

# Downshifting Consumer = Upshifting Citizen? An Examination of a Local Freecycle Community

*By*  
MICHELLE R. NELSON,  
MARK A. RADEMACHER,  
and  
HYE-JIN PAEK

Critics suggest that contemporary consumer culture creates overworked and overshopped consumers who no longer engage in civic life. The authors challenge this conventional criticism against consumption within an individualistic lifestyle and argue instead that consumers who are “downshifting” do engage in civic life. In particular, this research examines downshifting attitudes among members of [freecycle.org](http://freecycle.org), a grassroots “gift economy” community. Results of an online survey show that downshifting consumers are indeed less materialistic and brand-conscious. They also tend to practice political consumption (e.g., boycotts, buy-cotts). Most important, they tend to engage in a digital form, but not a traditional form, of civic and political participation. The authors contend that alternative forms of consumption might be a new form of civic engagement.

*Keywords:* downshifting; Web community; civic engagement; political consumption; materialism

Critics claim that overworked individuals and unchecked consumption erode civic life. According to a conventional critique, “distracted by material things and out of touch with social health, [consumers] watch community life from the sidelines” (De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2001, 62). Most critiques emphasize the privileging of acquisition over community, along with a time displacement of priorities (Putnam 1995). Indeed, according to *New American Dream: A Public Opinion Poll*, 93 percent of Americans surveyed agreed with the statement, “Too many Americans are focused on working and making money and not enough on family and community” (2004; see <http://www.newdream.org/about/PollResults.pdf>).

Nevertheless, in response to hyperconsumption and the stress, overtime, and psychological expense that may accompany it, a growing number of people (estimated at 19 percent of the U.S. population; Schor 1998) are simplifying their lifestyle. These are “downshifTERS”—people

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who voluntarily choose to work less and/or consume less. Downshifting behaviors are often considered a form of the voluntary simplicity movement. Both emphasize regaining balance in life (more leisure time, less work) by reducing clutter and emphasizing personal fulfillment and connections to others over economic success (Etzioni 1998; Mazza 1997). As a result of reduced incomes or a desire for a less materialistic life, downshiftners try to repair, reuse, share, and make goods rather than buy them. Instead of “getting and spending” to give lives order and meaning, downshiftners may focus on civic reengagement (Schor 1998).

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*Alternative forms of consumption might be a  
new form of civic engagement.*

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Although increased civic engagement is often implied as a motivator or a consequence of downshifting (Etzioni 1998), research has not empirically examined these relationships. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether people who simplify their lives or downshift their work and/or consumption behaviors then “upshift” or increase their civic life.

Previous research has identified downshiftners, in part, as those who choose good-quality secondhand goods (Shaw and Newholm 2002). In this article, we examine a previously unstudied community of people who actively seek out

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*Michelle R. Nelson is an associate professor in the Department of Advertising at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research focuses on advertising and consumer culture. She studies the sociocultural and psychological factors that regulate commercial media effects on individuals' values, attitudes, and behaviors. She has authored articles in journals such as Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Consumer Behaviour, and Journal of Advertising.*

*Mark A. Rademacher is a doctoral student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Broadly construed, his research focuses on media and consumer culture. Specifically, he studies the influence of media, consumption, and peer culture in college students' identity development and maintenance. He has presented numerous papers on these topics at major communication and consumer research conferences. In 2006, he was selected to attend the National Communication Association's National Doctoral Honors Seminar.*

*Hye-Jin Paek is an assistant professor in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. Her topical research interests include health campaigns, socially responsible consumer behavior and advertising, and communication research methods. Her theoretical orientation focuses on how promotional media messages influence individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and how such influences are augmented by social perceptions, social interactions, and social contexts. She has published her research in major communication journals such as Communication Research, Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, and Mass Communication & Society.*

secondhand goods as a way to investigate the relationships among downshifting attitudes, consumer and political consumption values, and acts of civic and political engagement. The community is freecycle.org—an international, grassroots group committed to participating in a “gift economy” based on the free exchange of goods. Members of local freecycle groups actively post messages to give away (e.g., “Offer: children’s clothes, all sizes”) or request consumer goods from others in the community (e.g., “Wanted: good working lawn mower”). Thus, they are reusing and recycling secondhand goods.

