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Meet the Dutch downshifters: How people adjust consumption expenditures, experience downsizing and contribute to sustainability.

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Abstract

The paper presents results of an extensive quantitative and qualitative socio-economic study of Dutch voluntary and involuntary downshifters. The paper presents changes in consumption with results of the study of the Dutch downshifters. After a description of the profile of the Dutch downshifters and their foreign counterparts, the paper elaborates on the changes in consumption practices. Further, the negative and positive experiences with living with less money are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion whether and if so, under which conditions, living with less could contribute to sustainability.

Keywords: Downshifting; Home Economy; consumer behaviour change; sustainable lifestyle.

Introduction

Despite the increasing awareness that a more sustainable way of living is needed, living with less is generally considered an inconvenient option. The current viewpoint is that the hedonistic and materialistic mentality of people would be too serious an obstacle for change. This paper however presents this vision, referring to the rapid growth of the new consumer movement and the sustainability movement in the First World. There are strong indications that a fundamental change towards a less consumerist and more restrained way of life is taking place (Datamonitor, 2003; Etzioni, 1998; Gandolfi & Cherrier, 2008; Ray & Anderson, 2000; Schor, 1998). The number of people dissatisfied with their lives and longing for a simpler, less stressful existence is even higher, according to Datamonitor (2003). Also the sustainability movement has growing support. The results of the second annual National Geographic/GlobeScan Greendex survey (2010) showed that, over the past year, consumers have adopted more environmentally friendly behaviour which has led to a general increase in Greendex scores. Because the Greendex measures the behavioural practices of citizens in 17 countries in both the developed and the developing world, the results indicate that growing numbers of citizens are not only convinced that measures should be taken to preserve the planet but that they are also willing to adjust their behaviour toward a more sustainable lifestyle.

What lessons can be learned from the new consumers, in particular the downshifters? Here lies the starting point of this paper, which addresses the question: Can living with less contribute to sustainability? The paper discusses results of a qualitative and quantitative study of downshifting conducted in the Netherlands, the first study to examine living with less money from an experiential and practical perspective. The study goes beyond sustainable consumption as it explores opportunities for a sustainable lifestyle, which we conceptualised

analogously to the triple bottom-line of corporate social responsibility. In line with Callenbach's (1990) green triangle we proposed the Dutch Triple Gs of a sustainable lifestyle: *geld* (money), *groen* (eco-friendliness) and *gezondheid/welzijn* (health-wellbeing). This view posits that a sustainable lifestyle results from putting the right input into each of the three pillars. The basic assumption is the concurrence between the pillars and their mutual interdependence: changes in one influence the outcome of the other two. With this theoretical construct we could explore the connection between finances, quality of life, use of resources and other variables of sustainable consumption, resulting from our empirical research.

The paper begins with results of the study of the Dutch downshifters. After a description of the profile of the Dutch downshifters, sustainable and responsible consumption practices are discussed, including the negative and positive experiences with living with less money. The paper concludes with a discussion of perspectives for sustainable living.

The Dutch downshifters

Early in 2007 a survey was conducted among the readers of the Dutch magazine *Genoeg*, a bimonthly publication focusing on consuming less and sustainability. The study was part of the research project *Living with Less* which intended to explore new possibilities for sustainable consumption. The readers of the magazine were recruited as they were assumed to be representative downshifters. The survey (see Table 1) covered 1006 participants (13.35%) and comprised three groups: voluntary downshifters (n = 461), involuntary downshifters (n = 280) and non-downshifters (n = 265).

In this study, downshifting is simply defined as a reduction in spending, including both a voluntary and involuntary dimension. So downshifters are people who are living with less money than they did before, regardless of whether the change is voluntary or involuntary. The total number of participants that met the criterion for downshifters (n = 741) were further classified as either voluntary or involuntary downshifters. In total, 55% of all downshifters changed their expenditure patterns after a reduction of income (n = 422) while 34% opted to downshift despite experiencing no change in income (n = 260). Surprisingly, an additional 11% choose to downshift after an increase in income (n = 87). Of those who experienced a reduction in income, this reduction was voluntary for 29% (n = 114). The respondents who experienced a decrease in household income and answered no to the question of whether voluntary choice was the reason for the decrease, were classified as involuntary downshifters (n = 280).

Table 1 The Sample

	N	%
Voluntary downshifters	461	**46**
Involuntary downshifters	280	**28**
Non-downshifters	265	**26**
Total	**1006**	**100**

Of this population, we collected a series of characteristics, whose main ones were weighted to construct a representative image of the Dutch downshifters. The resulting profile will be presented below, followed by the sample data of downshifting practices, their experiences and attitudes. These data are the building stones to answer the central question – can downshifting contribute to sustainability? – which will be addressed in the final part of this paper.

