

Taking back control

Minimalism as a reaction to high speed and overload in contemporary society

Abstract

This paper examines the core ideas of minimalism as communicated in key writings of a selection of American bloggers and authors who have served as pacesetters for numerous people in several countries. The study examines minimalism based on narrative analysis, drawing on Hartmut Rosa's critical theory of social acceleration and the concept of constructive resistance. The message the authors convey centres on a lifestyle change that was instigated by the discontent they felt in their previous lives, and they commend minimalism as a means to freedom and autonomy. Although critical of contemporary temporal norms and consumption culture, minimalism is primarily an individual approach to dealing with situations of discontent. This can be understood as a consequence of a more general individualization of society, but it could also be understood in relation to the unclear centre of power in the case of social acceleration. Minimalists can be seen as performing constructive resistance through individual acts without calling for organization or collective mobilization of any kind, and without being particularly challenging or threatening to the system.

Keywords: lifestyle change, resistance, social acceleration, tempo, time

THE NOTION OF minimalism is now trending in countries characterized by affluence and consumption culture, such as Japan, the USA, and several European countries, including post-socialist countries (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016). The minimalist lifestyle is associated with decluttering and the gratification arising from owning fewer objects, but it can also include a broader perspective on how to reduce stress and live a simpler life. As the notion of minimalism has spread it has taken somewhat different directions, such as the nomadic lifestyle (e.g., Wright 2013) and the 100 things challenge (e.g., Bruno 2011). Some, minimalists tend to have a more aesthetic take on minimalism (e.g., Sasaki 2017 and Kondo 2019), whereas others merge the notions of minimalism with sustainability and environmental issues. In Sweden, numerous people are drawing on these ideas, and among Swedish minimalist bloggers, we find variation in the directions taken.¹ At

1 See e.g. Minimalisterna (<http://minimalisterna.se/>) Hildas: Minimalism, hållbarhet & ett fritt liv (<https://hildas.se/>) The Modern Nomad (<https://www.themodernnomad.com/about/>)

the same time, minimalism has maintained a recognizable core – as a tool to achieve freedom and a meaningful life. This paper examines the core ideas of minimalism as communicated in key writings of a selection of popular, well-known, and frequently cited American bloggers and authors who have served as pacesetters for numerous people in several countries.

The minimalist lifestyle shares features with, for example, downshifting and the practice of voluntary simplicity. However, whereas the concept of downshifting captures changes in consumption and quality of life resulting from voluntary and involuntary reductions in work hours and income (e.g., Kennedy, Krahn & Krogman 2012; Schor 1998; Schreurs, Martens & Kok 2012), the minimalist lifestyle change starts with conscious decluttering and reducing the number of possessions as a means to improve quality of life. Additionally, although minimalism is sometimes included in the umbrella concept of voluntary simplicity, the simplicity movement generally entails broader engagement and has societal implications. For example, voluntary simplicity is often connected with environmental engagement, including reduced energy consumption, second-hand purchases and salvaging, home food production, and consuming local food (Alexander & Ussher 2012; cf. Hsu 2015; Vostal 2017 on slow food and slow living). For many involved in voluntary simplicity, "it is the 'type of possessions' that matters most and the 'attitude' toward them, 'not the number'" (Alexander & Ussher 2012:74), but for the minimalist, the core idea is reducing the number of possessions and "getting rid of anything that's unnecessary" (Rodriguez 2017:1).

Although the notion of minimalism has recently gained increased attention and spread widely beyond the American context, there are to my knowledge, very few studies focusing on the phenomenon as such. One study of Polish blogs shows how the bloggers included in the study explain that they want to live without the excess of material objects and that they value independence and freedom, from both work and the pressure to consume. However, the Polish bloggers do not make any references to anti-consumption or moral motivations for their lifestyle choice (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016). Based on examples from the USA, another article (Rodriguez 2017) presents minimalism in terms of decluttering and how owning less saves both money and time. In addition, the article discusses to what extent minimalism represents a radical, anti-capitalist movement, concluding that although it represents a critical reflection of contemporary consumer culture, it lacks such radical potential.

The results of these studies indicate that minimalism represents an intentional lifestyle change that runs counter to contemporary consumption culture and contemporary norms of high speed and efficiency. However, minimalism does not seem to represent any radical critique of the contemporary consumption culture.

This observation raises the question of how we can understand the phenomenon of minimalism and the increased attention it is attracting. Does the preoccupation with decluttering simply represent a morally charged "battle against domestic mess" (cf. Löfgren 2017:1), or could it be understood as a likely reaction to the speeding-up of contemporary society and a way to resist contemporary dominant structures (cf. Rosa 2015; Sørensen 2016)?

The aim of this paper is to contribute a deeper understanding of the central ideas communicated by minimalist pacesetters in their stories of lifestyle change. What message do they convey to their audience? How do they describe and motivate the minimalist lifestyle change? Is there critical potential in the minimalist message, and if so, what is it? The study presented here examines minimalism based on narrative analysis, drawing on Hartmut Rosa's critical theory of social acceleration and the concept of constructive resistance (Sørensen 2016).

Special attention is paid to the construction of identity, time, and tempo in the minimalist narrative² and to what this, in turn, can tell us about people's experiences of and ways of dealing with high speed and overload in contemporary Western society.

