

Sustainable Life Path Concept: Journeying Toward Sustainable Consumption

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ABSTRACT:

This think piece (concept paper) develops the idea that a construct is needed to help people view consumption as a journey, a complex, lifelong process, rather than a series of discrete, separate, cumulative events (shopping trips). The sustainable life path concept is introduced and developed through the conceptual integration of the sister-concepts of voluntary simplicity, living simply, life intentions, and life acumen, grounded in the idea of an examined and engaged, purposeful life. Reframing consumption as unfolding along a sustainable life path, perceiving consumers as pathfinders, and framing consumption as a lifelong journey are offered as conceptual innovations.

Keywords: Sustainable life path, engaged life, sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity, consumer acumen

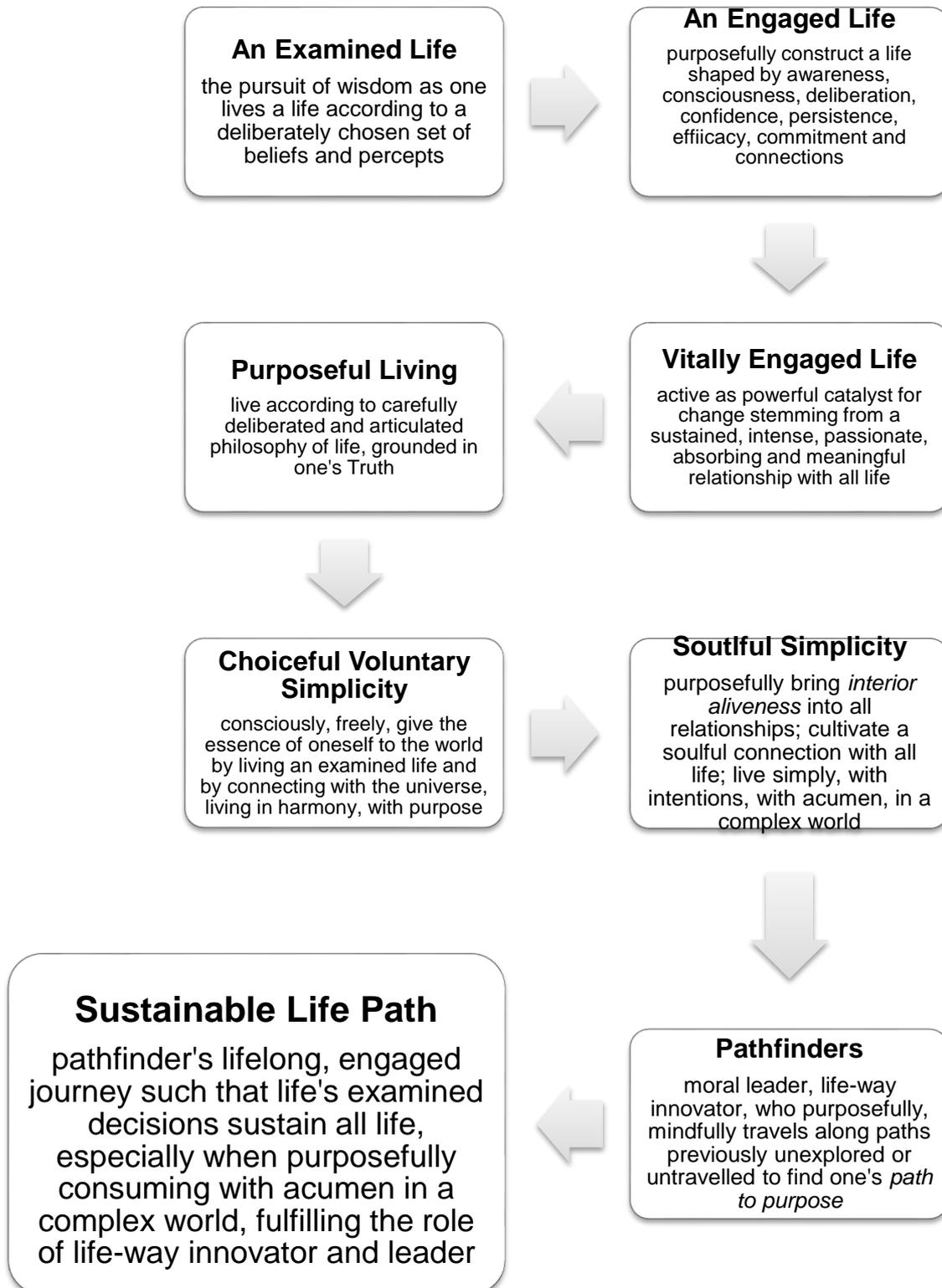
As a modest estimate, the average person enters into at least a million consumer transactions over the span of a lifetime (based on 75 years of consumption (during ages 15-80) and 35 decisions each day, totalling 958,125). This guestimate puts a face to the scope of people's consumption behaviour over the span of their life time. People tend to view these purchases as single events, albeit cumulative in nature. From this disparate, fragmented perspective, it is easy to dismiss the lifetime impact of these decisions. Many of these transactions translate into unsustainable consumption due to the complexity of: resource extraction, design and production, transportation, labour source, product use, service delivery and disposal issues. Multiply this complexity by billions of consumers and the unsustainability quotient goes through the roof.

