

Quiet Luxury. Simplicity, Sustainability, and the Rearticulation of Status in Consumer Culture

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Abstract

Contemporary consumer culture is increasingly shaped by a tension between calls for environmental sustainability and the persistence of status-driven, acquisitive consumption. While practices of voluntary simplicity are often presented as ethical alternatives to excess, their social and cultural implications remain deeply ambivalent. This article examines three emblematic consumption practices — decluttering, forest bathing, and upcycling — to theorize the emergence of *quiet luxury* as a distinctive reconfiguration of simplicity within late-modern consumer culture. Drawing on practice theory, the analysis conceptualizes these practices as constellations of meanings, materialities, and competences through which sustainability, moral value, and social distinction are co-produced. Empirically, the article combines discourse analysis of heterogeneous sources, including books, media coverage, brand communications, blogs, and digital platforms such as Reddit. The findings show that, rather than displacing consumerist logics, these practices rearticulate status in subdued and reflexive forms, grounded in restraint, presence, craft, and embodied competence. Together, these cases reveal how sustainability is mobilized as a moral and aesthetic resource that reshapes, rather than resolves, social inequalities. The article concludes by discussing the implications of quiet luxury for contemporary debates on sustainable consumption, class, and moralized lifestyles.

Keywords: Consumer culture; Quiet luxury; Sustainability; Conspicuousness; Decluttering; Forest-bathing; Upcycling.

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1 Introduction

Contemporary consumer culture is increasingly shaped by a tension between calls for sustainability and the persistence of acquisitive, status-driven consumption. On the one hand, individuals are increasingly urged to consider the environmental impact of their choices, often invoking the three Rs of sustainable consumption (reducing, reusing, recycling) as an added value for reframing consumption, waste, and nature. On the other hand, everyday practices continue to reflect a logic of abundance and obsolescence, competition, and extractivism, often with emphasis on the therapeutic character of consumption. While reducing, reusing, recycling, and reframing are buzzwords in the world of sustainable consumption, alternative and critical ways of consuming as well as green commodities are charged with contradictions related to what, in neoliberal terms, are often understood as *externalities* — such as on the natural environment and social inequalities (Lewis & Potter, 2011; Middlemiss, 2018; Sassatelli, 2006 & 2015). This article examines how a broader cultural orientation toward “simplicity” is being reconfigured within this contested landscape.

Minimalism or voluntary simplicity has developed in commercialized consumer cultures in many different varieties and has long come to be related to sustainability issues and alternatives to overspending (Etzioni, 1998 & 2004; Leonard-Barton, 1981; Rebouças & Soares, 2021; Schor, 1998 & 2011; Shaw & Newholm, 2002; Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). Voluntary simplicity emphasizes emotional well-being and connection to nature over the acquisition of material possessions. Unlike unchosen poverty, it is an elective or “ethically chosen” mode of living rooted in a long intellectual lineage — from Thoreau’s calls for a “life in the woods” as early as 1854, to Schumacher’s human-centered economics of “small is beautiful” in the 1970s, as well as a variety of assorted spiritual traditions that praise restraint and moderation and the logic of “enough”. While the local is stressed, it differentiates itself from openly politicized consumption restraint typical of national economic self-sufficiency or autarky, as practiced by many totalitarian states, such as Fascist Italy in the Twentieth Century (Helstosky, 2004). As argued by Samuel Alexander (2011), simplicity may amount to a new regime of consumption, which is presented as entailing a deliberate reduction of consumption to what is materially sufficient, while cultivating non-material sources of wellbeing such as time, community, nature, and creative engagement.

At the same time, simplicity-oriented practices may be diverse. Such diversity can be illustrated through the work of Juliet Schor (2011). In *True Wealth*, previously published as *Plenitude*, she emphasizes that minimalism and voluntary simplicity are about reclaiming autonomy, well-being, and environmental responsibility from market-driven excess. In her view, practices such as buying less, valuing durability, engaging in self-provisioning (e.g., gardening, making, repairing) are both practical strategies to reduce dependence on income and overwork and cultural shifts away from status competition toward more meaningful, less commodified forms of living. Schor also highlights the classed dimensions of these practices: the ability to adopt them often requires time, skills, and a degree of economic security, making simplicity more accessible to certain groups, while offering an alternative to status-driven consumption for those who can engage with it.