The remainder of this paper is organized in four sections. The following section, "Social acceleration and constructive resistance", presents the theoretical framework. The next section presents the empirical material and analytical approach. In the section "The minimalist narrative", the results of the narrative analysis are outlined under three thematic headings: *Minimalist stories of lifestyle change*, *Construction of identity* and *Construction of time and tempo*. The concluding section discusses the key findings of the study.

Social acceleration and constructive resistance

High speed and progress are closely linked to the cluster of capital accumulation, capitalist competition, and the time discipline of industrialization. In this cluster, we see time conceptualized as a resource and commodity people can use, spend, or waste. This notion of time entails certain temporal norms, which put pressure on people to be effective and productive (Larsson & Sanne 2005; Lockie & Wong 2018; Rosa 2015:161ff.). High speed is valorised through modern core ideas of progress and "as a virtue associated with wit and intelligence" (Vostal 2017:4).

Although experiences of stress and time shortage in contemporary society are related to social acceleration, social acceleration is neither a new phenomenon nor a trend with entirely negative consequences (Rosa 2015; Tam 2008; Vostal 2017). The "acceleration imperative" is intertwined "with both liberatory and progressive promises of modernity" (Vostal 2017:3; see also Giddens 1991; Rosa 2015), i.e., the possibility of breaking with tradition and living one's life independently.

In his critical theory of social acceleration, Rosa (2015:71ff.) describes modernity as the speeding up of "all kinds of economic, social, and cultural processes and a picking up of the general pace of life" (Rosa 2009:78). The theory distinguishes between three analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions of social acceleration: technological acceleration, acceleration of social change, and acceleration of the pace of life. The first dimension refers to goal-oriented processes of transport, communication and

² As mentioned in the introduction minimalism includes some variation. When I use the concept "the minimalist narrative" in this paper, it refers to the core ideas of minimalism the authors selected for this study communicate to their audience.

production. The second dimension refers to accelerated processes of social change, rendering "social constellations and structure as well as patterns of action and orientation unstable and ephemeral" (Rosa 2009:83). The third dimension refers both to escalation of the speed of action and to people's experience of time shortage.

In his theory, Rosa identifies three external drivers – the "economic motor", the "cultural motor" and the "structural motor" – of social acceleration. The most obvious driver is the capitalist economy, which entail the continuous introduction of new technologies (Rosa 2009:89). The "cultural motor" refers to dominant cultural ideas of modernity, where the "good life *is the full life*" (Rosa 2015:182, italics in original). The "structural motor" refers to the principle of functional differentiation in modern society, implying both efficiency and increased productivity and increased time scarcity because of the heightened complexity (Rosa 2015:186). Furthermore, according to Rosa, the three dimensions of acceleration are interrelated in a self-propelling process, i.e., a circle of acceleration functioning as a "self-reinforcing 'feedback system'" (Rosa 2015:151); acceleration of social change leads to time pressure and a sense of constant hurry, when people experience time scarcity, they may call for new timesaving technology, a technology that, in turn, entails increased social change (Rosa 2015:156). Although these three dimensions of acceleration are interconnected, in this paper, I primarily consider experiences of the acceleration of the pace of life because this is closest to people's everyday life experiences of time shortage and insufficiency.

It is the modern, progressive promise of freedom and autonomy that Rosa (2010a, 2015) used as a reference point in his critical theory of late-modern temporality. In modern society, social acceleration was originally a precondition for individual freedom, since "individual self-determination only makes sense in a world that moved beyond a supposed ontologically fixed social order" (Rosa 2010b:79). According to Rosa's theory, however, we have reached a point in modernity when social acceleration no longer sets people free. Instead, acceleration of the pace of life tends to relieve people of the possibility of reflexively constructing identities and leading lives on their own terms.

Rosa (2010b) argued that the powers of social acceleration to liberate people in modern society have instead become a source of enslaving pressure. In late modernity, the necessities of social acceleration have overpowered modernity's project of autonomy and self-determination, and "acceleration no longer secures the resources for the pursuit of individual dreams, goals and life-plans" (Rosa 2010b:81). In contrast, Rosa claimed that social acceleration entails alienation and situational identities, making it difficult for people to construct stable identities, meaningful relationships, and long-term life plans. When people no longer have time for the important things in life and lose the ability of self-determination, both their identities and lives become situational, "experienced as a *game* or as *aimless drifting*" and "frenetic standstill" (Rosa 2015:314, italics in original). They experience a state of constant movement and activity without essential change or profound experiences.

According to Rosa (2015), certain cultural phenomena have escaped "dynamization", for example, territorial or cultural oases such as monasteries or traditional forms of living and production. There are also deliberate forms of deceleration, which come

in two versions. First, people can choose activities that help them take a break from the race, for example, practising yoga or mindfulness to handle stress. Such activities are limited and temporary, however, and after the short break, people continue the race with renewed energy, implying that this form of temporary deceleration paradoxically keeps "the hamster wheel" turning. Second, we find ideologically based movements of deceleration. Based on ideology and certain values, these movements resist the logic of the high-speed, affluent society. Rosa (2015) mentioned, for example, the ultraconservative, anarchist, deep ecology movements, and the "slowdown movement", which "promises 'a new well-being through deceleration'" (Rosa 2015:86).