This paper is a think piece, sharing the genesis of a new concept called a *sustainable life path*. Reflecting an amalgamation of literature and the author's personal intellectual insights, the idea is not yet empirically tested, something not required for a think piece (Max Planck Institute of Economics, 2006). A think piece is "a piece of writing meant to be thought-provoking and speculative that consists chiefly of background material and personal opinion and analysis" ("Think piece," 2013). One of the key benefits of think pieces is to facilitate discussion on emerging topics without the benefit of empirical evidence, anticipating this positivistic validation will evolve in the future if scholars in the field judge that the new idea has merit. Thought pieces are intended to *provoke thought*; they are legitimate tools for contributing to the cumulative improvement of theoretical knowledge (Max Planck Institute of Economics, 2006).

The sustainable life path construct is intended to help people view consumption as a journey rather than a collection of disparate events, of separate shopping trips. A journey entails travelling from one place to another, usually taking a rather long time. Over the course of a journey, people make many journey decisions and journey choices, informed by both their rational decision making side and their experiences of the journey side. Better journey choices (instead of consumer choices) lead to less negative impact on self, others and the environment (Pelly & Le Grand, 2012). Currently, people tend to conceptualize consumers as making many shopping trips, with pursuant consumer decisions leading to the accumulation of materialistic gain. The sustainable life path concept presumes that people's consumer journey decisions and choices reflect the accumulation of sustainable life decisions, over the course of their life journey.

This concept is an innovation. It views consumption as a complex, lifelong process (a journey) rather than a series of one-at-a-time decisions made during cumulative transactions (shopping trips). It presumes the life path that people journey as they consume should sustain all life. To develop this concept, the paper first provides conceptual clarity, differentiating amongst several related concepts, namely style, lifestyle, sustainable living, and sustainable lifestyle. Second, the paper tenders an inaugural definition of life path followed with a preliminary definition of a sustainable life path. Recognizing that this preliminary definition lacks nuance and sophistication, the paper presents a richer conceptualization of sustainable life path, one that reflects conceptual integration at the interface of seven sister-concepts set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Genesis of the conceptualization of a sustainable life path concept



The sustainable life path concept enables people to better comprehend how consumption is a very complex, life-long process that evolves over the course of people's lives.

As a caveat, this is a theoretical paper, not an empirical study nor an application of the concept. Furthermore, the author acknowledges that this is a macro-concept, which is potentially made up of many micro decisions, consumer decisions that will impact overall macro-level behaviours. The intent of this paper is to bring attention to the idea of a sustainable life path, rather than to tender a far-reaching critical analysis of the proposed concept. It is anticipated that this critical dialogue and wider discourse will emerge and evolve once people begin to intellectually and pragmatically engage with this conceptual innovation.

Conceptual Clarity

The sustainable life path construct comprises the amalgamation of two separate concepts: sustainable and life path. First, sustainable is from two words: sustain and able. Sustain is Latin *sustinere*, to hold up or support from below. Able is Old French *ableté*, expert at handling something. Sustainability then refers to people becoming experts at holding up or providing support for something from below. Sustainable living depends heavily upon people knowing how to consume in a sustainable matter, in such a way that their patterns of action in the marketplace scaffold and support all life, now and in the future. In the 21st century, it is very hard to provide support for all because current consumption patterns undermine the life support structures. Without this support, everyone and everything becomes weakened and vulnerable, exposed to profound risks, even extinction for some species and geographic locales (McGregor, 2011b). Sustainable (providing life support from

below) means “meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 41).