Analyzing survey data collected from this type of downshifter, we examine the following research questions: (1) What are the motivations of joining freecycle.org and what are these downshifter’s consumption values? and (2) To what extent do they engage in traditional and nontraditional forms of civic participation? As we argue, the critique that consumption erodes civic life is too simple. Rather, emerging and alternative modes of consumption are positively related to new forms of civic participation.

### *Critiques of consumer culture*

Despite consumer culture’s contribution to America’s economic stability and success, it is also viewed with underlying anxiety. Critics have argued that the increased availability of consumer goods partnered with increased disposable income has resulted in hedonistic, individualistic consumers (e.g., Bell 1976; Bellah 1975; Galbraith 1958; Lasch 1979; see Horowitz [2004] for a review). Instead of using consumption to achieve social equality and other collective social goals, these types of consumers are viewed as seeking personal satisfaction through goods at the expense of democracy.

The dichotomy between consuming for personal satisfaction and for the communal good became most apparent during World War II. Many public intellectuals viewed the government-imposed restrictions on consumption as an expression of a new moralism, in which citizens rationed and sacrificed a standard of living for the soldiers and for “the health of postwar democracy” (Horowitz 2004, 20). The new moralism linked consumption with democracy and community. Through self-restraint, consumption could transcend individualism to serve the public good. Despite this optimistic view, in the postwar era individualistic consumption returned as Americans experienced both incremental gains in income and the availability of mass-produced goods (Cohen 2003). The behavior of consumers during this period “undermined . . . [the efforts] to make a convincing link between democracy, the reform of capitalism, and lessened consumption” (Horowitz 2004, 21). Furthermore, it laid the foundation for beliefs that the rising aspiration and associated consumption helped drive the postwar economy; indeed, the links between patriotism, consumption, and democracy remain intact today. An op-ed piece in *USA Today* commented on retail sales on Veteran’s Day and suggested, “We are a nation that conflates patriotism and shopping, our role as citizens and our role as consumers. We know our economy depends on consumer confidence and spending. Shopping is good for America; therefore, it’s patriotic” (Roth-Douquet 2006).

Whether for political or personal reasons, many American middle-class consumers have, quite literally, “shopped till they dropped.” In a recent critique of consumer culture, Schor (1998) cited statistics that show increased work hours, credit card balances, and stress levels and decreased household savings and quality-of-life indicators such as time spent with family and happiness. Thus, to escape this “work-and-spend” cycle, some individuals are seeking other ways of living by reducing their work hours and consumption—these are the downshifters. Downshifters do not escape the marketplace (Arnould 2007 [this volume]) but are voluntarily engaging in alternative forms of work, consumption, and play because of the individual gratifications they receive. Thus, in contrast to some anticonsumption simplifiers (e.g., “radical greens” who isolate themselves in communes; Moisander and Pesonen 2002), the mainstream downshifters tend to operate inside consumer and civic culture.

### *Downshifting and the simple life*

The “simple living” movement, with its roots in material restraint, dates back to at least the colonial era (Shi 1985). The movement rests on the de-emphasis on acquiring money and goods to focus on “the purity of the soul, the life of the mind, the cohesion of the family, or the good of the commonwealth” (Shi 1985, 3-4).

Contemporary simplifiers seek to minimize their consumption, although they are not required to live in poverty or isolation from others nor to deny technological progress or the existence of material beauty. Specifically relevant to the freecycle community, voluntary simplifiers remove clutter and complexity in their personal lives by giving away or selling those possessions that are seldom used and that could be used productively by others (Elgin 2000). Downshifters seek out those secondhand goods (Shaw and Newholm 2002).