Demographic characteristics

For the total sample, data on sex, age, education and paid employment were adjusted to represent the Dutch population. This was done as follows. First, sample data on sex and age were compared with the Statistics Netherlands 2008 data on gender and age for Dutch people between 20 to 80 years. In the total sample there were relatively more women, especially between 41 to 50 years, and relatively fewer men, especially between 20 to 40 years. The following weights were calculated: Men: 20 – 40 years: 6.45; 41 – 50 years: 2.43; 51 – 80 years: 2.9. Women: 20 – 40 years: 0.74; 41 –50 years: 0.38; 51 – 80 years: 0.64. Then, the weighted data for downshifters were compared to the overall Dutch population.

As shown in Table 2, the Dutch downshifters had a relatively higher level of **education** (60%) than the Dutch population. Around 40% had low to intermediate educational attainment. They were more frequently between the **ages** of 20 and 40. Downshifters were also more frequently **female** but the difference from the general population was small. Net **incomes** were less than € 1850 per month. Further, downshifters were more frequently engaged in paid **employment**, particularly part-time work. The percentage of downshifters with a full-time job (a workload of 40 hours per week or more) was far below the Dutch average. Finally, downshifters generally tend to have more children and are more likely to live in cooperative housing projects or have a different type of **household** than the average Dutch population.

Table 2 Demographic Characteristics (weighted)

		Downshifters % *n* = 741	Non-downshifters % *n* = 265	General population %
Sex	Male	48	55	**50**
	Female	52	45	**50**
Age	20-40	42	33	**37**
	41–50	21	24	**24**
	51–80	38	43	**40**
Education	Low – intermediate	41	33	**75**
	High	59	68	**25**
Paid employment	None	33	26	**38**
	<10 hrs	3	2	**4**
	10–20 hrs	8	8	**6**
	20–30 hrs	15	16	**9**
	30–40 hrs	28	31	**21**
	>40 hrs	12	18	**22**

Dutch downshifters and their foreign counterparts

The weighted findings of our study are comparable to three nationwide studies of downshifting: Schor's study (1998) in the USA, Hamilton and Mail's (2003) study in Australia and the Hamilton's (2003) study in the UK. If the *Genoeg* readers are considered members of a downshifting community, the sample populations of at least three other studies are comparable to ours. These studies include Elgin and Mitchell's (1977) voluntary simplicity survey of the readers of the magazine *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, Pierce's (2000) study of voluntary simplifiers from a simplicity website and Huneke's (2005) voluntary simplicity study which drew its study participants from online forums related to voluntary simplicity. Comparison with these studies is further enabled by the fact that they essentially employed similar definitions of a voluntary simplifier.

Some noteworthy observations can be made. Contrary to the belief that downshifting is predominantly an upper middle class phenomenon, findings suggest that voluntary downshifting is not a lifestyle choice exclusive to the social elite, but might be an attractive way of life for people across all social strata.

Another similarity between our study and the results of other studies concerns the rather counterintuitive finding that only a quarter of voluntary downshifters had experienced a decrease in income when they began downshifting. Thus living with less money does not automatically result from a lower income, but appears to be a conscious choice. This conclusion counters the prevailing image of the postmodern consumer as a materialistic big spender, driven by hedonistic motives.

Consumption practices

To operationalize the Dutch Triple Gs of sustainable living: ***geld*** (money), ***groen*** (ecology) and **gezondheid** (health/wellbeing), we defined indicators for eco-friendly consumption and for the two other dimensions of sustainable living: namely money and health/wellbeing. Our measure combined items of the Ecological Footprint (Rees, 1998), and of the list of Simple Living Practices and the Simple Living Scale (Huneke, 2005) (see Tables 3 & 4) and addressed a broad range of activities across six domains: purchasing, food, leisure, environment, do-it-yourself, and mobility. High scores on the following items were considered indicative of eco-friendliness, conducive to proper personal finances and/or wellbeing: Purchasing: 1 – 6; Food: 7, 9, 10, 11; Leisure: 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 22; Environment: 23 – 27; Do-it-Yourself: 28, 29, 30; Mobility: 32, 33, while low scores on the following items were considered indicative of eco-friendliness, conducive to proper personal finances and wellbeing/health: 8, 12, 17, 21, 31, and 34.

Table 3 reports the consumption practices of voluntary and involuntary downshifters and Table 4 shows the consumption practices of downshifters and non-downshifters. Below, we first discuss the scores in each domain. Then we will summarise the main differences between consumptions practices of downshifting and non-downshifting practices.