As a conceptual aside, it is necessary to distinguish between style and lifestyle and between the familiar concepts of sustainable living and sustainable lifestyle. Style refers to habits, attitudes, tastes and moral standards that, together, constitute the current mode of living of an individual or group. It pertains to a particular, distinctive or characteristic mode of action at a given point in time (or a current lifestyle) (Collins English Dictionary, 2012). A lifestyle refers to people’s choices that shape their current life; that is, a style of living (Anderson & Golden, 1984).

Sustainable lifestyle, used in conjunction with responsible and sustainable consumption (Black & Cherrier, 2010) is often associated with sustainable living. Sustainable living is a lifestyle that involves the application of sustainability principles to consumer choices and decisions (meaning present day decisions do not cause harm in the future). And, although “living a sustainable lifestyle involves shopping with the planet in mind” (Black & Cherrier, 2010, p. 441), the concept does not fully convey the idea of people (consumers) embarking on a lifelong journey along a sustainable life path. Indeed, people could engage in multiple modes of action (lifestyles) as they travel along their path of life, with no guarantee these actions are sustainable; this lack of certainty triggers a legitimate concern for the sustainability of life’s decisions (Schulenberg, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1998), especially cumulative consumer decisions.

Second, the literature did not reveal a distinct definition of life path. Exploring each word in its own right, and then weaving them together, inspired an inaugural definition of life path. Life refers to the period of time during which someone is alive (i.e., not dead). Life can pertain to the events and experiences that happen to people while they are alive, and can pertain to their life's work (their most important achievements). A way of life refers to the well-established behaviours and habits that are typical of a particular group, e.g., the way of life of the gypsies. A path is a route or course along which something or someone moves or travels. It can be made for a particular purpose, and be used as a passageway (wide or narrow) to move from one place to another. A path can also be a course of action or conduct (e.g., the path of righteousness). Paths can be viewed as the space ahead of people as they move along. These paths can be open or obstructed, with the latter preventing people from achieving what they intended (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2003; The Free Dictionary, 2012).

Weaving life and path together, this paper, for the first time, tenders a definition of life path as it pertains to sustainability. A life path is a course along which people travel while they are alive, (a) replete with life events, experiences and activities, (b) informed or not by a particular purpose(s), (c) blocked or not by obstacles and barriers, and (d) likely involving socially-judged conduct along the way. As well, a preliminary definition of sustainable life path, using the aforementioned definitions of sustainable and life path, is now tendered. A sustainable life path comprises purposively journeying along life's path such that life's decisions would sustain all life, especially consumer decisions. A more nuanced and sophisticated definition is offered at the end of the paper, informed by the line

of thinking (conceptual logic) portrayed in Figure 1. The next section moves the discussion closer to that definition by setting the stage for the conceptual innovation.

Setting the Conceptual Stage

Moving toward a more nuanced and sophisticated definition of sustainable life path, consider these three thoughts. The sustainability of life's decisions is a reflection of choosing certain pursuits over others. Some pursuits along one's life path make other pursuits unlikely. And, certain pursuits take precedence over others in terms of impact; that is, they overshadow them (Schulenberg et al., 1998). To illustrate, in our 21st century consumer culture, people's consumeristic, materialistic lifestyles have overshadowed responsible living, leading people down a particular life path that continues to wreck havoc on those living elsewhere, the next generation, those not yet born, other species and the earth. These life choices reflect unsustainable life decisions taken by people who have fallen off the sustainable life path, have taken a fork in the road, or have never embarked on this lifelong journey.

Encouragingly, some people do choose to live sustainably. As one example, Miller and Bentley (2012) determined that when sustainability leaders were asked to "retrace their paths to choosing a *sustainable lifestyle* [emphasis added]" (p.137), all recounted how personal experiences served as foundational underpinnings of their choice to embrace sustainable life habits. Once they became aware that changing their path could lead to decisions that did not harm others or the future, "they felt a moral responsibility to act...

[and] to lead and inspire by example” (Miller & Bentley, p. 142). Indeed, it could be argued that ethical and moral consumer behaviour demands leadership rather than just management, conformity or compliance with existing societal norms (Lager, 2010; McGregor, 2010). Such leaders would become pathfinders (to be discussed shortly).

Chawla (1999) interviewed people about “periods in [their] life when significant experiences occurred” (p.15), thereby prompting them to commit to environmental activism. Her research determined several reasons: (a) a sense of social justice, (b) a concern for one’s children or grandchildren, (c) religion or principles, (d) friends, and (e) work. She also cited literature identifying many other factors that point people down the path of environmental action, including (f) family, (g) experiences in nature, (h) involvement in environmental or likeminded organizations, (i) education, (j) books, and (k) the loss or degradation of a valued place. Using this collage of information, she constructed “a typical *life path* [emphasis added] of predominant sources of commitment [to environmental action], at different ages” (p. 15).