According to Rosa, the different forms of deceleration cannot choke off the speeding up of society, which in late modernity represents a totalitarian power. Social acceleration is an all-pervasive and all-inclusive force in people's lives; it is an abstract principle that represses "all who live under its rule" (Rosa 2010b:61). Based on the theoretical framework of governmentality, however, it is reasonable to add some nuance to Rosa's thesis of social acceleration as a new form of totalitarianism. Foucault's governmentality concept does not offer a substantial theory but rather a useful approach to and way of thinking about how power works in liberal democracies (Stripple and Bulkeley 2014). The semantic linkage between the words *govern* and *mentality* indicates that people's mindsets are at the core of this way of governing. Within a particular discourse, certain "subject positions" are available, i.e., positions from which the discourse becomes intelligible (Hall 1997). For example, in a commercialized society people will frequently occupy the subject position of consumer. However, the available subject positions should not be understood as fixed formulas. Actors are never fully controlled by discourse. Foucault's theoretical approach not only focuses on how we are governed but also offers possibilities for analysing various forms of resistance and counter-conduct at the micro-level (Death 2010:237f.).

To analytically capture resistance at the micro-level, this paper draws on the concept of constructive resistance, which "covers initiatives in which people start to build the society they desire independently of dominant structures already in place" (Sørensen 2016:1). This type of resistance can be performed by various actors and does not need to be formally organized. Furthermore, it may entail outspoken critique (e.g. protest demonstrations) of contemporary power structures, but the critique can also be implicitly conveyed through the performance of alternative lifestyles. Constructive resistance "focuses on creating, building, carrying out and experimenting with what is considered desirable" (Sørensen 2016:2). Accordingly, the fact that people are addressed in a certain way, for example, as consumers, does not mean that people act and define themselves as such (cf. Middlemiss 2014).

Empirical material and analytical approach

The empirical material in this study consists of key writings of a selection of popular, well-known, and frequently cited American bloggers and authors engaged in minimalism: Leo Babauta, Joshua Becker, Joshua Fields Millburn, and Ryan Nicodemus.³ One reason for the selection of these authors was that their writings are often mentioned as sources of inspiration by other bloggers around the world. All of these authors report large numbers of followers and readers of their blogs (Babauta 2019; Becker 2019, Fields Millburn and Nicodemus 2019). They have all authored best-selling books and they all appear with their message in the documentary *Minimalism: A documentary on Important Things* available to a broad audience via Netflix. Another reason for the selection of these authors is that they, although with some differences (for example, Becker is a Christian and Babauta is inspired by Buddhism), talk about minimalism without representing a specific niche, such as the 100 things challenge. The three books selected for this study – *The Power of Less* by Leo Babauta, *The More of Less* by Joshua Becker, and *Minimalism* co-authored by Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus – summarize the main messages on minimalism from these authors.

The American context may be extreme in its level of consumerism (see e.g., Schor 1998; 2004), but the fact that the minimalist message is spreading to many other countries, including post-socialist economic and political contexts (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016), indicates that people in various countries have similar experiences of time shortage, work overload and affluence (see also Czarniawska & Löfgren 2013).

As the aim of the study was to capture the core ideas of minimalism as told in the authors' stories about lifestyle change it was based on thematic narrative analysis, which qualitatively examines content, but differs from thematic coding in its attempt to foster insight into the "story" of the text (Kohler Riessman 2008). In this study, the texts were analysed as narratives that organize diverse elements and normative assumptions, assigning meaning to certain courses of action (cf. Sandercock 2005), implying a focus on clarifying the situation before the current state and a turning point that explains the change to the current state. The germane feature of narrative in this context is that it makes sense of experience, assigns meaning, and imagines the future (Childs 2008). A compelling story is a vehicle for promoting engagement and action in a certain direction. Such a story expresses a certain understanding of a phenomenon, conveying distinctions and ideas about a contemplated or desired order. In a narrative, we can identify a temporal sequence (i.e., before, during, and after) and a plot (e.g., cause and effect). Based on this understanding, the narrative analysis was guided by the following questions:

³ Becker, Babauta, Fields Millburn, and Nicodemus are all active bloggers and authors; for simplicity, in the following I use "authors" when referring to them.

- What was life like before minimalism? (problem definition)
- What caused the lifestyle change? (turning point)
- What does it mean to lead a minimalist life? (solution to the problem and desired order)

In addition, the analysis was based on the following analytical tools for identifying the frame-shaping elements of the text (cf. Machin 2007):

- *repetition of information*, emphasizing how certain themes and items of information are repeated and thereby made salient
- *distinctions and contrasts*, emphasizing how distinctions and contrasts are used to make information salient
- *type of representation*, emphasizing how actors are represented

In analysing how the minimalist lifestyle change is narrated, special attention has been paid to how identity, time, and tempo are constructed in the narrative.