Building on these insights, this article examines three emergent practices, each in different ways related to simplicity, that have become particularly visible in the Global North over the past two decades: *forest bathing*, *decluttering*, and *upcycling*. These practices are approached as distinct yet related configurations through which simplicity is articulated in contemporary consumer culture. We conceptualize them as instances of what we call *quiet luxury*: a cul-

tural reframing of consumption that combines reflexivity, restraint, and aesthetic refinement, involving a critical, reflexive backlash against consumerism. While often presented as critical responses to consumerism, these practices are increasingly mainstream and are frequently shaped by marketing discourses that appropriate and rework simplicity, especially in domains such as fashion, where durability, minimalism, and inconspicuousness are re-signified as markers of sophistication and value (Greenberg et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2025). In this article, quiet luxury is understood as a subdued and reflexive form of luxury, grounded in individualized and often therapeutic engagements with materiality, space, and nature. At the same time, following Sombart (1913), luxury remains intrinsically linked to distinction, insofar as it refers to goods and practices positioned above the ordinary. By conceptualizing quiet luxury as a constellation of practices — rather than a market segment or aesthetic style — this article contributes to debates on alternative forms of consumption by foregrounding the situated co-production of morality, taste, and status. The paper ultimately explores how these practices complicate claims to egalitarianism and environmental responsibility, raising critical questions about the sustainability and inclusivity of contemporary aestheticized and commercialized lifestyle politics.

Methodologically, the analysis adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded in discourse analysis of heterogeneous empirical materials. The aim is not to provide a representative account of the three practices examined, but to reconstruct the cultural logics, evaluative repertoires, and meaning structures through which they are articulated and circulated within contemporary consumer culture. The three cases were selected through a theoretically driven sampling strategy, considering their emerging relevance in contemporary consumer culture discourses as well as for the ways in which they enable us to analytically capture how “quiet luxury” emerges across diverse domains of consumption: through divestment and aestheticized restraint (decluttering), through embodied and experiential engagement with nature (forest bathing), and through the creative reworking of objects and skills (upcycling).

The empirical corpus was constructed through a theoretically informed sampling strategy, oriented toward identifying highly visible and culturally influential sites in which decluttering, forest bathing, and upcycling are defined, debated, and enacted. The dataset includes best-selling books and manuals (e.g., Kondo, Clifford), mainstream media and magazine articles, blogs and online guides, and user-generated content from digital platforms, with particular attention to Reddit communities. Selection criteria were based on visibility, explicit engagement with the practices under study, as well as the capacity of sources to articulate norms, values, and evaluative distinctions. Rather than aiming at completeness, the corpus was designed to capture the diversity of discursive formations through which these three practices are stabilized and negotiated. Emphasis was placed on the role of cultural intermediaries and digital platforms in shaping aesthetic codes, normative expectations, and forms of recognition. The analytical strategy follows a discourse-analytic approach, focused on identifying recurring narratives, classificatory schemes, and moral framings associated with these three practices. In doing so, we are able to document the different ways in which cultural discourses connected to these practices deploy a rhetoric that renegotiates abundance and acquisition in the name of personal growth and acknowledgment of environmental issues. We also, ultimately, show how they may still function as modes of status-making grounded in aestheticized restraint, ecological moralism, and curated authenticity. In many cases, in fact, rather than displacing consumerist values, their narratives of presence over possessions and sufficiency over prestige operate within a broader cultural shift precisely toward what we have identified as quiet luxury.

2 Consumer Practices, Sustainability, and the Emergence of Quiet Luxury

Contemporary consumer culture is now recognized as a distinctively complex terrain, in which social order, morality, and selfhood are continually (re)made. Classical (Veblen, 1899; Mauss, 1925) and contemporary (Bourdieu, 1979; Baudrillard, 1968; Campbell, 1987; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Miller, 1987) contributions in consumer studies have demonstrated that consumption is not merely an economic act, but a cultural and moral field through which identities and social boundaries are continually remade. While Pierre Bourdieu (1979) explains how taste and *habitus* reproduce social hierarchies, consumers' capacity to appropriate, reinterpret, and even subvert commodity meanings as situated actors is likewise central to the dynamics of contemporary consumer society. From this perspective, we can see how consumer culture is increasingly shaped today by the tension between ecological responsibility and the persistent drive for distinction, which can be understood as the very contradiction that underpins the relevance of quiet luxury. Focusing on practices of quiet luxury in consumer culture, we argue that these practices do not simply mitigate acquisitive and obsolescence-driven consumption; rather, they also reconfigure status dynamics under the banner of sustainability, constituting a reflexive yet highly visible challenge that remains embedded in the symbolic economy of taste and privilege.

In the last two decades, the practice turn in social theory has offered a powerful lens for understanding consumption beyond both structural determinism and voluntarist individualism (Reckwitz, 2002 & 2012; Røpke, 2009; Shove et al., 2012; Schatzki et al., 2001; Warde, 2005; Warde et al., 2017). Particularly within consumption studies, this gave way to a composite set of sensibilities, concepts, and analytical orientations. Still, as Shove et al. (2012, pp. 7–12) have stressed, practices are characteristically understood as hybrid phenomena, carried out by individuals but “not contained” by them: they are “distributed” configurations, sustained through the ongoing coordination of materials, competences, and meanings across people, infrastructures, and cultural systems. Social life is portrayed as composed of practices — configurations of materials, competences, and meanings — that are constantly reproduced and transformed through the “performing” of everyday activities.