Chawla (1999) also found that life paths reflect both intentions and chance events. Each can set people off in new directions, along different paths than they anticipated, intended or imagined (see also Schulenberg et al., 1998). An intention is the quality of consciousness people bring to an action (Zukav & Francis, 2003). When people consciously choose (with a conscience) a specific intention, they choose an intended consequence; that is, they make a responsible choice or life decision. By choosing their intentions, people can create the life experiences they desire, walk the path on purpose. When they purposefully choose an intention, they choose a consciousness (a deep state of awareness) that can lead

to the creation of authentic inner power, which comes from their soul and their inner self (McGregor, 2005; Zukav & Francis, 2003). This inner power, these conscious choices, keeps them on their sustainable life path.

Conceptual Integration

This section identifies and explains the seven concepts (see Figure 1) that were woven together to generate a more nuanced and sophisticated definition of sustainable life path, augmenting the preliminary offering: “purposively journeying along life’s path so life’s decisions (especially consuming) sustain all life.” Integrating these seven contributory concepts provides rich insights into a very nuanced, lifelong process. A sustainable life path is informed by an examined and vitally engaged life. It reflects a worthy and purposeful life shaped by choiceful and soulful simplicity, life intentions and acumen. These are all proposed corollaries of a sustainable life path, leading to purposeful pathfinders striving to find their path to purpose.

An Examined and Engaged Life

An examined life involves the pursuit of wisdom. It means living one’s life according to a deliberately chosen set of percepts and beliefs, discerned through self-examination and expressed in both words and deeds (Miller, 2011). Examining one’s life leads to engagement with life. Engaging with life means people reconnect with their curiosity, use their innate abilities and imagination, and shift their consciousness (Freeborg, 2012). They no longer allow unexamined, unconscious thought to determine their lives (Bottero, 2012). Van De

Riet (2011) argued that the moment people stop interacting with their life, or show indifference toward it, that is the moment their life starts to become less relevant. Being engaged is dependent upon bringing awareness to a life that has been lived unaware, meaning people have been going through the motions, have been on autopilot (Reece, 2006; Van De Riet, 2011). To make positive changes in the world, people must purposefully examine their lives and then become purposefully engaged, become catalysts for change (Van De Riet).

In more detail, engagement “involves learning, persistence, a social context, a high sense of empowerment and self-organization, and an evident sense of confidence and self-efficacy” (Marcum, 2009, p.76). An engaged life must be carefully and purposefully constructed by each person, a process that reflects their unique commitment to that philosophy of life (Kytile, 2000). It is up to each person to decide to live an engaged life; others cannot make that decision for them (Bottero, 2012; Marcum, 2009).

Vitally Engaged Life

When people make the choice to live an engaged life, the structure of their life changes (Bottero, 2012; Kytile, 2000). Living an engaged life then becomes self-evident. People find goals they can devote themselves to with genuine passion. They exhibit sustained connections and sustained commitment to some aspect of the world (Nakamura, 2001). She explained that for some people, this engagement becomes a vital part of their life, called vital engagement, and defined this as “an absorbing and meaningful relationship to the world” (p. 5). This vital world-relationship is intense and positive. People are strongly

connected to the world, and their vital engagement occurs over a long period of time; it is not just a fleeting event.

Purposeful Living

Wong (2012) discussed the notion of a worthy life, explaining that it reflects the responsible exercise of human freedom and of personal agency, in the face of pressures and temptations. He suggested that “an enduring passion for living comes only from commitment to a higher purpose” (p. 6), akin to Nakamura’s (2001) idea of vital engagement. Mindfully aware people, who are engaged with life, have a purpose (Freeborg, 2012, Wong, 2012). Purposeful living includes clearly articulated goals, directions, worldviews (one’s philosophy of life), values, aspirations and future objectives (Wong). Purposefully living an engaged life means people choose to connect with their Truth, and live in harmony with the Earth. It involves listening deeply when in conversation, and then opening and connecting with the heart, all of which are part of non-violent conversations. Ultimately, it can lead to the creation of a culture of engaged living with the world (Bottero, 2012; Stone, 2011). “Voluntary simplicity is the natural choice for those living an engaged life” (Bottero, p. 2).