The minimalist narrative

This section presents the results of the study under three thematic headings. *Minimalist stories of lifestyle change* presents how the authors narrate their lifestyle change by describing a previous unsatisfactory and stressful life, a moment of awakening, and their new minimalist life, which is primarily characterized by freedom and passion. *Construction of identity* examines how different phases of this process are associated with different notions of selfhood. *Construction of time and tempo* elucidates a certain ambiguity in the minimalist narrative, which simultaneously resists and embraces the modern understanding of time and tempo.

Minimalist stories of lifestyle change

Minimalists tend to describe their paths to minimalism in similar ways. Their life stories tell of discontent and how work overload, stress, and owning too much stuff were taking over their lives (Babauta 2009; Becker 2016; Fields Millburn & Nicodemus 2011; see also Rodriguez 2017; Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016). The co-authors Fields Millburn and Nicodemus (2011) tell rather dark stories about their lives of high-speed careers, stress, and overconsumption. The more they worked and earned, the more they consumed and the more dissatisfied and depressed they became. Although they were promoted in their successful careers and were well paid, they were not happy: "Sadly, far darker things came with those promotions, as well: anxiety and stress and worry and overwhelm [sic] and depression" (Fields Millburn and Nicodemus 2011:15). Similarly, Babauta (2009:ix-x) tells of a stressful, unhealthy, and totally unsatisfying life. Becker (2016:76) tells about how he and his wife were frustrated by clutter and stuck in their finances, which he describes as "a life of drifting, not focused direction" (Becker 2016:191).

The authors' depictions of their previous lives reflect Rosa's (2015) notion of the detemporalization of life in late modernity, implying that the "biographical course of life as a whole loses *its direction*. It can no longer be understood as *directed motion* and narratively constructed in the sense of a history of progress or development. *Life doesn't head anywhere; in the end, it goes nowhere (very fast)*" (p. 246, italics in original).

The minimalist authors also describe how, at some point and for some reason, they understood that all the stuff they owned would not make them happy. They describe realizing that they actually were owned by all their stuff and commitments. In his book, Becker tells of experiencing a moment of awakening. On a Saturday full of shopping, running errands, garage cleaning, and no time to play with his son, Becker had an enlightening conversation with a neighbour, who told him about her daughter who was a minimalist. Based on this experience, Becker (2016) realized that he did not want to go on accumulating more and more stuff and that it was time for a lifestyle change:

In that moment, as I surveyed the pile of stuff in my driveway, another realization came to me: *Not only are my possessions not bringing happiness into my life; even worse, they are actually distracting me from the things that do!* I ran inside the house and found my wife upstairs scrubbing a bathtub. Still trying to catch my breath, I said, "Kim, you'll never guess what just happened. June said we don't need to own all this stuff!" And in that moment a minimalist family was born. (pp. 3–4, italics in original)

Minimalists' change of life course could be understood as an apparent reaction to discouraging experiences of contemporary consumption culture and high-speed society, in which autonomy and freedom have been lost. In the above quotation, Becker describes a certain day in his life when minimalism came alive to him. For Fields Millburn and Nicodemus (2011:17), the death of the former's mother and all the things she left behind helped them put their lives in perspective: "We decided to take an inventory of our lives. We wanted to find what was making us unhappy, and what we needed to do to change those things in our lives, so we could experience happiness, passion, freedom". The two friends later discovered minimalism, and they describe how they found out about Colin Wright, who owned very few things and followed his passion for travel. Fields Millburn and Nicodemus (2011:23) said that "it was like someone turned on the lightbulb for us for the first time and presented us with a tool to help us weed through the clutter in our lives to finally get to what was important".

Minimalism, in terms of owning less and reducing clutter, is not a goal in itself, but a tool for achieving freedom to pursue one's passion and the life one truly wants. The narrative constructs this as a causal relationship in which minimalism "can actually reveal, or at least clarify, what those passions are" (Becker 2016:39). The formula is to start with the material possessions and then move on to other areas in life. Minimalism is described as leading away from a dissatisfying state, i.e., being locked into consumer culture and contemporary norms of speed – towards an authentic life of freedom. Becker (2016:191), for example, concludes that the life he used to live was delusive: "I

was doing all the things I thought I wanted to do. But now I can see how my previous way of living was not improving my satisfaction”.

When the authors write about what they consider really worth aiming for, they give their narratives impetus using various distinctions and contrasts, all echoing Rosa’s description of a high-speed society. On one hand, there is what contemporary society offers and prescribes: There are the “empty promises of consumerism” (Becker 2016: 23), and efforts to improve one’s sense of self-worth by obtaining praise for performing well (Babauta 2009:6; Fields Millburn & Nicodemus 2011:8). This is a multitasking world, where people have “learned to juggle tasks at high speed, worthy of this age of the Internet” (Babauta 2009:27–28), a world where expectations, demands, and accessibility continue to expand, producing busy unreflective lives (Becker 2016:193). According to this narrative, it is a world where wants are confused with needs and long-term goals are overshadowed by instant “kicks” and temporary highs. In this way, the authors express some critique of contemporary society. However, this critique is mentioned in passing and never elaborated in any detail.