The reasons for downshifting relate to wanting more time and experiencing less stress and more balance in life. Thus, the primary motivations for these people are, first, to gain time by working less and, second, to escape from the work-and-spend cycle. Two forms of downshifting emerge: *work downshifting*, voluntarily decreasing the number of hours of employment; and *consumption downshifting*, consciously reducing spending.

Downshifters are primarily white consumers with middle- to upper-middle-class incomes from Western, affluent countries (Schor 1998; Zavestoski 2002). As a group, these consumers are concerned with environmental, social, and animal welfare issues (Shaw and Newholm 2002). They are also more likely to value the functional utility of goods over the ability to convey status (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Schor 1998). Thus, we can expect these types of consumers to be less brand-conscious and materialistic than hedonistic consumers (Etzioni 1998).

### *Downshifting consumption and upshifting participation?*

Scholars have argued that contemporary American culture is witnessing the decline of civic mindedness. The critique primarily stems from the belief that

contemporary culture represents individualistic and self-serving consumption behavior, as well as the fact that media increasingly pervade daily life. As the argument goes, both of these conditions ultimately distract citizens from more community-focused activities. The most ardent proponent of this decline thesis is political scientist Robert Putnam (2000), who argued that the privatization of social life has resulted in a decline in social capital and, therefore, a decline in the social cohesiveness of communities (see also Bellah et al. 1985). In essence, Putnam and others (e.g., Bennett 1998, 2000) have argued that the evolution from a civic culture to an “uncivic” culture represents “a fundamental threat to the survival of healthy communities and democratic political systems” (Stolle and Hooghe 2004, 153).

But the decline thesis has faced strident opposition from a number of scholars in various disciplines. Most critiques characterize the decline thesis as pessimistic, based on nostalgia for a time when civic engagement was the norm, and nearsighted in its conceptualization of civic engagement (Stolle and Hooghe 2004). Some scholars advocate for the inclusion of new forms of civic participation such as socially conscious consumption and consumer activism (e.g., boycotts and buycotts) (e.g., Klein 2000; Scammell 2003; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). The primary difference is that these forms of engagement focus on the politicization of lifestyle concerns instead of organizational politics (Bennett 1998; Stolle and Hooghe 2004). Other scholars focus on the Internet’s potential to build social networks and communities organized around branded goods (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) or to help people organize, discuss, or provide opinions related to political or civic matters (Shah et al. 2005).

The ultimate response to the decline thesis, then, is that civic engagement has evolved to include a wider range of activities, including debating and seeking political information online and political consumption. The politicizing of consumption has consequently transformed some consumers into people who consciously consider the consequences of consumption—and routinely ask how, where, and by whom a product is made. Such consumers attempt to use purchasing power to bring about social change and to be socially responsible (Webster 1975).

One group of consumers who must confront their values and new lifestyles and identities when faced with consumer choices are downshifters (Schor 1998). By living more consciously and being aware of where and how goods are made, downshifters are likely to engage in forms of political consumption by boycotting goods and services of companies whose actions or policies they consider unethical (Elgin 2000) or by buycotting goods and services of companies that practice social responsibility. Indeed, through their reduction in consumption and reuse of secondhand goods, downshifters are helping the environment. Those who partake in such practices are also more likely to engage in other green consumption activities, such as buying solar heating equipment (Stern 1984). Yet as noted by Etzioni (1998), the consequences of downshifting for social justice and society are not known and warrant further examination.

Taking up this issue, we explore downshifting attitudes and measures of civic participation. The downshifters here are part of a Web community ([freecycle.org](http://freecycle.org)),

people who use the Internet to build and leverage social networks to share their goods. In fact, such virtual communications are viewed by the broader simplicity movement as a way to reach out to similar others, who become submerged between networked communities and commercialized communities (Cherrier and Murray 2002). These virtual spaces help create feelings of belonging and solidarity and support for alternate ways of living. Schor (1998) suggested that such peer reference groups are necessary for downshifter survival in a consumer society. But does membership in a consumption community (albeit secondhand consumption) suffer from time displacement critiques noted above? Will freecycleers use their online propensity to engage in online political or civic activities, or will they fall prey to the critiques of Internet use as described by de Vreese (2007 [this volume])? We examine a local downshifting group that builds community on the Web to help us explore and revisit the conceptualization of what it means to be civically and politically engaged in contemporary (consumer) culture.