Within this framework, consumption is not merely the outcome of choice or taste, but a process embedded in the organization of social practices themselves; its evolution can therefore be understood through the emergence, transformation, and shift of specific practices that make up the texture of social life. Characteristically, rather than treating consumption as a separate domain or a matter of isolated choices, practice theory as deployed within consumer studies locates it as a “moment within practices” (eating, dressing, traveling) whose trajectories depend on socio-material infrastructures, routinized skills, and situated meanings (Warde, 2005). Crucially, as Sassatelli (2007, p. 108) has argued, a practice perspective foregrounds the embodied subject: actors are not merely cognitive interpreters but situated agents interacting with material goods in social contexts that participants continuously stabilize through their practices. Such a perspective helps us view consumption as both the appropriation and the narrativization of materiality: nature, goods, spaces, and bodies. In this way, it provides a valuable framework for understanding how sustainability and distinction intertwine within contemporary consumption, making quiet luxury a privileged site where social practices mediate the ongoing negotiation between moral responsibility and status performance.

A substantial body of literature in consumer culture studies has long contextualized and historicized responses to consumerist excess, highlighting the cultural diversity and complexity of anti-consumption practices. For instance, Kim Humphery's *Excess* (2009) offers a nuanced

mapping of the ways in which individuals negotiate and resist overconsumption. Both the now-classic *The Conquest of Cool* by Thomas Frank (1997), as well as Sam Binkley's (2007) *Getting Loose*, address how countercultural critiques of mass consumption developed in the second half of the last century and were absorbed into capitalism. To be sure, they do so in slightly different ways: Frank shows how the advertising industry in the 1960s appropriated the countercultural language of rebellion, individuality, and anti-conformism, turning "cool" into a powerful marketing tool; Binkley, through a Foucauldian reading, shows how alternative lifestyles themselves, centered on authenticity, flexibility, and self-expression, became part of new forms of governance and subjectivity. In his view, practices of "getting loose" were not simply captured by markets but were already aligned with emerging neoliberal ideals of the self.

All in all, these and other works (Binkley & Littler, 2011; Littler, 2009) typically stress that anti-consumerism has increasingly been subsumed within commercial logics and, to some extent, even fetishized. Taken together, this scholarship underscores that contemporary movements toward minimalist luxury are part of a longer, historically grounded trajectory, not primarily a critique of consumer culture, though this is increasingly the case as consumer capitalism dominates. Considering only clothing in modern and contemporary Europe, the visible demonstration of restraint itself has served as a powerful marker of distinction: sobriety can function as a form of self-presentation, where demonstrative consumption operates through understatement or even staged carelessness (Sassatelli, 2007). Examples include the rise of "inconspicuous consumption" among British gentlemen from the eighteenth century (Kuchta, 2002) and the severe yet costly attire of the Protestant bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century France (Perrot, 1981). As Simon Schama shows in *The Embarrassment of Riches* (1987), even in the affluent Dutch Golden Age, material prosperity was culturally tempered by norms of modesty and moral restraint. More recently, similar dynamics could already be observed in the anti-fashion of the 1970s and the minimalist chic of late-1990s Italian fashion, exemplified by brands such as Armani and Prada (Steele, 2003). Thus, Giana Eckhardt et al. (2015) have argued that status and identity are increasingly expressed through subtle, ethical, and restrained forms of "inconspicuous consumption" rather than overtly flashy or luxurious goods.

In recent years, scholarship on alternative forms of consumption has increasingly focused on the rise of "green", "sustainable", and "ethical" consumer practices, whose rise is commonly framed as a political and moral response to environmental crisis (Hansen & Nielsen, 2023; Micheletti, 2003; Reisch & Thøgersen, 2015; Seyfang, 2009; Soper, 2020). Yet a closer look at the tensions and contradictions of green consumption reveals that these practices are not only responses to the politics of care for the planet but also terrains of symbolic struggle, where moral worth and cultural sophistication are displayed and contested as part of socially rooted dynamics of differentiation and boundary-making. In this sense, sustainability also acts as an ideological container that aligns environmental awareness with marketing and brand management, contributing to a normative macro-frame of "promotional sustainable consumption" (Welch, 2020), centered on brand activity that exploits the moral ordering of consumer engagement in today's age of green consumption.

Focusing more specifically on how green consumption operates within the dynamics of social differentiation, we observe that the rhetoric of simplicity and restraint often masks subtle status competition, in which the ability to consume less, better, and more "authentically" signals cultivated taste and reflexive selfhood. Drawing on Lamont's (1992) concept of "boundary work", green practices help define who counts as a virtuous consumer and who remains portrayed as morally suspect or environmentally ignorant. Recent studies confirm a curvilinear

relationship between social class and green consumption, with middle-class consumers exhibiting the highest propensity for sustainable choices (Yan et al., 2021). Building on Bourdieu, Carfagna et al. (2014) identify the emergence of an “eco-habitus” among high cultural-capital consumers — a reconfiguration of distinction practices that integrates environmental awareness into the aesthetic and moral repertoire of the upper-middle class. Through new planet-friendly orientations, high-brow consumers articulate a form of reflexive consumption tied to strategies of distinction, transforming ecological virtue into a marker of cultural refinement and sophistication.

