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“MY MINIMALIST JOURNEY:” NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF YOUTUBE MINIMALIST STORIES

Lizhen Zhao
University of Massachusetts – Amherst

The recent minimalist lifestyle is often claimed to be a way to change your life, to enlighten you regarding what is important in your life, and to bring more happiness and freedom to you through minimizing your spending, possessions, tasks, relationships, etc. A variety of practices are seen as minimalist, such as decluttering (getting rid of possessions), and intentional shopping (buy only what is needed). YouTube is an important venue where minimalist content is published and shared (Meissner, 2019). Various types of content can be found here, such as introduction to minimalism, tips for practicing minimalism, and decluttering process (Zappavigna, 2019). Additionally, people also tell stories of how minimalism has improved their financial, physical, and mental situations.

The current study focuses on one type of minimalist content on YouTube - “minimalist journey” narratives. In this type of narrative, people tell their stories of “encountering” the minimalist lifestyle. Oftentimes it consists of components such as a description of their life status before minimalism, how they learned about this lifestyle, the practicing process, and the results or current status. I collected “minimalist journey” stories from 40 YouTube videos with their comments and analyzed them using narrative analysis methods (Labov & Waletzky, 1997; Riessman, 2005). By closely examining these narratives, this study sheds light on how people experience and make sense of the minimalist lifestyle within the context of anti-consumerism and neoliberalism in digital space. This study also contributes to digital culture studies by showcasing how personal life narratives are constructed on video-sharing platforms like YouTube.

Theoretically, I draw from the literature on anti-consumerism and the neoliberalist entrepreneurial self. Rooted in the context of consumer capitalism, anti-consumerism goes against “the routine, if currently muted, excesses of consumer economies” on both discursive and behavioral levels (Humphery, 2010, 3). Also emerging in late capitalist societies, the neoliberal entrepreneurial self is flexible, adaptive, and in constant need of

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self-monitoring, self-improvement, and self-transformation (Foucault et al., 2008; Gill & Kanai, 2018). Meissner (2019) argues that the minimalist lifestyle is paradoxical because, on the one hand, it advocates for people to resist consumption and productivity which are the two wings of capitalist accumulation, but on the other hand, it encourages new forms of consumption (of better-quality products, for example) and neoliberal subjectivity centered around self-entrepreneurship. This theoretical paradox of minimalism, both anti-consumerist and neoliberal, can be better understood through empirically studying the lived experiences of minimalists and how they construct meaning for such experiences through narrating personal life stories.

Methodologically, to analyze “minimalist journey” narratives, I employed both thematic analysis and structural analysis. Labov and Waletzky (1997) saw oral personal narrative as serving functions more than just recapping experience but also evaluative functions – constructing the “point” of the experience. In this project, I ask the question “what does minimalism mean to people who practice it?” To answer this question and uncover the “point” of minimalism for those who practice it, I combine thematic analysis, an approach suitable for identifying and theorizing common themes across many cases, with Labovian structural analysis (Riessman, 2005), examining both the “what” and the “how” of the minimalist stories.

Two themes emerged in the analysis: “Hoarder to Minimalist” and “Always been a Minimalist.” With the former type, narrators construct stories that start with overconsumption, cluttered space, and anxiety, and end with an under-control consumption habit, clutter-free space, and peaceful mind. In this process, minimalism is the transformative force that facilitates this significant change in their lives. In the second type of narrative, narrators tell stories where they have always been frugal. Their lifestyle was misunderstood and criticized for not fitting into the larger normalized consumer culture. After “discovering” minimalism, they seem to re-approach and embrace their lifestyle with this new, trendy term. In these narratives, the concept of minimalism works as a conceptualization tool. It provided a new perspective for the “always-been minimalists” to reflect on the routinized consumer behavior in capitalist societies, and to reclaim control over the meaning of their everyday lives and past experiences.

Regarding the “how” of the telling, I examined two ways structural elements were organized to form the narratives. First, narrators of both narratives focus on the orientation, or the specific situation where the actions happen (Labov & Waletzky, 1997), emphasizing the crucial role of the environment, especially family, in their lifestyle choices. A “poor” childhood is often the starting point of the “Always been a Minimalist” narrative where being frugal is forced. Meanwhile, the “Hoarder to Minimalist” narratives are often rooted in a family or community that normalizes consumerism. In either situation, earlier family lives are a tool for the narrators to understand why they treat shopping and finance in a certain way. Second, structural elements like evaluation,

result, and coda (the bridge between past and present), are used in juxtaposition with the orientation to construct a contrasting “before and after” image.

Meissner’s (2019) paradox, minimalism being both anti-consumerist and pro-neoliberal entrepreneurial self, manifests in the “Hoarder to Minimalist” narrative. In these stories, the encounter with minimalist discourse is seen as an opportunity to invoke reflections on, and rejection of, the consumerist norms rooted in the narrators’ original circumstances. Through practices like decluttering and intentional shopping, the routinized excess consumption is disrupted, at least temporarily. This discursive rejection and behavior disruption, if done on a large scale, could have considerable political consequences, despite its private and under-politicized nature (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019; Meissner, 2019). However, the analysis also highlights the self-entrepreneurship in such narratives. The narrators, through closely examining their possessions and monitoring their consumption, claim to improve their physical space, financial and psychological health significantly, thus reinforcing the neoliberal sense of self that needs constant transformation.

The “Always been a Minimalist” narratives, however, showcase an alternative meaning of minimalism. These narratives orient to an often-underprivileged social status. Being criticized for their frugal lifestyle reveals the normalcy of consumerism in many societies. With the popularization of minimalism, the always-been-frugal narrators can re-approach their living conditions using this new lens and refute criticism from others in a culturally accepted way. Then “cheap” is now “chic.” Minimalism has the potential to empower economically disadvantaged people by providing them with a set of vocabulary for recreating meanings. It, however, downplays the class divisions in capitalist society as merely an issue of “framing”; the struggles of lower social class people just need to be beautified as “minimalism.”

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