## Method

### *Survey*

A survey was conducted among members of the Madison, Wisconsin, chapter of freecycle.org in July 2005. Freecycle.org is predicated on the idea of a gift economy with the express goal of environmental activism and community (i.e., “to build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources & eases the burden on our landfills while enabling our members to benefit from the strength of a larger community”; [www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)). As of November 8, 2006, freecycle.org expanded from a small group in Tucson, Arizona, in 2003 to a current global membership of 2,792,052 people comprising 3,811 communities in 77 countries.

In partnership with the local chapter’s moderators, an online survey was distributed to the 7,507 members of the Madison and Dane County freecycle community. A link to the survey was embedded in a post on the community’s Web site that mirrored the format of a typical “Wanted” post. In total, 183 freecycle members completed the survey. This response rate (2.4 percent) is low. But it should be noted that our main purpose is not to generalize our findings to the entire freecycle.org community but rather to take this group of people as a unique case of downshifters and to examine their motivations and practices related to consumption and civic participation.

The participants consisted of 75 percent females and 89 percent Caucasians with a mean age of 39.4 years. A little less than 60 percent of the respondents were married, and just more than 63 percent of respondents owned their home. Their median income falls into the \$40,000 to \$49,999 bracket, and their average education level is between some college and college degree (see Table 1 for demographic profiles).

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF VARIABLES USED (N = 183)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Predictor variables		
Demographics		
Sex (female) <sup>a</sup>	74.9 (137)	—
Race (white) <sup>a</sup>	89.1 (163)	—
Married <sup>a</sup>	59.6 (109)	—
Home ownership <sup>a</sup>	63.4 (116)	—
Age	39.38	10.83
Education <sup>b</sup>	3.81	1.61
Income <sup>c</sup>	8.00	3.74
Values		
Brand consciousness	2.39	1.02
Materialism	2.47	1.27
Civic/consumption activities		
Political consumption	4.93	1.28
Offline civic participation	1.99	1.78
Online civic participation	1.72	1.49
Criterion variables		
Work downshifting	4.88	1.26
Consumption downshifting	5.19	1.23

a. The variables are measured with a dichotomous scale that indicates 1 as the label's value (i.e., female, white, married, own a home) and 0 as other (i.e., male, other races, combination of other marital status, and rent); numeric values indicate proportion with sample size in parentheses.

b. The education variable was measured with a 6-point ordinal scale ranging from *high school degree* to *graduate or terminal degree*. The mean represents an education level between some college and undergraduate degree.

c. Income was measured with an 11-point ordinal scale with a \$9,999 increase per bracket (starting under \$10,000). The numeric value indicates median (instead of mean), which represents the \$40,000 to \$49,999 bracket.

*Measures*

The variables used in the present analysis can be categorized into four groups: (1) the criterion variables—work and consumption downshifting; and the predictor variables: (2) consumption values—brand consciousness and materialism; (3) online (non-traditional) and offline (traditional) civic participation and political consumption; and (4) the demographic variables—gender, race, marital status, homeownership, age, education, and income. The variables measured with multiple items were examined with exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for a factor structure and with Cronbach's alpha reliability for internal consistency. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics of all the variables. The appendix also reports all the



items that construct the respective variables, EFA results and alpha coefficients, and question wording.