Extending this lens to the contemporary digital environment, online platforms, as cultural intermediaries, constitute crucial infrastructures for the emergence and circulation of new patterns of consumption, thereby displaying what qualifies as acceptable, tasteful, and sustainable conduct (Hund, 2023). The digital mediation of taste — through curated feeds, influencer aesthetics, and lifestyle branding — renders the shift to green consumption spectacularly visible: the digitalization of consumption amplifies the performativity of consumption and intensifies expressivity, reflexivity, and competition, as users continually negotiate their position within a dynamic field of recognition across social media (Zajc, 2015; Hund & McGuigan, 2019). Drawing on Bourdieu and cultural sociology, Scott et al. (2025) show how cultural intermediaries deploy distinct charismatic modalities in fashion to advocate sustainability, while Frigg and Jaakkola (2023) demonstrate how promotional intermediaries address — and sometimes conceal — the tension between conspicuous promotion and sustainable living. In this context, digital intermediation, embedded in algorithmically driven platform mechanisms (van Dijck et al., 2018), is not merely a channel to display but an orchestrator of practice, standardizing the visual grammar of quiet luxury, distributing competences through tutorials and templates, and consequently reshaping the material qualities of consumer goods.

If we return to Sombart (1913) and reframe classic narratives, we may see that he argued luxury was not a moral deviation but a historical driver of capitalist development, creating new markets and desires that catalyzed modern consumption. To disentangle today’s tensions at the intersection of environmental sustainability, consumer practices, and social differentiation, we identify quiet luxury as a constellation of practices that re-articulates luxury through sustainability-oriented values — including restraint, material authenticity, time-rich self-curation, and eco-moral signaling. A distinctive feature of contemporary luxury display is the rise of “inconspicuous consumption” (Berger & Ward, 2010), with its specific articulation of (un)visibility, cultural capital, and identity. Inconspicuous consumption refers to the use of “subtly marked products which are misrecognized by most observers but facilitate interaction with those who have the requisite cultural capital to decode the subtle signals” (Eckhardt et al., 2015, p. 808). Research on consumer minimalism likewise shows that restraint and curation can function as status practices and as a means of freedom and autonomy (Uggla, 2019), rather than mere anti-consumption (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). Alongside aesthetic restraint, the rise of “conspicuous conservation” (Sexton & Sexton, 2014) highlights the integration of moral capital into luxury and lifestyle choices. Building on these strands, we argue that quiet luxury decouples status from ostentation while retaining (and often enhancing) its symbolic efficacy in terms of social differentiation and distinction.

Practices of quiet luxury articulate a meaningful contemporary trajectory of distinction that privileges minimalism, craftsmanship, and connection with the environment over ostentation and spectacle, yet remains embedded within the symbolic economy of taste and privilege. Rather than repudiating status, quiet luxury refines status cues: logos give way to craftsmanship; novelty gives way to experience; volume gives way to curation. This shift extends beyond

fashion to broader lifestyle domains, including wellness, furniture, and nature-based experiences, where presence over possession and connection over acquisition are mobilized as moral-aesthetic claims. As such, the different forms of quiet luxury all encapsulate a central tension of late-modern consumer culture, negotiating between morality and aspiration, authenticity and performance, environmental virtue and social exclusivity.

3 Minimalist Prestige: Decluttering and the Rebranding of Simplicity

Decluttering represents a paradigmatic case of quiet luxury insofar as it reframes divestment and restraint as forms of cultivated selfhood and moral distinction. This practice, as popularized by Marie Kondo in the early 2010s through her influential “KonMari” method, has emerged as a prominent cultural response to the emotional and material excesses of contemporary consumer societies (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021). Kondo, named one of *Time* magazine’s 2015 “Top 100 Most Influential People”, is widely celebrated for her guidance on creating calm, manageable living spaces, often described as offering “life-changing” insights. Her 2014 book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* has been translated into 40 languages, and in January 2019 Netflix released *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* as an original series (Khamis, 2019; Lucy, 2023); her advice has grown more popular during the pandemic as confinement in the home drew attention to space and possessions (Sandlin & Wallin, 2022). Rooted in Japanese domestic traditions and Kondo’s professional consultancy practice, the KonMari method re-frames tidying from a mundane household chore into a transformative, quasi-spiritual process, centered on discerning which possessions “spark joy”. Its global appeal reflects broader anxieties about overaccumulation, the pressures of modern domestic life, and the search for emotional stability and clarity through material reduction. Popularized through bestselling books and later through global media platforms, Kondo’s philosophy positions decluttering as both a personal therapeutic practice and a disciplined reordering of one’s relationship to consumption (Kondo, 2014).