The **purchasing practices** of non-downshifters, and voluntary and involuntary downshifters, appeared to be rather close. All reported regularly buying fair trade and green products,

although voluntary downshifters reported doing so significantly more often ($p < .01$) and they were also more likely to buy second hand goods. The second remarkable difference was noted for ignoring advertisements. In this respect, non-downshifters tended to ignore advertisements more frequently than (involuntary) downshifters ($p < .04$).

With regard to **food consumption**, the most salient result was the finding that all three groups reported very frequently cooking from scratch instead of eating prepared meals (Means > 4.35). Striking differences have been noted for non-downshifters eating organic food more frequently than downshifters ($p < .01$); downshifters on the other hand reported consuming more fish than non-downshifters ($p < 00$).

The three groups showed comparable scores (Means > 3.66) for reading, walking and biking and social contacts. The least frequently reported **leisure activities** were meditation and exercise/sports (Mean > 2.53). Further, participants reported engaging fairly often in activities related to personal growth and development. Watching television was also a popular leisure activity. Striking differences between the three groups were noted with respect to shopping, traveling and personal growth. Shopping occurred considerably more among involuntary downshifters than among voluntary downshifters ($p < .01$). Traveling occurred significantly more often among non-downshifters than downshifters ($p < .00$). Personal growth activities were practised more often by downshifters than by non-downshifters ($p < .00$).

In the **environment** category, we found that non-downshifters, as well as involuntary and voluntary downshifters, reported recycling glass and other materials very frequently (Means > 4.64). The three groups were also very resourceful with respect to energy consumption (Means > 4.2) and all reported a tendency to bring unnecessary items to second hand shops (Means > 4.12). The least frequently reported activity in this domain was organic composting (Means > 2.24). Compensating for CO2 emissions due to air and car travel was also less frequently reported. Remarkably, we noted that downshifters were significantly more resourceful with energy than non-downshifters ($p < .01$).

In the **do-it-yourself** category, conducting one's own home maintenance appeared to be the most favourable activity for the three groups, with a striking difference in the scores of downshifters compared to non-downshifters ($p < .04$). Results for sewing clothes and growing vegetables indicated rather low frequencies.

Regarding **mobility**, biking was reported to be the most popular mode of transport for all types (Means > 3.93). Non-downshifters reported biking most often (Means > 4.18). Additionally, the three groups reported rarely traveling by air plane (Means > 1.92). Further, results indicated that downshifters were slightly more frequent car users (Means > 2.94) than non-downshifters (Means > 2.79), although the difference was not significant. With respect to public transport, conversely, non-downshifters showed higher means than downshifters (3.06 versus 2.93).

Table 3 Consumption Practices (Voluntary versus Involuntary Downshifters)*

	Voluntary downshifters *n* = 461			Involuntary *n* = 280			
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	p-value
A Purchasing							
1 Buy fair trade	3.17	0.81	459	3	0.80	277	**.01**
2 Buy green	3.43	0.75	460	3.4	0.72	278	**n.s.**
3 Buy second hand	3.34	0.83	460	3.26	0.89	277	**n.s.**
4 Dumpster diving	2.12	1.04	460	2.03	0.99	278	**n.s.**
5 Buy at local stores	2.74	1.04	460	2.67	1.07	277	**n.s.**
6 Ignore advertisements	3.45	1.38	457	3.22	1.44	278	**.04**
B Food							
7 Eat organic food	3.17	1	460	3.07	1.03	278	**n.s.**
8 Eat meat	3.15	1.08	460	3.14	1.13	277	**n.s.**
9 Cook from scratch	4.35	0.64	460	4.38	0.65	277	**n.s.**
10Eat local food	3.44	0.95	457	3.49	0.96	276	**n.s.**
11 Eat fish	3.18	0.92	460	3.19	0.92	278	**n.s.**
C Leisure							
12 Watch television	3.27	0.87	460	3.36	0.92	276	**n.s.**
13 Read	3.98	0.52	460	4.01	0.58	278	**n.s.**
14 Exercise/sport	2.81	1.08	459	2.73	1.06	277	**n.s.**
15 Walk and bike	3.76	0.84	460	3.83	0.81	277	**n.s.**
16 Meditate or pray	2.53	1.2	459	2.63	1.26	277	**0.3**
17 Shop	2.69	0.71	460	2.83	0.81	278	**.01**
18 Personal growth	3.41	0.89	456	3.52	0.89	275	**n.s.**
19 Social contact	3.68	0.64	460	3.68	0.73	278	**n.s.**
20 Go out	2.59	0.73	460	2.53	0.79	278	**n.s.**
21 Travel	2.75	0.78	459	2.64	0.83	278	**n.s.**
22 Garden	2.96	1.2	458	3.06	1.21	278	**n.s.**
D Environment							
23 Recycle	4.68	0.62	459	4.64	0.72	278	**n.s.**
24 Compost	2.42	1.68	459	2.24	1.60	277	**n.s.**
25 Limit energy consumption	4.33	0.68	459	4.34	0.66	277	**n.s.**
26 Bring items to second hand shop	4.12	1.1	459	4.2	1.02	278	**n.s.**
27 Compensate CO2 emissions	2.72	2.2	459	2.94	2.27	277	**n.s.**
E Do-it-yourself							
28 Sewing	1.95	1.09	461	1.98	1.17	280	**n.s.**
29 Grow vegetables	2.18	1.31	460	2.08	1.41	280	**n.s.**
30 Do home maintenance	3.56	1.09	461	3.42	1.13	279	**n.s.**
F Mobility							
31 Car use	2.93	1.14	460	2.96	1.21	279	**n.s.**
32 Public transport	2.91	1.07	461	2.95	1.07	279	**n.s.**
33Biking	3.93	0.99	460	3.96	1.01	278	**n.s.**
34 Plane	1.85	0.83	461	1.85	0.79	280	**n.s.**