To identify motivations of joining the community, the survey asked members this question: "What prompted you to become a member of freecycle?" Two coders initially classified respondents' open-ended responses into one of ten distinct categories. When some respondents stated multiple reasons for joining the community, only their first response was considered in the coding procedure. The interreliability coefficient using Perreault and Leigh's (1989) Index (P/L Index)—known to be most appropriate when there are only two coders and items with nominal scales—was .85, which represents fairly good reliability (Rust and Cooil 1994). One of the researchers settled disagreements between the two coders. The original ten categories were then collapsed into four distinct categories that more accurately reflected the emergent themes in the respondents' answers: simple life (e.g., decluttering), environmental concerns, self-orientation (e.g., "want free stuff"), and other-orientation (e.g., help others by giving away goods).

Then we analyzed two sets of hierarchical regression models to examine the associations between the two forms of downshifting (work and consumption) and each of the consumption values, political consumption, and civic participation measures. With work downshifting and consumption downshifting as dependent variables in each regression model, predictors were entered in hierarchical regression models in the following order: first, the seven demographic variables for control purposes; second, the two consumption value variables; and finally, the two forms of civic participation and political consumption. Since some of the variables that are entered in the same block have a strong correlation (e.g., between the two consumption values and between the two forms of civic participation) and therefore may cancel out one another's effects, we also looked at the size and direction of beta-in coefficients as well as those of beta-final coefficients. As shown in Table 2, the first column reports "beta-final coefficients" from the final equation in which all the predictors are controlled; the second column reports each "beta-in coefficient" in which demographic variables only are controlled.

## Results

### *Motivations for joining freecycle*

Our first research question asked why people joined the freecycle community. The most frequent answer given (33 percent of respondents) related to elements of a "simple life," which echoes the mission of the community and adheres to characteristics of voluntary simplicity. Answers that fall into this category include de-cluttering or getting rid of stuff. For example, one member said, "I had a lot of stuff in my house that was very useable, but I didn't want it anymore"; another indicated, "We were moving and had a ton of stuff to get rid of. Plus, I'm a reformed packrat, so now need to clean the basement." Others saw freecycle as a viable alternative to donating the items to local thrift shops or paying for them to be removed.



TABLE 2  
 HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES THAT PREDICT  
 TWO FORMS OF DOWNSHIFTING (N = 183)

Variable	Work Downshifting		Consumption Downshifting	
	Beta Final <sup>a</sup>	Beta In <sup>b</sup>	Beta Final <sup>a</sup>	Beta In <sup>b</sup>
<b>Demographics</b>				
Sex (female)	-.044	—	-.110	—
Race (white)	-.061	—	.052	—
Married	.080	—	-.032	—
Home ownership	.265 <sup>***</sup>	—	.096	—
Age	-.174 <sup>**</sup>	—	-.061	—
Education	.153 <sup>**</sup>	—	.185 <sup>**</sup>	—
Income	-.166 <sup>*</sup>	—	-.153 <sup>*</sup>	—
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>		.176 <sup>****</sup>		.127 <sup>***</sup>
<b>Consumption values</b>				
Brand consciousness	-.109	-.225 <sup>***</sup>	-.294 <sup>****</sup>	-.374 <sup>****</sup>
Materialism	-.270 <sup>****</sup>	-.339 <sup>****</sup>	-.194 <sup>**</sup>	-.358 <sup>****</sup>
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>		.119 <sup>****</sup>		.179 <sup>****</sup>
<b>Civic/consumption activities</b>				
Political consumption	.150 <sup>**</sup>	.212 <sup>***</sup>	.229 <sup>***</sup>	.271 <sup>****</sup>
Offline civic participation	-.080	.085	.003	.114
Online civic participation	.172 <sup>**</sup>	.183 <sup>**</sup>	.047	.113
Incremental R <sup>2</sup>		.045 <sup>**</sup>		.053 <sup>**</sup>
Total R <sup>2</sup>		.339 <sup>****</sup>		.359 <sup>****</sup>

NOTE: All betas are standardized regression coefficients.

a. Betas are taken from the final equation with all the predictors entered.

b. Betas are taken from “beta in” after the control variables (demographic variables).

\*p ≤ .10. \*\*p ≤ .05. \*\*\*p ≤ .01. \*\*\*\*p ≤ .001.