While centered on reducing, divesting, and sacrificing, Kondo’s advice is indeed framed through a *positive, expansive rhetoric*: like other positivity trends in contemporary consumer culture, decluttering is fundamentally about expanding the self and its possibilities of feeling, through psychological well-being, aesthetic improvement, mindful living, and environmental sensibility. The emphasis is on some kind of conscious, self-realizing, self-regarding relation to materiality: *komono* (miscellaneous small articles with no purpose) are “placed, stored and accumulate ‘just because’, without us giving them much thought”, but the “magic” of decluttering is based on “following your intuition, and all will be well” (Kondo, 2014, pp. 122 and 146). The accumulation, display, and use of material possessions have long been recognized as key practices through which individuals construct social identity and signal status: Veblen (1899), for example, famously maintained conspicuous acquisition has become paramount in consumer capitalism, where material culture has multiplied, and cycles of innovation are faster (see also Sassatelli, 2026, in this symposium). Like in a Potlach (Mauss, 1925), material goods, visible and expensive, are sought after not for their practical use but for their symbolic value and capacity to display status. If filling the home with stuff may be seen as the accumulation phase of a Potlach, decluttering may be seen as the sacrificial phase of the Potlach. Analogous to the sacrificial phase of the Potlach, this process involves an act of giving; however, unlike the traditional ritual, this giving is highly individualized and typically rather anonymous, with the consumer achieving self-realization through personal relinquishment:

As you reduce your belongings through the process of tidying, you will come to a point where you suddenly know how much is just right for you. You will feel it as clearly as if something has clicked inside your head and said “Ah! This is just the amount I need to live comfortably. This is all I need to be happy. I don’t need anything more”. [...] Interestingly once you have passed this point, you’ll find that the amount you own never increases. And that is precisely why you will never rebound. The click-point differs from one person to another [...] Focus on choosing the things that inspire joy and enjoying life according to your own standards [...] If you have not yet felt click, don’t worry. You can still reduce. Tackle this job with confidence (Kondo, 2014, pp. 145ff.).

Civic, polite, or spiritual “restraint” and “consciousness”, a set of narratives drawing on the ascetic rhetoric which has always lingered in modern consumer culture side by side with the hedonistic, romanticized acquisitive mentality (Sassatelli, 2001), become forms of joyous experiential empowerment. Hedonism reworks asceticism, and viceversa. In the case of Kondo and her success in the US, this is probably largely related to the worried middle-class response to the global financial crisis (Khamis, 2019) — a highly individualized response indeed. Its specificity lies in what Susie Khamis (2019) calls the “aestheticization of restraint”: restraint is detached from images of deprivation or moral hardship and instead reimagined as an expression of autonomy, sophistication, and emotional well-being. Khamis shows that, especially after the financial crisis, “consumer restraint”, once possibly framed as austerity, hardship, or moral duty, was culturally transformed into something attractive, desirable, and even chic: decluttering, minimalism, careful selection, and “less is more” became aesthetic and lifestyle choices, not just reactive or frugal ones.

These reframings shift restraint away from stigma or necessity and reinterpret it through a language of well-being, taste, control, mindfulness, and emotional clarity. Indeed, if we consider *r/decluttering*, a Reddit community mostly active around the pandemic years which deepened the sense of crisis that emerged a decade earlier (Sandlin & Wallin, 2022), we find recognition of the “sentimental” character of material goods. One must keep those that “make your current-self feel great” rather than bringing out “sad memories”, going past one’s “emotional baggage” but also being “grateful” to past experiences enshrined in the goods while letting them go. Divestment is often rationalized (through numbers, percentages, classification) and at the same time romanticized (as a time to move toward the “future”, to go past “habituation”, to discover the possibility of “donation”). Marie Kondo is ubiquitously cited, her method appropriated essentially through notions of “joy” and “positivity”, but also, with emphasis on the need to “overcome anxiety”. Indeed, this online community seems to share a moral pressure to decluttering which itself generates anxiety and yet finds answers precisely in the small rituals of divestment which are documented by a plethora of photographs of home settings (before/after). While details of the methods of disposal are listed with painstaking precision, the destination of the discarded is typically undetailed if branded as “generous”. Above all, the community debates psychological tricks used to personally deal with “loss”: the letting go of the memories in the goods and considering them as “stuff”, which is then portrayed in largely ambivalent ways as both “junk” and “recyclables”. And yet rarely understood in more structural terms as “waste”.