In contrast to contemporary norms and demands, minimalism offers a way to escape the unnecessary accumulation of possessions and to help people find “real, lasting happiness or contentment” (Fields Millburn and Nicodemus 2011:15). The goal and passion can be almost anything; what matters is that one is true to oneself and finds a way to live intentionally. It is about “reducing the number of possessions to a level that sets us free” (Becker 2016:23). The minimalist narrative constructs a distinction between what could be seen as the authors’ previous deceived selves and their current conscious, authentic selves. Thus, as narrated, the minimalist life represents constructive resistance against dominant norms and power structures in terms of creating and experimenting with an alternative lifestyle.

When the authors tell about their encounters with minimalism, they tell stories about change. There is a shared plot, including a turning point signalling some sort of enlightenment causing a profound lifestyle change. There is also a temporal aspect, describing an unsatisfactory life before minimalism (i.e., a stressful unhealthy life, encumbered by debt and deep feelings of discontent and frustration), followed by a new minimalist life. The authors no longer have debts, they have time for what is important in life (e.g., family and friends), they live a healthier lifestyle, and they feel free to follow their passions. According to this narrative, the new minimalist life is characterized by freedom, happiness, and fulfilment. This new life is certainly not without its struggles but is still constructed in profound contrast to the life before minimalism. What, then, does it mean to be a minimalist and what does it take to become one?

Construction of identity

Based on a theoretical elaboration of how social acceleration can in various ways affect people’s sense of selfhood (Hsu & Elliot 2014; Rosa 2010b, 2015), this section examines the construction of identity in the minimalist narrative. In addition to this theoretical elaboration, the notions of *the deceived self* and *the authentic self*, identified in the minimalist narrative presented above, have been used in this analysis. Additionally, the depiction

of what it takes to become a minimalist and to lead a minimalist life constructs the notion of *the disciplined self*, which will be elaborated on at the end of this section.

Hsu and Elliot (2014) theoretically examined how social acceleration can affect people's sense of selfhood, elucidating how various notions of selfhood can be linked to social acceleration. Based on this elaboration, they suggested five "images of the self" associated with social acceleration, indicating the paradoxes and complexities of selfhood in late modernity:

- *The reinventive self* alludes to a self that responds to a culture of reinvention, i.e., a culture that values flexibility, transformation, and reorganization. It is a culture that transforms people's sense of identity. The reinventive self becomes caught in an endless stream of changes and new options, making the concept of identity itself disposable.
- *The detached self* is an image of the self corresponding to Rosa's (2010b:96) description of alienation. It is a self attuned to the normative pressure to have a fast-paced life, whereby "novelty becomes routinized". Because of the rapidity of social change and a "hyper-stimulated" lifestyle, the detached self adopts a "blasé attitude" and cultivates a deep sense of indifference (Hsu & Elliot 2014:402).
- *The stationary self* corresponds to Rosa's (2015) notion of situational identity, in terms of a sense of lost direction. It is a situation of "frenetic standstill" in which the individual lacks the means and capacity to lead his/her life. The high speed of social change and the fast pace of life do not entail any real change for the individual's life course.
- *The reflexive self* is opposed to the detached and stationary selves passively adapting to the demands of high-speed society. The reflexive self is associated with self-awareness and the construction of the self, using social acceleration to facilitate self-making and autonomy (e.g., Giddens 1991), which, according to Rosa (2010b:61), is more or less impossible in late modernity because of the almost totalitarian character of social acceleration. Hsu and Elliot (2014) have given a more nuanced description of reflexivity and self-making, suggesting that self-construction in contemporary society takes place in a social context of "unruly" social acceleration. The reflexive self is neither a helpless victim nor in full control.
- *The decelerating self*, finally, implies that social acceleration should not be seen as a totalizing phenomenon. Whereas the stationary self can be seen as a fatal, unintended consequence of social acceleration, the decelerating self can also be seen as a self resisting the high speed of late modernity.

The minimalist narrative relates in various ways to the abovementioned notions of selfhood, as well as to the notions of the deceived, authentic, and disciplined selves, implying that different phases of the minimalist "journey" relate to different notions of selfhood (see Table 1).

In the minimalist narrative, *the reinventive self* is not as clearly pronounced as are the other images of the self. However, this image of the self is indicated, for example, when Fields Millburn and Nicodemus (2011) describe their life courses. They describe how, in their search for meaning, they restlessly tried various lifestyles – i.e., turning to and abandoning, for example, drugs, religion, and marriage – on their way to minimalism, implying the contingency and the revisability of their identities.

The minimalist authors' descriptions of their previous life situations more clearly resonate with the notion of *the detached self*. They describe themselves as constantly preoccupied, with no time for things that truly matter. For the *detached* or *alienated* self, meetings with others are shallow and confined to exchanging information. A recurrent theme in the minimalist narrative is how the authors' previously fully packed schedules, for example, had severely limited the time spent with family and friends.

In addition, the construction of the pre-minimalist self clearly resonates with the *stationary self*, alluding to a self that has lost its direction. Rosa (2015:314) ascribes this experience to the "postmodern' antinomy", implying that although the pace of life is high, nothing is essentially changing or achieved. An illustrative example is that of Babauta (2009:x), who describes experiencing maximum stress every day, finding himself "going nowhere, fast", indicating experiences of both "aimless drifting" and a "frenetic standstill".