The next two most frequent answers were related to self-oriented needs and wants (27 percent) and environmental concerns (27 percent). For those whose answers fall into the “self-orientation” category, responses were related to their own functional or economic purposes (e.g., save money) or their own wants/desires (e.g., love a bargain, free stuff, or mere curiosity). For environmental concerns, responses typically explicitly included the “recycling purpose” or “keep stuff out of landfill” rationale. Many also noted that their goods still had “life left in them.” Compared to the self-oriented reasons, other-oriented reasons were less frequent (8 percent). The respondents whose answers belong to this category appeared interested in helping others (e.g., “hoping their stuff goes to someone who needs it”) or feeling a sense of bonding/community.

*Consumption values and political consumption and civic participation*

We also examined the association between downshifting practices and each of the consumption values, political consumption, and civic participation measures. As shown in Table 2, materialism and brand-consciousness values were quite strongly and negatively related to both of the downshifting practices. Those who engage in work downshifting—by valuing personal growth over financial growth—and those who engage in consumption downshifting are significantly less materialistic. They also tend to place less emphasis on the importance of designer names and heavily advertised brands. Although the beta-final coefficient of the brand consciousness variable becomes nonsignificant at the  $p$ -value = .05 level (beta final =  $-.109$ ,  $p = .17$ ), its beta-in coefficient shows that the association remains significant when demographic variables only are controlled and materialism is not controlled (beta in =  $-.225$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Given the significant correlation between brand consciousness and materialism ( $r = .425$ ,  $p < .001$ ), it seems that the beta final coefficient of brand consciousness is cancelled out in the regression model for work downshifting. This finding may indicate two points: one, materialism may be a stronger negative predictor of work downshifting than brand consciousness; two, nevertheless, brand consciousness is also statistically and negatively related to work downshifting. Compared to the regression model for work downshifting, the regression model for consumption downshifting indicates that the two consumption values are quite robust predictors. Overall, these two consumption values explain about 12 percent of total variance in the work-downshifting model and about 18 percent in the consumption-downshifting model.

The two forms of downshifting practices are also quite significantly related to political consumption and civic participation. First, political consumption, represented by boycotting (e.g., I will not buy a product from a company whose values I do not share) and buycotting (e.g., I make a special effort to buy from companies that support charitable causes), are strongly and positively related to both downshifting practices. It is interesting to note that the relationships are somewhat stronger for consumption downshifter than for work downshifter. Those who are consciously limiting consumption may also think more about political ramifications of purchases than those limiting work hours.

Meanwhile, two types of civic participation—online and offline—have different levels of associations with the two downshifting practices. Online civic participation—for example, organizing community activities, discussing politics, expressing own views to politicians by e-mail or on Web sites—is significantly and positively related to work downshifting but not to consumption downshifting. In this case, perhaps the time gained by limiting employment is used for civic purposes. By contrast, there is no significant association between offline civic participation—for example, attending a club meeting, volunteering, or working on a community project—and either of the two downshifting practices. Noteworthy is that, at the bivariate level (i.e., simple correlations between variables), the two forms of civic participation are significantly and positively related to both of the downshifting practices at the  $p = .05$  level, although online participation appeared more strongly

related ( $r = .231, p = .002$ , for work downshifting;  $r = .189, p = .011$ , for consumption downshifting) than offline participation ( $r = .141, p = .058$ , for work downshifting;  $r = .163, p = .029$ , for consumption downshifting) to the two criterion variables. But in the hierarchical regression models where other major predictors are controlled, the strength of the associations became weaker.

Overall, this civic engagement block in the hierarchical regression models explained about 4.5 percent of total variance in work downshifting and 5.3 percent in consumption downshifting. In addition, including the total variance explained by the first block of the demographic variables (18 percent in the work downshifting and about 13 percent in the consumption downshifting), the overall hierarchical regression models explained about 34 percent of total variance in work downshifting and about 36 percent in consumption downshifting.