Note * Answers were provided on a 5-point scale. Scale means were subsequently calculated and compared. Multiple testing correction was applied using the Bonferroni correction.

Table 4 Consumption Practices (Non-Downshifters versus Downshifters)*

	Non-downshifters *n* = 265			Downshifters *n* = 741			
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	**p-value**
A Purchasing							
1 Buy fair trade	3.21	0.78	264	3.1	0.81	736	**n.s.**
2 Buy green	3.47	0.77	264	3.42	0.74	738	**n.s.**
3 Buy second hand	3.22	0.86	264	3.31	0.85	737	**n.s.**
4 Dumpster dive	2.04	1.07	263	2.09	1.02	738	**n.s.**
5 Buy at local stores	2.77	0.98	264	2.71	1.05	737	**n.s.**
6 Ignore advertisements	3.57	1.38	264	3.36	1.41	735	**.04**
B Food							
7 Eat organic food	3.33	1.02	263	3.13	1.01	738	**.01**
8 Eat meat	3.1	1.14	264	3.15	1.09	737	**n.s.**
9 Cook from scratch	4.37	0.63	263	4.36	0.64	737	**n.s.**
10 Eat local food	3.32	0.94	263	3.46	0.96	733	**n.s.**
11 Eat fish	2.94	0.91	264	3.18	0.91	738	**.00**
C Leisure							
12 Watch television	3.27	0.79	264	3.3	0.89	736	**n.s.**
13 Read	3.94	0.62	265	3.99	0.55	738	**n.s.**
14 Exercise/sport	2.91	1.14	263	2.78	1.07	736	**n.s.**
15 Walk and bike	3.85	0.69	265	3.79	0.83	737	**n.s.**
16 Meditate or pray	2.55	1.23	264	2.57	1.22	736	**n.s.**
17 Shop	2.7	0.70	265	2.74	0.75	738	**n.s.**
18 Personal growth	3.23	0.99	261	3.45	0.89	731	**.00**
19 Social contact	3.66	0.65	264	3.68	0.67	738	**n.s.**
20 Go out	2.64	0.74	264	2.57	0.75	738	**n.s.**
21 Travel	2.88	0.78	263	2.71	0.8	737	**.00**
22 Garden	3.11	1.12	263	3	1.2	736	**n.s.**
D Environment							
23 Recycle	4.75	0.52	265	4.67	0.66	737	**.05**
24 Compost	2.54	1.67	265	2.35	1.65	736	**n.s.**
25 Limit energy consumption	4.2	0.72	265	4.34	0.67	736	**.01**
26 Bring items to second hand shop	4.14	1.01	265	4.15	1.07	737	**n.s.**
27 Compensate for CO2 emissions	2.92	2.24	264	2.8	2.23	736	**n.s.**
E Do-it yourself							
28 Sewing	1.87	1.04	265	1.96	1.12	741	**n.s.**
29 Grow vegetables	2.18	1.32	265	2.14	1.35	740	**n.s.**
30 Do home maintenance	3.35	1.02	265	3.51	1.10	740	**.04**
F Mobility							
31 Car use	2.79	1.15	264	2.94	1.16	739	**n.s.**
32 Public transport	3.06	1.08	265	2.93	1.07	740	**n.s.**
33 Biking	4.18	0.85	265	3.94	1	738	**.00**
34 Plane	1.92	0.76	265	1.85	0.81	741	**n.s.**

Note * Answers were provided on a 5-point scale. Scale means were subsequently calculated and compared. Multiple testing correction was applied using the Bonferroni correction.