In hindsight, the authors have re-evaluated the norms of high speed they previously adhered to, questioning contemporary consumer culture. In this kind of reassessment of life before minimalism, the narrative resonates with an image of selfhood that I here call *the deceived self*. This image of selfhood alludes to the notion of "false consciousness", i.e., the possibility of being oppressed and suffering without being fully aware of it. Becker describes how his previous life "wasn't even close to the best one possible, for me or for those closest to me" (Becker 2016:191).

The turning point in the narrative alludes to enlightenment and insight, resonating with the *reflexive self*, i.e., a self associated with self-awareness and conscious self-construction, implying the possibility to resist contemporary dominant norms. According to the minimalist authors, to become free and autonomous one must start by getting rid of possessions and decluttering. The subtitle of Becker's (2016) book – *Finding the Life You Want Under Everything You Own* – is indicative of this central idea in the minimalist narrative.

The minimalist narrative also invokes the possibility of attaining an *authentic self*, alluding to freedom, autonomy, and the ability to be one's true self. Fields Millburn and Nicodemus (2011:4–5) declare that their book was written and organized to help "you" (i.e., the reader) think about your life and become "the real you, the passionate, loving, disciplined, happy you" (Fields Millburn & Nicodemus 2011:4–5, italics in original). Becker (2016:30), with great ease concludes: "We were free to craft our own style of minimalism in any way that suited us. What a relief!" The way to an authentic self is thus based on the notion of a reflexive, rational, and autonomous self that can conduct the necessary inventory work and independently make well-founded decisions about the future, and in doing so pursue an authentic life course.

However, as stated by Hsu and Elliot (2014), this type of reflexive self-construction occurs in social contexts characterized by "unruly" social acceleration, making it an ongoing process. The minimalist narrative captures this aspect of contemporary society in its plot. The turning point – the decision to become a minimalist – is not the end of the story; instead, to become a minimalist one must be determined and consistent. This includes setting limits and creating new habits, establishing and sticking to rules (Babauta 2009:15–16, 88), making priorities and "focus[ing] on these priorities above everything else" (Becker 2016:21). In this sense, the minimalist narrative constructs yet another image of the self that can be associated with social acceleration, i.e., *the disciplined self*. It is a self in control of itself and continuously working on its own improvement. It is this disciplined self that can perform constructive resistance against the normative pressure people face in contemporary society. The disciplined minimalist self can loosely be associated with secular asceticism (cf. Shepherd 2002). First, asceticism resonates with the way minimalists apply certain principles to every aspect of their daily lives. Second, it applies to the way minimalists are "working on the self" by introspection and consistent self-discipline (cf. Rose 1996).

The self that takes back control over its own life resonates with the *decelerating self*, i.e., a self resisting the high speed of late modernity and engaged in intentional and enduring lifestyle change. However, as elaborated on in the following section, minimalism is not entirely about slowing down: although a slower pace of life is valued, the minimalist narrative conveys a more complex relation to tempo.

Table 1. The construction of identity in the minimalist narrative associates different phases of the minimalist "journey" with different notions of selfhood.

Construction of identity in the minimalist narrative		
Phases	Notions of selfhood	Identity
Life before minimalism	The reinventive self The detached self The stationary self The deceived self	A self that lacks awareness, control, and direction
Becoming a minimalist	The reflexive self The disciplined self	An autonomous and rational self that becomes aware and starts to take control
Leading a minimalist life	The authentic self The decelerating self The reflexive self The disciplined self	A free, passionate, and truly happy self that must maintain its awareness and continuously work on its own improvement

Construction of time and tempo

The minimalist narrative includes resistance against contemporary temporal norms and the norms of contemporary consumption culture, implying a critique of capitalist society. At the same time, the narrative also includes the notion of time as a finite resource and a commodity, in line with the logic of capitalism and the time discipline of industrialization. It seems that the minimalist authors have internalized the essence of the capitalist notion of time, i.e., time as something we ought to use wisely and not waste.

In the minimalist narrative, this notion of time partly appears in explicit statements, such as "Your time is limited and precious" (Babauta 2009:105) and "your most precious commodity – your time" (Fields Millburn & Nicodemus 2011:56). It is also implicit in the narrative, with its repeated time management strategies and advice on how to spend time meaningfully. According to the narrative, time can either be used wisely or wasted on meaningless things. When Becker (2016:76) tells of his frustration with clutter and stretched finances in his previous life, he concludes that he and his wife discovered that they "were wasting time" managing their possessions. In his book, Babauta (2009) provides advice and numerous tips on how to "save time" and "stop wasting time", for example, advising the reader to eliminate distractions, impose routines, and prioritize tasks, in what can be seen as the "ordering of social life through temporal structures such as schedules, routines and calendars" (Lockie & Wong 2018:328). Fields Millburn and Nicodemus (2011:16) conclude that we have only "a finite amount of time on this earth. It can be spent accumulating monetary wealth, or it can be spent in a meaningful way".

By drawing such a contrast, the minimalist narrative inculcates a distinction between an aimless and futile life according to the norms of contemporary consumer culture and a fulfilled, intentional, and meaningful minimalist life with long-term goals. The minimalist lifestyle, thus, represents constructive resistance against the capitalist norms of competition and capital accumulation. At the same time, by emphasizing time as a finite resource, the narrative still adheres to the notion of a productive life, implying continued connection to the notion of speed as a "virtue associated with wit and intelligence", as well as an appreciation of effectiveness and an aversion to "sluggishness" (Vostal 2017:4,12). What partly differentiates the minimalist and the capitalist notions of time concerns what this finite resource should be spent on.

