pleasures were everyday, not just festive, meals celebrated in the family circle, the possibility to carefully observe plant growth or animal behaviour, reading and watching what you had not had time for before (Krajewski, Kubačka 2020c: 69).

As for the followers of voluntary simplicity, however, not only are these activities a breakthrough in pandemic-triggered uncertain everyday life but they also constitute the essence of their lifestyle.

## 5. Conclusions

The initial phase of the pandemic witnessed Li Edelkoort (trend analyst) forecast a massive quarantine of consumption. She predicted that following the initial global recession, the coronavirus epidemic would allow reorganising the world of values and force individuals to slow down the pace, teach self-sufficiency and mindfulness (Edelkoort 2020). These elements – to a varying degree – were noticeable not only in the statements by the simplifying ones, but also in the answers given by the respondents in mentioned reports. The life-simplifying people had introduced this consumption quarantine intentionally and voluntarily beforehand. Most of their activities during the COVID-19 pandemic have not changed dramatically; some of them have been modified to adapt to social regulations (e.g. minor stockpiling). Some of the already well-established practices have been extended and subjected

to innovations, especially in the field of independent, home-based manufacturing. In their opinion, the pandemic has confirmed the functionality of the simplifying lifestyle, and the proposed and implemented solutions associated with it have made it relatively easier to find oneself in a new situation. To the dominant extent, their voices were affirmative and reinforced the rightfulness of the choices made.

Habits and routines that had been common and obvious everydayness for the simplifying ones, during the pandemic have become something usual – by necessity – for the majority. Will these changes be permanent and embedded in the minds of individuals? As the cited reports show, the ideas and discourses that organise the simplifying worldview have been becoming visible in the experiences of others, although they do not constitute a defined coherent lifestyle. When it comes to the potential good effects driven by the pandemic situation, there are two phenomena that are interesting in view of the presented considerations. The first is to re-evaluate various issues in everyday life; to see what is most important; to bring family members closer to each other; to appreciate interpersonal solidarity and sensitivity to the needs of others. The second is to treat the crisis as a hope to change how the world works – especially when it comes to consumerism and waste, as well as the lack of respect towards the natural environment (the remaining indications concerned the appreciation of the role and importance of the health service, science and scientists). It is surprising how much these areas resonate with the repertoire of attitudes characterising the simple life (at least on the rhetorical level) (see Drozdowski et al. 2020a). The language of description itself is analogous – what is important, closeness, cooperation, empathy, namely the already-invoked components of the subjective well-being impossible to be made realised within the framework of consumer culture.

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## UPRASZCZANIE ŻYCIA W PANDEMII COVID-19

**Abstrakt.** Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie wybranych aspektów życia codziennego osób określających się jako zwolennicy upraszczania życia w kontekście pandemii COVID-19 w Polsce. Artykuł składa się z trzech części. W pierwszej w syntetycznej formie przybliżono ideę prostego życia, jej główne przekonania i manifestacje, w drugiej opisano stopień i rodzaje zmian w organizacji codzienności upraszczających życie we wskazanym czasie. W części trzeciej dociekano, czy doświadczenia pandemii mają w sobie potencjał modyfikacji obecnych postaw konsumpcyjnych. Punkt ten stanowi nawiązanie do głosów pojawiających się w debacie publicznej sygnalizujących – szczególnie w początkowej fazie – taką możliwość w szerszej społecznej skali. Materiał źródłowy stanowiły wpisy na blogach, fragmenty podcastów poświęconych prostemu życiu oraz inne źródła niewywołane (raporty, teksty naukowe i publicystyczne).

**Słowa kluczowe:** proste życie, osoby dobrowolnie upraszczające, alternatywne formy konsumpcji.