In the Reddit decluttering community, all this happens against the backdrop of a sense of moral order in the home and in oneself, which is tied to a drive toward a “model house” and the idea that “you are too rich to hoard that!”. This matches Meghann Lucy (2023)’s case study of *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*, where divestment appears as a form of conspicuousness: in con-

texts of overaccumulation, even privileged individuals with “cluttered” homes are compelled to dispose of possessions that are still valuable. “Excess” or having “too much” is constructed as evidence of uncontrolled selves, and how these are related to maintaining and trespassing class, gender, and generation boundaries (see also Ouellette, 2019).

Too many objects in the home are considered transgressions of class norms as well as failures in gendered or parental roles. Thus, by reducing excess branded as clutter, the social and moral problems associated with excess are addressed, positioning divestment as an investment. In this view, the practice of decluttering is reframed as a tool for negotiating with personal agency — but in the context of class status, gender expectations, and parental responsibility. Indeed, an entrepreneurial outlook is related to premium family relations where time becomes a precious asset to be managed like materiality: the popular blog *Becoming Minimalist*, for example, sports a post which suggests “Why Minimalism Is One of the Best Gifts You Can Give Your Family”: “(e)verything we buy communicates values to our children. When we purposefully decide to buy only what we need, our spending begins to align more with the values we hope to pass on to our kids — caring for others, being wise with our dollars, investing in relationships. Kids learn their model of financial success not from what we say, but from what we do”.¹ This resonates strongly with the middle class, who often experience a paradox of abundance: possessing more material goods than previous generations but feeling encumbered by them, having more money and less time.

Looking at a variety of decluttering blogs from *Becoming Minimalist*² to *The Uncluttered Life*,³ from *Zen Habits*⁴ to *Simply+Fiercely*,⁵ we indeed find that they reflect moral narratives about the meaning of possessions, the self, and the planet. In *Ultralight: The Zen Habits Guide to Traveling Light & Living Light*, we get advice on assorted minimalist practices which are clearly characteristically adjusted to middle-class concerns or above, such as “breezing through airports, cutting back on clothing, minimizing electronics, toiletries, and more, finding restaurants, apartments”, or “What you don’t need to pack”.⁶ More broadly, these blogs offer insight into how decluttering acts as a way for typically middle- and upper-middle class individuals to manage identities and anxieties within consumer culture. While some tie it to long-term behavioral change, across these platforms, decluttering is mostly framed as a practice of self-improvement grounded in the dominant values of choice and elective lifestyle. Despite their differences, these blogs promote minimalism as a route to happiness, productivity, and freedom, echoing neoliberal ideas of personal responsibility and self-optimization typically related to privileged lifestyles: so decluttering, through self-reflective practices such as “journaling help(s) go from shopaholic to minimalist” (*Simply+Fiercely*)⁷ and “adds creativity and a refined aesthetic, ensuring each space is both visually stunning and highly functional. Together, they deliver exceptional results — whether transforming a single closet or preparing an entire home for staging prior to a sale” (*The Uncluttered Life*).⁸

Decluttering becomes a moral performance: signaling discipline and intentionality, emo-

1. <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/why-minimalism-is-for-family/>.

2. <https://www.becomingminimalist.com>.

3. <https://www.theunclutteredlife.com>.

4. <https://zenhabits.net>.

5. <https://www.simplyfiercely.com>.

6. <https://zenhabits.net/ultralight-ebook/>.

7. <https://www.simplyfiercely.com/my-decluttering-story-from-shopaholic-to-minimalist/>.

8. <http://www.theunclutteredlife.com/>.

tional and environmental awareness. While decluttering is often linked to sustainability, these practices reveal contradictions in middle-class environmental ethics. Large volumes of discarded belongings highlight the waste produced by consumer culture. The minimalist aesthetic popularized by minimalist blogs can unintentionally reinforce cycles of consumption in pursuit of curated, visually harmonious spaces. What appears as sustainable living may instead mask the environmental costs of initial overconsumption.

4 The Prestige of Presence: Forest Bathing and the Therapeutic Rebranding of Nature

The second practice considered, forest bathing, exemplifies quiet luxury as an experiential form of distinction grounded in presence, slowness, and embodied access to scarce natural environments. First institutionalized in Japan in the early 1980s, forest bathing (*shinrin-yoku*) emerged at the intersection of rapid urbanization, rising public-health concerns, and a longstanding cultural respect for the natural world. Promoted by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, it was framed as a scientifically grounded intervention capable of mitigating stress, supporting cardiovascular and immune system health, and counteracting the psychological strain associated with industrial modernity. Early research by scholars such as Yoshifumi Miyazaki and Qing Li positioned forest bathing not merely as a cultural practice but as an evidence-based form of environmental medicine, demonstrating measurable physiological benefits and helping to legitimize nature exposure as an object of scientific inquiry (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Li, 2018). Today, forest bathing has spread across North America, Europe, and Australia, revealing a complex interplay of socio-cultural dynamics that are deeply intertwined with sustainability and consumption in a highly commercialized world. As the practice traveled globally, it was rearticulated through wellness industries, eco-tourism, and therapeutic professions that selectively translated its Japanese cultural and spiritual roots into Western frameworks of physical and mental health (from cardiovascular to depression), mindfulness, self-care, and lifestyle enhancement, with a nod to ecological awareness and climate consciousness.