Whereas the construction of time as a finite resource is clear in the narrative, the construction of tempo is based on a contrast between life before and after the lifestyle change to minimalism. The tempo of life before minimalism is unambiguously depicted as rushed, whereas the construction of tempo in the minimalist life comprises multiple temporalities.

As elaborated above, the authors describe their pre-minimalist lives as thoroughly stressful, strained by work overload and too many possessions to manage. In pre-minimalist life, high speed is associated entirely with life without direction. As described by Babauta (2009:x), he was "going nowhere, fast".

The construction of tempo in relation to life after the lifestyle change is somewhat ambiguous. In this way, the narrative oscillates between the ideas of resisting haste

by "living in the moment" and the diligent focus on long-term achievement, with the latter being a dominant theme in the narrative (Table 2). On one hand, Babauta (2009:132) states that our bodies and minds "are made for a slower pace of life", arguing that we should learn to slow down and "rebel against fast food and fast life" (p. 138). Fields Millburn and Nicodemus (2011:25) describe how minimalism helped them reclaim time and live in the moment. On the other hand, as elaborated above, the narrative centres on minimalism as an ongoing process that "takes daily focus and a commitment to constant improvement" (Fields Millburn & Nicodemus 2011:121). Contrary to the idea of living in the moment, the minimalist life is mainly depicted as an intentional life in which "we examine our options and make choices with larger purposes and long-term goals in mind" (Becker 2016:192). The minimalist narrative thus includes contradictory temporalities (cf. Lockie & Wong 2018). Whereas the notion of living in the moment and at a pace that suits our bodies and minds alludes to a temporality based on the idea of natural rhythms, the notion of focused activity based on long-term goals alludes to a temporality based on the idea of linear time and the time discipline of industrialization.

Similarly, the intention behind the minimalist authors' lifestyle change seems ambiguous. According to the narrative, the minimalist lifestyle will free people to live at a slower pace, but it will also make us more effective and productive. Becker (2016:194) states that most of us unfortunately "become busy over all the wrong things and we have allowed false assumptions to drive our schedules". The minimalist narrative does not encourage a slow, unproductive life – or "sluggishness" – but rather a focused, intentional life. The authors conclude that it is high speed without focus and long-term goals that is unproductive. The notion of a focused, intentional life is based on the idea of setting limits in order to be productive. Babauta (2009:xi) writes: "Many of my readers have asked me how I can do so much, given that I have the same number of hours in the day as everyone else. My answer: It's a matter of placing limits, and focusing on the essential."

Fields Millburn and Nicodemus (2011:28) describe how, with the aim of helping others, they decided to create a website to document their personal journeys into minimalism. To do so, they were "laboring vigorously until the last minute", indicating that productivity and time discipline in terms of hard work and sharp deadlines are not a problem as long as they are devoted to intentional tasks that add meaning to one's life.

As related in their stories, the minimalist authors want to achieve a lot (e.g., write books, start successful blogs, and contribute to society), but they want to do so at their own pace and based on their own passions and their own understandings of what is meaningful. The construction of tempo in the minimalist narrative resonates with Vostal's (2017:12) concept of "temporal autonomy", implying uninterrupted periods of time, protection of unrushed time, and "relative sovereignty over scheduling, planning and organization" in one's activities. Accordingly, the Italian musical term for tempo *a piacere* (approximately "at one's pleasure") can be used to describe the construction of tempo in the minimalist narrative, i.e., the tempo can vary as long as it is at the discretion of the performer.

Table 2. The construction of tempo in the minimalist narrative.

Construction of tempo in the minimalist narrative			
Phases	Tempo	Lifestyle implications	Outcomes
Life before minimalism	rushed high speed	busy with the wrong things unable to focus on important things wasting time	A stressful life without direction, a life based on false assumptions
Leading a minimalist life	<i>a piacere</i> , at the discretion of the performer	rebel against fast living live in the moment set long-term goals and follow one's passions focus on essentials and set limits	A productive and intentional life with freedom, true happiness, and temporal autonomy

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to contribute a deeper understanding of the central ideas communicated by minimalist pacesetters in their stories of lifestyle change. The authors included in this study are Northern American, middle-aged men, which may imply a bias not least in regard to the link between careers, consumption and status they report on in their books. North Americans are generally hardworking, and long working hours have increased in the USA. The USA also represents a highly commercialized society where consumption and status are closely linked (Schor 1991; 1998; 2004). Furthermore, the authors have all been successful in creating platforms for themselves as minimalist bloggers and authors, making communication about minimalism to a broader audience part of their new lifestyle. However, at large, the life stories these authors share with their audience reflect how people in several countries seem to be caught in a constant struggle to cope with time shortage and excess, i.e., managing situations of "too much information, too many choices, too many commodities or tasks" (Czarniawska & Löfgren 2013:1, see also Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska 2016). It is also likely that this common experience across national borders has made these authors successful in reaching a broad audience.