Differences between downshifters and non-downshifters

Although generally downshifters and non-downshifters both scored fairly high on all practices indicative of eco-friendliness and simple living, downshifters appeared to practise more indicators. With respect to energy use and fish consumption we found remarkable differences between the scores of downshifters and non-downshifters, the more since the sample includes the readers of the magazine *Genoeg*. Further, downshifters practised activities related to personal growth and home maintenance more often than non-downshifters. On the other hand non-downshifters reported eating more organic food than downshifters. They also reported ignoring advertisements more often. Further, they were traveling more often, as the results showed that they bike more frequently than downshifters.

Positive and negative experiences with downshifting

Experiences of downshifting were considered meaningful indicators for the third pillar of the Dutch Triple Gs: health and wellbeing. Therefore we used two open-ended questions that invited participants to provide three positive and three negative experiences with spending reduction. Two evaluators categorised the results separately. In this way, nine categories of positive experiences and eight categories of negative experiences emerged. Then, two additional evaluators processed the responses separately and classified all but three responses identically (see Table 5). Again results are presented for voluntary and involuntary downshifters.

As Table 5 shows, there is some overlap in these categorizations, since three categories concern both positive and negative experiences. Six categories thus are specifically positive, while five categories are specifically negative. Below we will explain the meaning of all positive and negative experiences. Then we will compare voluntary and involuntary downshifters' scores and discuss their different experiences.

The following three types of experiences had double assessment. They are listed in the categorization of both positive and negative experiences.

The category **challenge** included the concept that the task of making ends meet is perceived as a sport or game. Downshifting thus is seen to have a competitive element in which downshifters attempt to adjust expenses and consumption patterns to the new financial standard. This experience was described by respondents as a "sport" or "game". The experience can be labelled as positive (a sport as in a special task assignment that has to be overcome and that provides a stimulating experience encouraging respondents to achieve). The challenge can also be viewed as a negative experience. In this case, the task of making ends meet is experienced as too onerous or too difficult or even impossible. Respondents mentioned, for example, that the involuntariness of spending reductions makes it difficult to adjust their expenses to the new consumption standard.

Budgeting denotes explicit financial planning. The term includes the inventory of financial means, the preparation of an overview and the calculation of a budget. Budgeting may be experienced as positive or negative, depending on the person's ability to succeed in this, for most respondents, new task.

The category **psychological effect** refers to the emotional and psychological consequences of living with less. It has two dimensions as respondents reported both positive and negative psychological experiences. The positive consequences included increased self-esteem, confidence, pride, independence and an increased sense of autonomy. Additional positive consequences were the strengthening of one's personality and increased self-knowledge. Negative psychological experiences reported included feelings of stress, worry and guilt, especially toward one's children. Feelings of being a personal failure or being deficient and feelings of low self-esteem were also reported.

Further we noted six more positive categories:

The category **financial effect** denotes the results and outcomes of living with less such as increased savings, debt reduction and the possibility of being able to afford special purchases or to support one's children's education.

Personal growth denotes the knowledge and skills gained during the process of living with less. Respondents mentioned that they became more creative because of downshifting and developed particular skills or gained particular knowledge.

The category **post-materialism** denotes the acquisition of a changed attitude toward money and material possessions. As a positive experience, it puts the importance of material possessions into perspective and respondents reported that they became less attached to material possessions while, at the same time, placing increased value on what they already owned.

Social effect refers to the strengthening of social ties such as family relationships and friendships. This category also includes reports of changes in social contacts because of living with less, such as meeting new soul mates and ending other relationships.

Quality of life represents having an increased appreciation of life and is analogous with reports of less fatigue, less stress, more free time and/or having a more adventurous life. It also includes reports of improved health and better physical condition resulting from less stress and/or better food.

Better citizen refers to all positive evaluations of living with less that impact the world. For example, respondents mentioned that spending their money more consciously had allowed them to contribute positively to the environment and/or made them more compassionate toward the underprivileged. This category is also connected to greater engagement with issues of poverty, pollution and global concerns, and includes a critical awareness of the social pressures of consumerism.

The following five negative categories were reported:

In the responses to the question on negative experiences, a substantial number concerned familial relationships within the immediate **family** such as with a partner, children and other close family members. Respondents mentioned discussing expenses with their relatives and being met with protest, critique and arguments. With regard to the nature and the intimate

character of the bonds, this specific type of social effect was identified as a separate category and distinguished from the category "social effect" in the list of positive experiences.

The category **poverty** includes all direct reports of poverty as well as more descriptive reports such as "too little money to cope", and "unable to buy essentials".

Sacrifice includes reports of material or immaterial items that are no longer affordable, as well as activities which are considered to be too costly and therefore forsaken.