Choiceful Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary simplicity warrants discussion in this paper because, while distinct, it helps inform the concept of sustainable life path. Voluntary simplifiers are people who choose, “out of free will - rather than by being coerced...- to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning” (Etzioni,

1998, p. 620). In comparison, while voluntary simplifiers reject the social norms of a consumer society, non-voluntary simplifiers are people who have adopted little or no sustainable consumption practices, and beginner simplifiers choose to support some aspects of sustainability without either embracing it or completely dismissing it (McDonald, Oates, Young, & Hwang, 2006; see also Boujbel & D'Astous, 2012; Shaw & Moraes, 2009).

Elgin (2010) described voluntary simplicity as an examined life in which people are motivated to get their lives back in control and to attempt to regain important things that have been lost or compromised. They make considered choices and they stop consuming when they reach what they deem is enough because it suffices for their happiness, while not depriving the environment nor other people. Elgin (2003, p.2) subsequently identified 10 kinds of voluntary simplicity, one being choiceful simplicity, which entails “choosing our *path through life* [emphasis added] consciously, deliberately, and of our own accord. As a path that emphasizes freedom, a choiceful simplicity also means staying focused, diving deep, and not being distracted by the consumer culture. It means consciously organizing our lives so that we give our ‘true gifts’ to the world - which is to give the essence of ourselves.” He encouraged people to consciously choose their examined path thorough life.

Living Simply/Soulful Simplicity

More and more often, people are being asked to live more simply on the earth, to choose a life path that does not heedlessly tread on the world and its citizens. Elgin (2003, p. 2) referred to a phenomenon called upshifting, wherein people are “moving ahead into a life that is, though materially more modest, rich with family, friends, community, creative work in the world, and a soulful connection with the universe.” Others have coined the term

downshifting in reference to moving toward a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle wherein people are in tune with nature and with themselves (e.g., Van Eyk McCain, 2010).

Speaking about simpler ways of living, about a culture of simplicity, Elgin (2003, p. 2) commented, “The simple life is not simple.” Librova (2008), who identified nine dimensions of simplicity, agreed, noting “while the life of the typical consumerist is simple, the life of environmental virtue is complex” (p. 1111). She discussed living lightly, explaining that it refers to being in harmony with one’s senses, being at peace with nature, and being free from choices and decisions. Librova asserted that modern consumers suffer from excessive choice, leading to the inability to live lightly because they are hamstrung with too many decisions. The latter situation leads to a lack of harmony with oneself and with nature, and to unsustainable life decisions.

Elgin (2003) also discussed living simply, calling it soulful simplicity. People practicing soulful simplicity “cultivate a soulful connection with life” so they can “bring their interior aliveness into relationships of all kinds,” with self, others, nature and the universe (2003, p. 2). He explained that by living soulful simplicity, people can more easily awaken to the living universe that surrounds and sustains everything, moment-by-moment. He recognized the soulful value of the simple life, claiming it helps people to rediscover the life of the soul. He also coined the term *life-way innovators* (Elgin, 2000), identifying four priorities that characterize their way of living. They place a high priority on the quality and the integrity of their relationships with all life. They strive to discover and to express their own unique, true gifts to the world. Life-way innovators view the simple life as more than living with less. They see it as a continuously changing process of consciously balancing the inner and the

outer aspects of their lives. Finally, they approach life as a meditation leading to centeredness, focused on a life of purpose.

Life Acumen and Life Intentions

Librová (2008) astutely observed that, as a reaction to the growing complexity of the world, humans tend to erroneously equate simplicity with the good life: “The simple life is a good life” (p. 1112). In reality, it may be unrealistic to walk a sustainable life path with the sole intent (pun intended) of living a simplistic good life, because this intention may negate the deep importance of complexity. Walking a sustainable life path requires acumen; that is, keen insight, good judgements and quick decisions in very complex situations. Acumen means people are able to penetrate deeply into ideas, enabling them to discern the dynamics of changing contexts. With shaper minds and intellectual wit (i.e., the capacity for inventive thought and for quick understandings) - with acumen - people gain confidence. Confident people are adept at seeing the collage of building blocks comprising their complex world and their place within it (McGregor, 2011b). This keen, penetrating intelligence better enables them to live an examined and an engaged life; that is, a path to purpose.

There is nothing simple about consumer acumen (McGregor, 2011b); yet, it has the potential to pave the sustainable life path with achievable life intentions. People’s actions along their life path are guided by life intentions, which are a reflection of their past experiences in their life and of their future goals (Chawla, 1999). To reiterate, an intention is the quality of consciousness people bring to an action (Zukav & Francis, 2003). When people consciously choose a specific intention, they choose an intended consequence, meaning they make a responsible, more sustainable, life decision.