Despite some variations in their personal stories, the authors selected for this study communicate a coherent narrative of their lifestyle change, including their motives for this change and their experiences of what it takes to become a minimalist. The message they convey to their audience centres on a lifestyle change that was instigated by the discontent they felt in their previous lives. Looking back, they describe how they were deceived by contemporary norms of consumption and speed. They all commend mini-

malism as a means to freedom and autonomy, which we, according to Rosa's (2010b:61) critical theory, have lost under the "totalitarianism" of acceleration in late modernity.

In his theory, Rosa mentions ideologically based movements as deliberate forms of deceleration. Although minimalism includes a critique of the time pressure caused by the contemporary "cycle of work and spend" (Schor 1998:xiii), it is not simply a quest for deceleration. In line with previous research on the dynamics of social acceleration and with critical reviews of the fast-slow dichotomy, this study shows that the construction of tempo in the minimalist narrative is "far from even and one-dimensional" (Vostal 2017:16, see also Hsu 2015). The construction of tempo in relation to the minimalist lifestyle implies oscillation between conflicting temporalities, i.e., between "living in the moment" and a diligent focus on long-term achievement. In this part, thus, the narrative represents two mindsets. One is set on counteracting contemporary temporal norms, using minimalism as a means to reclaim individual autonomy (cf. Goodin et al. 2008), which can be seen as constructive resistance against the "enslaving power" of social acceleration that Rosa (2010b:80) associated with late modernity. The other mindset seems to embrace the diligence and time discipline of industrialization.

The narrative of the lifestyle change analysed here includes descriptions of life before minimalism, a turning point, and what it means to lead a minimalist life, the phases of which all construct identity based on various notions of selfhood. To free oneself from the normative pressure of contemporary society, one must be both reflexive and disciplined. The authors describe the turning point as an enlightening moment when inspiration comes from fellow human beings telling of their experiences of minimalism, but the narrative still depicts lifestyle change as an individualistic journey and a primarily autonomous and rational process. Although critical of contemporary society, the minimalist narrative suggests that it is up to each individual to make the necessary changes, taking back control over his/her life, and decide for oneself what direction the minimalist life shall take.

Minimalism seems to function as a "boundary object" that serves as an anchor and bridge between worlds or between actors from different contexts (Star and Griesemer 1989). "Boundary objects are entities that enhance the capacity of an idea, theory, or practice to translate across culturally defined boundaries" (Fox 2011:71). A boundary object can be any element that is understandable in more than one setting, that is, plastic enough to be adjusted to different settings and stable enough to retain its identity in these different settings (Fox 2011: 72; Star and Griesemer 1989: 414). This may be one possible explanation for the spread of the notion of minimalism across contexts. People with somewhat different motives for resisting contemporary norms of high speed and consumption can all be inspired by the core idea of minimalism as a tool to achieve freedom, yet still create their own version of it.

The increased attention paid to minimalism can be understood as an expression of discontent with the functioning of contemporary society, a discontent shared by numerous people across national contexts. This study suggests that the minimalist pacesetters capture this sentiment in their life stories but mainly inspire people to perform resistance by creating and/or "experimenting with what is considered desira-

ble” to themselves (Sørensen 2016:2). The spread of minimalism also shows that the suggested individual strategies for dealing with situations of discontent seems both reasonable and appealing to many people. This approach to dealing with situations of discontent can be understood as a consequence of a more general individualization of society, but it could also be understood in relation to the unclear centre of power in the case of social acceleration. Temporal norms do not have any obvious sender, but still govern our mentalities. As Rosa (2010b:77) puts it, “there is no moral or political debate about the powers of the deadline and dictates of speed at all”. The normative pressure is often silent and hidden, entailing the notion that modern society is “almost sanction-free and minimally restricted in ethical terms” (ibid.).

One way to understand the social context of the type of resistance suggested by the minimalist pacesetters, which is to primarily focus on individual strategies for dealing with societal problems, is provided by governmentality studies and the interrogation of the post-political, in terms of the depoliticized conditions of neoliberal society (e.g., Kent 2009; Maniates 2001; Wilson & Swyngedouw 2014). In the course of this interrogation, the concepts of post-politics and depoliticization are based on the assumption that politics have traditionally been played out as conflicts or “more precisely as potentially irreconcilable disagreements about the values and direction of society” (Strand 2016:18). The concepts are used to describe what are understood as attempts to remove conflicts from the political agenda of Western liberal democracies, implying that “political projects are replaced by pragmatic adjustments within the existing order” (Strand 2016:19). From this perspective, minimalists can be seen as performing constructive resistance through individual acts, inspiring others without calling for organization or collective mobilization of any kind and without being particularly challenging or threatening to the system (cf. Sørensen 2016).

The potential for social change offered by this form of resistance must, however, be considered in the long-term perspective. The inspiration minimalism offers to people with various levels of engagement and various motives (e.g., environmental concerns) may in the long run give rise to both societal change – by the pure number of people involved – and to more organized mobilization. Not least, in light of the contemporary political engagement of youth in climate change issues, it will be of interest to follow and examine the spread of minimalist core ideas across contexts. This is one area of research that may provide insights and help us better understand the critical potential of this kind of constructive resistance based primarily on individual acts and social media communication.

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