The category **criticism/incomprehension** includes the comments and lack of understanding that respondents reported receiving from their social environment. The intensity of negative reactions varied from slightly negative surprise to severe forms of disapproval or ridicule.

Isolation includes the experience of becoming a social outsider as a result of the decision to downshift or the inability to invest in social obligations (e.g., gifts) and social activities such as parties, going out with friends or colleagues, and so on.

Table 5 Positive and Negative Experiences *

	Voluntary		Involuntary		
Positive experiences	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**p-value**
Challenge/process	43	9	28	10	**n.s.**
Budgeting	73	16	41	15	**n.s.**
Financial effect	121	26	34	12	**.00**
Personal growth	63	14	33	12	**n.s.**
Psychological effect	135	29	63	23	**.04**
Post-materialism	169	37	119	43	**n.s.**
Social effect	42	9	21	8	**n.s.**
Quality of life	121	26	46	16	**.00**
Better citizen	97	21	27	10	**.00**
Not applicable/no positive	63	14	73	26	**.00**
Negative experiences					
Challenge/process	49	11	46	16	**.02**
Budgeting	32	7	30	11	**n.s.**
Psychological effect	53	12	44	16	**n.s.**
Family problems	29	6	19	7	**n.s.**
Poverty**	6	1	8	3	**--**
Sacrifice	60	13	54	19	**.02**
Incomprehension/critics	79	17	19	7	**.00**
Isolation **	9	2	13	5	**--**
Not applicable/no negative	242	53	130	46	**n.s.**

Note * The list of positive and negative experiences resulted from a categorization of the responses to two open-ended questions to which participants could provide a maximum of three answers. * * numbers were too small for testing

Findings

The experiences of voluntary and of involuntary downshifters show some noteworthy differences (see Table 5). The most apparent finding is that involuntary downshifters reported

higher scores for all negative experiences, except for the category **incomprehension/criticism**. Voluntary downshifters reported higher scores for all positive experiences. When we consider the nature of the experience—positive or negative—the following finding is of note: In the range of negative experiences, almost half of the involuntary downshifters (46%) and over half of the voluntary downshifters (53%) reported having no negative experiences or non response.

The negative experience that scored the highest among voluntary downshifters concerned the category **incomprehension/criticism** (17%). Participants reported that they were confronted with critique and negative judgment from their social environment. Involuntary downshifter scores were significantly higher in two categories: **sacrifice** (19%) and **challenge** (16%). Also the category **psychological effect** (16%) showed higher scores, although not significantly. Respondents reported that trying to cope with less money was a difficult task.

With regard to positive experiences, the highest scores among both the voluntary and involuntary downshifters were reported in the categories **post-materialism** and **psychological effect**. About 40% of involuntary (43%) and voluntary downshifters (37%) reported that they valued material possessions and money differently from before. Also, a positive psychological and emotional effect was reported by 29% of voluntary and 23% of involuntary downshifters. This was described as feeling independent and autonomous and feeling good about the fact that they now could master their finances.

Increased quality of life (26% of voluntary downshifters) was also reported to be connected with pleasure derived from engaging in new activities as a result of living with less money. Respondents described their new lifestyle as more creative and adventurous. They reported doing nicer things such as going on sporting holidays, going for nature walks and picking fruit and mushrooms. In addition, the discovery of unexpected talents (e.g., gardening, cooking, do-it-yourself projects) contributed to the quality of life experience. Also, one fifth of the voluntary downshifters reported a change in attitude and a new commitment to society and the world, which we labelled as being a better citizen. Lastly, respondents reported that they had become more generous and more committed to the environment and/or the eradication of world poverty.

Rounding up, we may conclude that involuntary downshifters reported more negative experiences than voluntary downshifters, except for the category **postmaterialism** which was selected more often by involuntary downshifters. In general, it was shown that voluntary downshifters reported more positive experiences. An exception to this finding was that they selected the negative experience incomprehension/critics more frequently than involuntary downshifters. These results seem to suggest that voluntary downshifters experience more negative social reactions and more positive individual effects.

Attitudes: frugality and autonomy

To measure the attitudes that direct frugal behaviour, we chose the Frugality Scale (Lastovicka, Bettencourt, Hughner, & Kuntze, 1999), because the 8 propositions in this scale mainly refer to practices in line with our research focus on concrete consumer behaviour. We added though two extra propositions (numbers 9 and 10). Theories of postmaterialism

(Bauman, 2007; Schor, 1991, 1998; Inglehart, 1977, 1997) and characteristics of new consumer groups (Etzioni, 1998; Ray & Anderson, 2000; De Geus, 2003) inspired us to hypothesise about the downshifters' aspirations of autonomy and self-determination. These expectations were substantiated by results of our former field study (Schreurs, 2010) showing a number of negative reactions and critiques from the social environment. We hypothesised that downshifters are less receptive to commercial influences than non-downshifters. We further assumed that downshifters have stronger feelings of autonomy and self-determination, and a greater tendency to organise their life according to their own system of standards and values than non-downshifters.