Pathfinders Journeying Forward

On that note, it is proposed that, in order to honour the spirit of intending to journey along a complex, sustainable life path, people have to become pathfinders, consumer leaders instead of just consumer managers (McGregor, 2010). In more detail, anyone who becomes a pathfinder is someone who finds or makes a path thorough a previously unexplored or untraveled area (Random House Dictionary, 2012). People who are striving to follow a sustainable life path will be deeply involved in path finding. Most especially, their journey will be a path to purpose (a term coined by Damon, 2008). By this term, he meant finding purpose in their lives. Damon maintained that significant others cannot identify other people's life purpose or choose it for them, but they can help others sort through choices, leading to a purpose, a reason for doing something. People can find a purpose in their lives if they learn how to derive satisfaction from doing something that makes a difference in the world (i.e., examine their lives and become engaged).

Finding a life purpose involves asking hard life-purpose questions (Damon, 2008), especially "Why should I strive?" "What kind of person do I want to be?" "What do I want to accomplish in life?" and, "What legacy do I want to leave?" Pathfinders who are choosing a sustainable life path on their journey toward sustainable consumption will need to pose these sorts of questions, which augment the parallel, conventional queries about, respectively: "What should I strive for?" "What kind of person am I?" "What have I accomplished in life?" and, "What difference have I made?" The life-purpose questions help people face forward rather than look backward, recognizing that both visions are necessary

for a sustainable life path. These life-purpose questions bring people closer to Elgin's (2000, 2003) ideas of soulful simplicity and life-way innovators who live their life on purpose.

Answers to the life-purpose questions will help people to forge new roads, and to seek unexplored lines of thinking about what it means to be a consumer in a world with finite resources; that is, they will examine their lives and intentionally choose to become engaged moral leaders and pathfinders, life-way innovators. The answers will also help them develop life acumen so they can cope with the profound degree of complexity that continues to emerge in the 21st century consumer society. Consuming sustainably, indeed living sustainably, is not easy; journeying along the sustainable life path is hard work, requiring sacrifice, determination and self-discipline. People need to live an examined life, delving into their assumptions, worldviews, values, beliefs and convictions. An unexamined life leads to irresponsible living and unsustainable life decisions, especially consumer decisions.

Nuanced and Sophisticated Conceptualization of Sustainable Life Path

Earlier in the paper, a preliminary definition of a sustainable life path was suggested. It would reflect people purposefully journeying along life's path in such a way that their life's decisions, especially consumption decisions, would sustain all life. Life path was defined as a course along which people travel while they are alive, (a) replete with life events, experiences and activities, (b) informed or not by a particular purpose(s), (c) blocked or not by obstacles and barriers, and (d) likely involving socially-judged conduct along the way.

Figure 1 recaptures the line of thinking and the logic used to develop the concept of sustainable life path shared in this paper.

The integration of this collection of constructs leads to a more considered and more comprehensive definition of sustainable life path, an innovative way to conceive consumer decisions as a complex, nuanced, lifelong journey and process rather than a collection of one-at-a-time decisions made during cumulative transactions. *A sustainable life path* involves a pathfinder's lifelong, engaged journey such that life's examined decisions sustain all life, especially when purposefully consuming with acumen in a complex world, and when fulfilling the role of life-way innovator and leader for the good of humanity and the earth, now and in the future.

Conclusion

Reframing consumption as unfolding along a sustainable life path as defined in this paper is a conceptual innovation. Perceiving consumers as pathfinders is also a new way to envision consumer behaviour, as is framing consumption as a lifelong journey, a way to 'live life on purpose,' with intention, passion, conviction and simplicity - an engaged path to purpose. The sustainability of life's decisions is a reflection of choosing certain pursuits over others. With this concept, researchers and practitioners can now consider the suggestion that people acting in their consumer role could choose to become pathfinders, engaged leaders and life innovators committed to a sustainable life path that moves them along their journey toward a more examined life. Enough people travelling a sustainable life path could create a culture of engaged living with the world, leading to deeply sustainable consumption. With this new concept, consumers can be viewed as "tomorrow makers" (see

Pelly & Le Grand, 2012, p. 1), people journeying along a sustainable life path while making *responsible consume- journey decisions*, ever conscious of being accountable for their life.

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