## Discussion

We examined freecycle.org members as an interesting case because their practice in reusing consumer goods is characteristic of voluntary simplicity and downshifting. Findings indeed showed that the freecycle survey respondents engaged in downshifting practices by limiting consumption (i.e., “consumption downshifting”) and choosing personal growth over economic growth and time over money (i.e., “work downshifting”). As might be expected, the two forms of downshifting were highly correlated ( $r = .52$ ).

The profile of the Madison, Wisconsin, freecycle community was similar to that of other downshiffters (Schor 1998) in their high education profiles, but not in their lower incomes (see Table 2). This inconsistency may be due to the low response rate of our online survey, which may not represent all community members. It is also possible that the freecycleers in our sample have less income because they have already downshifted their work hours and incomes. Indeed, for nearly one-third of the members, participation in freecycle stemmed from a desire for obtaining goods. For example, one member commented, “We are retired and on a limited budget. Free things are a real help”; and another person joined to “save money on things that I want to buy and cannot.” It appears for these consumers, freecycle allowed them to engage in consumer culture despite their limited economic capital. Such motivations remind us that not all downshiffters have “deep closets” of possessions to unload (Schor 1998). Indeed, in a study of consumers who engage in alternative consumption practices in the United Kingdom, Williams and Windebank (2005) noted that some are shopping at secondhand stores or carboot sales for fun, while others are doing so out of economic and material necessity.

Though economic and material necessity may explain why some respondents joined freecycle, the motivations for membership among our local group varied. While the explicit motto of freecycle.org relates to a social movement dedicated to “changing the world one gift at a time,” the primary motivations for membership

were fairly balanced between self-oriented motivations and environmental reasons. That is, by de-cluttering and simplifying their lives, members' personal lives improve. Yet it was also true that the manner of de-cluttering—by giving goods “to a good home” rather than filling the landfill—was also important to freecyclers.

Despite both self-oriented and environmental motivations for joining, it is obvious that freecyclers hold consumption values different from the ones critics assign to hedonistic consumers. Unlike consumers who view consumption objects as a reflection of self (Belk 1988) or as a means of maintaining social hierarchies (Veblen 1899/1965), consumers seeking to truly engage in de-cluttering or downshifting material possessions must be able to dispose of goods and decouple notions of “identity” from goods (Belk 2007 [this volume]). This means dematerializing and valuing goods for function and not for branded or lifestyle values. In keeping with Etzioni's (1998) claims about the larger voluntary simplicity movement, the downshifter in our freecycle community also appeared to devalue materialism and brand conscious values, at least according to the self-report measures in our survey. This may suggest that downshifter maintain a distinctly different relationship with consumer culture than the general population.

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Our findings also support the assertion made by Elgin (2000) that those who engage in work and consumption downshifting are also likely to express their personal values and political orientation through consumer activism such as boycotts and buycotts. The politicizing of consumption has transformed some consumers into individuals who consciously consider the consequences of consumption—and who routinely ask how, where, and by whom a product is made.

Although the data cannot answer whether freecyclers consume in this fashion to achieve communal and social goals or to express personal lifestyle concerns, future research should explore the question of whether political consumption is motivated by communal or hedonistic goals (or both).

Some insight into this question, however, can be gleaned from the fact that our analysis indicates that downshifter in general are likely to be civically engaged. Both offline and online measures of civic participation are positively related to downshifting attitudes. Thus, it is noteworthy that despite belonging to a community devoted to consumption, albeit an alternative form of consumption, freecyclers

are active members of civic life. A more nuanced examination of the findings, however, reveals that online civic participation seems to be more strongly related to work downshifting than offline, traditional civic participation. The finding makes sense because the freecycle community itself is maintained in a digital world. Consequently, freecyclers may view themselves as part of a larger, global digital community and use the Web to engage in community issues across geographic boundaries. This explanation is fairly speculative, but it presents an empirically testable question for future research—that is, which communities do individuals consider most worthy of their civic efforts: the geographic area of residence or the digital community in which they live? Regardless, the Internet as a new public sphere may provide opportunity for people to engage in socially responsible consumption such as downshifting and to engage civically in Web and geographic communities. Thus, spending time online should not be viewed as automatically detrimental to civic life. Rather, instead of asking how much time people spend online (i.e., time displacement), it is more beneficial to ask *what* they are doing online (de Vreese 2007).