The Frugality Scale results (see Tables 6 & 7) show that, in general, all participants reported being fairly frugal. However, some significant differences were found between downshifters and non-downshifters. Generally, the non-downshifters appeared to be less frugal than the downshifters, since downshifters appeared to agree significantly more often than non-downshifters with 5 out of 8 propositions of the Frugality Scale. Comparisons between the scores of voluntary and involuntary downshifters (see Table 6) showed only one significant difference, namely for the proposition about the disciplined handling of one's money.

The expectation that downshifters are less susceptible to interpersonal or commercial influence than non-downshifters was not affirmed. However, the results for proposition 10 showed that downshifters actually affirmed the proposition significantly more often (P = .00) than non-downshifters, meaning that downshifters have a greater tendency to organise their life according to their own system of standards and values than non-downshifters.

Table 6 Frugality Scale: Voluntary and Involuntary Downshifters

	Voluntary *n* = 461			**Involuntary *n* = 280**			
	Mean	**SD**	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**	**N**	**p-value**
1. If you take good care of your possessions, you will definitively save money in the long run.	4.57	0.53	458	4.53	0.56	278	**n.s.**
2. There are many things that are normally thrown away that are still quite useful.	4.65	0.50	459	4.66	0.55	278	**n.s.**
3. Making better use of my resources makes me feel good.	4.42	0.65	457	4.5	0.6	277	**n.s.**
4. If you can re-use an item you already have, there's no sense in buying something new.	4.42	0.66	459	4.38	0.65	278	**n.s**
5. I believe in being careful in how I spend my money.	4.34	0.63	458	4.34	0.68	277	**n.s**
6. I discipline myself to get the most from my money.	3.75	0.89	456	3.97	0.84	277	**.00**
7. I am willing to wait on a purchase I want so that I can save some money.	4.07	0.76	457	4.1	0.76	276	**n.s**
8. There are things I resist buying today so I can save for tomorrow.	3.72	0.91	451	3.72	0.93	266	**n.s**
Frugality scale	**4.25**	**0.43**	**463**	**4.25**	**4.21**	**239**	**n.s**
9. Compared with others in my environment, I am disciplined with money and make less impulse purchases.	4.06	0.83	457	4.02	0.88	273	**n.s**
10. I try to live as my own life as much as possible and ignore other peoples' views.	4.2	0.78	457	4.3	0.72	278	**n.s**

Table 7 Frugality Scale: Non-Downshifters and Downshifters

	Non-downshifters *n* = 265			Downshifters *n* = 741			
	Mean	**SD**	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**	**N**	**p-value**
1. If you take good care of your possessions, you will definitively save money in the long run.	4.44	0.56	264	4.55	0.54	736	**.01**
2. There are many things that are normally thrown away that are still quite useful.	4.63	0.52	264	4.65	0.52	737	**n.s**
3. Making better use of my resources makes me feel good.	4.41	0.66	263	4.45	0.63	734	**n.s**
4. If you can re-use an item you already have, there's no sense in buying something new.	4.34	0.67	264	4.41	0.66	737	**n.s**
5. I believe in being careful in how I spend my money.	4.22	0.66	262	4.34	0.65	735	**.01**
6. I discipline myself to get the most from my money.	3.62	0.88	260	3.83	0.88	733	**.00**
7. I am willing to wait on a purchase I want so that I can save some money.	3.92	0.79	262	4.08	0.76	733	**.01**
8. There are things I resist buying today so I can save for tomorrow	3.53	1.01	254	3.72	0.91	717	**.01**
Frugality scale	**4.15**	**0.43**	**263**	**4.25**	**0.43**	**703**	**.00**
9. Compared with others in my environment, I am disciplined with money and make less impulse purchases.	3.94	0.85	263	4.05	0.85	730	**n.s**
10. I try to live as my own life as much as possible and ignore other peoples' views.	4.03	0.79	261	4.24	0.76	735	**.00**

Discussion and conclusions

What new insights for sustainable living may be concluded from the results of this study? In this final section we will return to the main theme of this paper: What opportunities does downshifting offer to sustainability? As already mentioned in the introduction, we use a broader definition of sustainable living than just eco-friendliness. In our view also proper financial behaviour and health and wellbeing are part of it, as depicted in our model of the Dutch Triple Gs of a sustainable lifestyle: ***geld*** (money), ***groen*** (eco-friendliness) and ***gezondheid/welzijn*** (health-wellbeing). Using this conceptual framework we will now discuss results pertaining to (a) Financial behaviour, (b) Eco-friendly behaviour, and (c) Personal wellbeing.