In this way, forest bathing offers a lens into how local traditions become global commodities, how nature is mobilized as a resource for managing the stresses of neoliberal life, and how scientific legitimacy intersects with cultural appropriation and environmental ethics. On the commercial side, forest bathing has been professionalized through certification programs for guides, such as the *Forest Therapy Hub*, the *Forest Therapy School*, and *Treeming's* online training programs.⁹ These programs teach participants to “learn the art of healing through nature and gain the skills to share this practice with others”, codifying a standardized repertoire of competences, materials, and meanings associated with wellness tourism through what is described as a “scientifically backed, flexible, and immersive learning experience”. Certified guides conduct structured sessions that integrate breathing exercises, mindfulness techniques, and group reflections, often marketed to urban clients seeking stress relief. In these contexts, meanings and aesthetic codes are stabilized top-down, with guides acting as intermediaries connecting clients to nature’s purported healing power.

The forest bathing community on Reddit¹⁰ discusses in depth the role of guides and the difficulties posed by the commercialization of a traditional, non-commodified experience like

9. <https://treeming.org/>.

10. <https://www.reddit.com/r/ForestBathing/>.

walking in the woods. Voices are raised, critical of the high structuring of the experience as proposed by forest bathing guide certifications and of what appears to be a top-down approach, psychologizing and commodifying “the forest is the therapist” through a “self-referential narrative” and a “transactional healing relationship”. Still, most comments and posts stress that forest bathing is a practice geared to help towards deepening the experience of “nature”: it is “the non-tangible way of feeding ourselves by nature in harmony”.

Most common is the idea that guides have to work towards “finding your own ‘you’ way of delivering it”. Reference to Japan’s experience of *shinrin-yoku*, rather than indigenous traditions of relation with woods and forests all over the world, is adamant, even though pluralism of delivery is encouraged and praised; in forest bathing discourses, it is especially stressed to overcome commodification, to offer an authentic experience, or to provide a memorable encounter with “the forest”. Woodlands themselves are the centerpiece of most posts: posting videos of the woods, shot in a rather casual, realistic, or staged-spontaneity style, is the most common form of participation in the community. On average, the camera displays the subjective experience of walking through trees but also zooms in on details such as flowers, branches, wood shapes, roots, and, above all, mushrooms — as the most curious, wild, and somehow hybrid form taken by the forest.

An ethnographic study conducted in Serbia illustrates that, for guides and participants, the meanings attributed to forest bathing emerged through reflections on bodily comfort in forest environments (Farkic et al., 2021). As a form of wellness tourism (Konu, 2015), a guided but silent walk, forest bathing was valued as an opportunity for self-reflection and reconnection with nature: “(t)he permeating qualities of slowness, stillness, security and silence were often contained in describing the experience of mindful soaking up the forest atmosphere” (Farkic et al., 2021, p. 6). Following the widely available intermediary narrative, participants commonly described forests as spaces of “escape” that foster “presence”. As the researcher noted in her diary: “(e)veryone was wandering about, searching for their private space in which they could have an intimate conversation with the forest. Some leaned against the trees, some stood motionless with their eyes closed, and some made very slow movements looking at the forest”. Similarly to what this fieldwork note vividly shows, Amos Clifford, the founder of the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs, observes in his popular *Guide to Forest Bathing* (2018) that:

going to nature for healing has a long tradition in many if not most, cultures [...] there is a growing interest in these practices, perhaps in response to some of the problematic failures of industrial medicine (...) The Japanese say that they use ‘all the five senses’ for forest bathing, but the approach described in this book includes additional senses such as proprioception, body radar, and imaginal communication [...] in forest bathing they accelerate my connection to nature, self and others (pp. 6–8).

Rather than a simple return to nature, forest bathing promises an increased capacity to “connect”, in fact, a slowness that becomes an acceleration of one’s own capacity. In this sense, forest bathing is somewhat a luxury experience: not only, for most city dwellers, it offers a sensorial environment which is at premium and contrasts dramatically with the urban context (its mechanical noises, its smells, its colors, and of course its pace), but it also provides a somewhat structured anti-structural practice, a space of liminality (Turner, 1967) where what is not permitted in ordinary life becomes possible and legitimate. “Embodied awareness” is all and is marshaled in three directions: (n)oticing our surroundings, noticing our body sensations, and

noticing our sensing bring us into contact with the forest, through a detailed set of instructions (Clifford, 2018, pp. 68ff.). “The deeper layers of forest bathing — Clifford (Ibid., p. 39) insists — can teach environmental activists and engineers what it means to partner with more-than-human world”.