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We acknowledge that our findings on the association between downshifting practices, political consumption, and civic participation should not be considered conclusive due to our limited sample drawn from a particular subsegment of the downshifting community. More population-level research should follow this case study to see whether the associations it observed can apply to other consumers and to the larger downshifting community as a whole. In addition, as in efforts to measure the effectiveness of other acts of political consumerism (e.g., boycotts, boycotts, talk; Micheletti and Stolle 2007 [this volume]), future research should also look at various forms of downshifting and their consequences in terms of individual and collective well-being and civic culture.

Overall, the findings of this study imply that the critique of consumption eroding civic life is too simplistic to truly capture the nuanced roles of consumption and civic life in contemporary society. As the case of freecycle illustrates, individuals brought together around consumption acts can have a positive relationship with both consumption and civic life. The ultimate effect of alternative consumption communities like freecycle on consumer or civic culture, however, is yet to be realized. As Arnould (2007) has illustrated, it is virtually impossible to

exist outside of the marketplace. And as addressed above, this is not the downshifter's goal. But by engaging in alternative forms of consumption while holding antimaterialist and anti-brand-conscious values, by engaging in political consumption, and by participating in civic life, downshifter's may ultimately serve as "moral agents" (Shi 1985) who, through their behavior, challenge the hegemonic position of consumer culture from within.

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*[O]nline civic participation seems to  
be more strongly related to work  
downshifting than offline, traditional  
civic participation.*

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### Appendix Variable Construction and Question Wording

Variable and Items	Question Wording
Work downshifting (EFA = 67.2 percent, alpha = .73) <sup>a</sup>	I would like to (or I choose to) work fewer hours, even if it means a drop in earnings Time is more important than money I am interested in personal growth more than economic growth
Consumption downshifting (EFA = 71.6 percent, alpha = .78) <sup>a</sup>	I try to limit my consumption I believe in material simplicity (i.e., buying and consuming only what I need) I believe in "small is beautiful" (e.g., I prefer smaller cars over larger cars)
Brand consciousness (EFA = 65.2 percent, alpha = .72) <sup>a</sup>	A recognizable brand name on a product is a good indication of quality The fact that a product is heavily advertised is a good indication of quality I prefer products with designer names
Materialism (EFA = 78.1 percent, interitem correlation = .56) <sup>a</sup>	Material affluence is very important to happiness I believe that money can buy you happiness

*(continued)*

Political consumption (EFA = 76.2 percent, interitem correlation = .53) <sup>b</sup>	I will not buy a product from a company whose values I do not share I make a special effort to buy from companies that support charitable causes
Offline civic participation (EFA = 69.2 percent, alpha = .84) <sup>b</sup>	Went to a club meeting Did volunteer work Worked on a community project Worked on behalf of a social group or cause
Online civic participation (EFA = 52.7 percent, alpha = .87) <sup>b</sup>	Used e-mail to organize community activities Discussed politics or news events using e-mail E-mailed a politician or editor to express my views Visited a Web site of a social group or cause Forwarded a news article to someone over e-mail Visited the Web site of a politician or political party Sought opinions and analysis about politics online (e.g., blogs) Expressed my political opinion in chat rooms or online polls

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NOTE: In parentheses beside each variable constructed by the respective items, EFA indicates exploratory factor analysis that shows clearly one factor for all the variables (percentage total variance explained), alpha indicates Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (for multiple items) and interitem correlation for two items.

- a. On a 7-point scale (*strongly disagree to strongly agree*).
- b. The question was asked, “How often during the past 3 months?” with 6-point scales ranging from 0 times (1) to 10 or more times (6).

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