Financial behaviour

Downshifters tend to be conscious, careful spenders as revealed by their scores on the Frugality Scale and by their responses to the list of consumption expenditures. Their product use and their buying behaviour are frugal and restrained, and budgeting is generally perceived as one of many positive experiences associated with downshifting. Downshifters

seek to increase their savings and pay off their debts. This may be interpreted as an indication of sound financial management. Studies in other countries show that the wise stewardship of resources is a common trait among downshifters (Schor, 1998; Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004; Huneke, 2005). However, this is not the explicit goal but rather a means—a deliberately chosen strategy to serve other goals. Similarly, we found that downshifters seek to maintain their lifestyle by ignoring advertisements and strengthening their own convictions. This attitude may function as a protective measure to counter marketing stimuli for impulse buying. Moreover, it may protect downshifters from the criticism that voluntary downshifters in particular receive from their social environment.

Eco-friendly behaviour

Our study showed various indications of eco-friendly behaviour among downshifters. First, downshifters reported handling their possessions consciously and carefully. Overall, they recycle glass and other materials, take good care of their possessions, avoid waste and resourcefully use their possessions. Additionally, downshifters used significantly less energy than the non-downshifters in our study. This is an interesting finding as *Genoeg* readers are likely to be already more committed to reducing energy consumption than the general population in the Netherlands. As such, downshifters consistently met the standards for eco-friendly behaviour that seeks to reduce, re-use and recycle. When it comes to eco-friendly food consumption and mobility, the picture is less evident. Although downshifters consume local food products and fish more frequently, they consume significantly less organic food than non-downshifters. Additionally, downshifters did use the car slightly more and the bike significantly less than non-downshifters. These mixed results correspond with the results of previous studies that have linked downshifting to eco-friendliness (Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004; Jackson, 2009; Huneke, 2005).

Personal wellbeing and happiness

Unlike other studies on the subject of downshifting, our study did not specifically explore the emotions or judgments downshifters express about their way of life. However, given our results, we can conclude that downshifting may increase quality of life and therefore contribute to feelings of personal wellbeing and happiness. This is plausible, especially given the fact that downshifters reported a broad range of positive experiences. This is particularly the case for voluntary downshifters, although involuntary downshifters as well reported positive experiences such as stress reduction and improved psychological outlook. We can also assume that the reported increase in activities in the sphere of personal growth promotes personal wellbeing and contributes to a better quality of life. Yet, the results of previous studies found a more direct association between downshifting and increased quality of life and satisfaction with the lifestyle change (Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004). As Breakspear and Hamilton reported, "None had any regrets, except perhaps for the years lost before they made the change." (p.ix). Conversely, our detailed overview of negative experiences paints a more nuanced picture of wellbeing and happiness. In particular, criticism from one's social environment as well as the financial difficulties connected to trying to make ends meet seem to colour the downshifting experience.

In short, it can be concluded that downshifting can contribute to sustainability as this way of life fundamentally resonates with the three pillars of the Dutch triple Gs of a sustainable lifestyle. Downshifters tend to practise the re-use, reduce and recycle mantra of eco-friendly behaviour and they are careful, resourceful spenders who find other values more important than those provided by materialism and consumerism. It seems these positive experiences can also strengthen their attitude.

Although the motivation for downshifting appears to be rather personally than environmentally driven, the outcome of downshifting could be eco-friendly. It was found that interest for the environment could very well coincide with financial or personal interests. The finding that downshifters primarily seek an improvement of quality of life beyond materialism and consumerism could be very well addressed to promote sustainability. It can inspire to define new – less material – dimensions of sustainability and strengthen as well social and economic conditions of a sustainable lifestyle, besides the current focus on environment.

In sum, we contend that living with less can promote sustainability either directly through reduced consumption or indirectly through a more fundamental transformation of lifestyle. The following general prospects for sustainability have been identified:

1. In our time, frugality still is a vital cultural feature and a guiding principle for consumer behaviour and practices. This finding resonates with the reported cultural change towards a less materialistic way of life and indicates the possibility of broader support for reduction than is generally assumed.

2. Living with less may indeed contribute to a better quality of life. Positive experiences with downshifting contradict the popular belief that spending less or a decrease in income is a purely negative event.

3. The Dutch triple Gs of a sustainable lifestyle can supply the parameters for measuring the sustainability of downshifting.

4. Downshifting can be an instrument for sustainable development.

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