Yet, to be sure, forest bathing cannot be fully understood through its commercialization alone. Interest in sustainability is largely endorsed. For example, consultants Francis Wang and Milena Guziak (2025) position forest bathing as a form of “sustainable health tourism”, which is not only an industry but also a tool for “reciprocal healing between people and the planet.” It meets what we may clearly see are characteristically middle-class demands for “authentic, health-oriented, and environmentally conscious travel”:

The critical distinction is the shift from sustainability, often focused on minimizing negative impacts, to regeneration, which actively seeks to restore and improve ecological and social systems. This commitment to positive contribution, rather than merely reducing harm, forms the (Forest Bathing) venture’s unique selling proposition and appeals to a growing segment of discerning consumers seeking authentic and impactful experiences (p. 30).

The quest for authenticity also draws upon a long-standing profane or folk tradition of woodland engagement, encompassing hiking, wandering, mountaineering, and solitary reflection that predate the wellness industry, extending beyond the forest into the provision of parks in urban environments and entailing a deep involvement with embodiment and sensory experience (Carpenter, 2013; Edensor, 2000; Gilmore, 2017). Thoreau’s *Walden* exemplifies this genealogy, documenting his experiment in simple living, immersed in the forest, as a form of spiritual and intellectual cultivation (Thoreau, 1854).

We may indeed distinguish between self-directed experiences in nature and organized, professionally facilitated, commercially led interventions. Managerial framing reshapes nature from a lived, relational space into a regulated therapeutic resource; a shift that is central to understanding how practices like forest bathing operate within health, wellbeing, and tourism infrastructures and produce specific expectations and indeed subjective positions. Similarly, contemporary recreational mountaineering, wilderness camping, Nordic walking, unsupervised forest walks, and a variety of extreme sports often reflect bottom-up practices, emphasizing embodied competences, personal agency, and subversive engagement with the landscape (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017; Shove & Pantzar, 2005). These forms exist both outside and inside the market logic; in their folk or profane form, they also involve improvisation, skill-sharing, and intimate, shared experiences of nature. Forest bathing thus illustrates how a social practice is distributed across multiple actors, infrastructures, and cultural scripts, highlighting tensions between commercialization and autonomous participation in nature. In commercial contexts, meanings and aesthetic codes are stabilized top-down, mediated by guides and marketing. In profane engagements, competences and identity enactment dominate, and meanings emerge organically from personal experience or communal traditions.

One way or the other, this form of consumption practice allows sustainability to be lived and displayed through the self-disciplined body and suggests how well-being, sustainability, and middle-class moralities are negotiated in everyday life and leisure time. Urban professionals may seek certified forest-bathing experiences to perform wellness-oriented identities in aesthetically curated and socially recognized ways, whereas independent hikers or mountaineers may cultivate resilience, ecological sensitivity, and ethical relationships with forests through unmediated practice. Both forms generate social distinction, but in different registers: one

through the consumption of curated experiences, the other through the cultivation of prudential, incremental engagement — sometimes individual, others collective. Such a duality reveals both the potential and the limits of a sustainability-oriented, wellness-focused, commercialized practice, such as forest bathing, in shaping contemporary middle-class engagements with the natural world.

5 Prestige Reframed: Upcycling between Branding and Consumer DIY

The third practice considered, upcycling, offers a material and performative articulation of quiet luxury, where sustainability is enacted through skill, craft, and online visibility. Upcycling is the practice of reworking discarded or second-hand materials into objects of higher aesthetic, functional, or symbolic value. Unlike recycling, which decomposes materials, upcycling preserves and recontextualizes them, mobilizing a reconfiguration of these materials with competences and meanings (Shove et al., 2012) in ways that foreground a mixture of craftsmanship, authenticity, and moral worth. As such, upcycling offers a privileged site for observing how environmental sensibilities are rearticulated as forms of distinction and visibility within contemporary quiet luxury.

The term upcycling was first popularized in the mid 1990s by German engineer Reiner Pilz, who contrasted it with recycling: “Recycling, — he said — I call it down-cycling. They smash bricks, they smash everything. What we need is upcycling, where old products are given more value, not less” (quoted in Kay, 1994). The concept gained traction in the early 2000s, alongside rising sustainability concerns (Vadicherla & Saravanan, 2014), and was institutionalized by McDonough and Braungart’s *Cradle to Cradle* (2002), which positioned upcycling as a main model of the circular economy aimed at extending the life and value of objects. Subsequently, upcycling moved from a design-led niche to a recognizable strand of consumer culture at the center of circular-economy debates (Bridgens et al., 2018; Sung et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2025).

Upcycling has since evolved from an aesthetic category grounded in repair and reuse into a recurring buzzword through which environmental sustainability is discursively reshaped in both marketing representations and consumer culture (Aus et al., 2021; Goodman-Smith et al., 2021). This genealogy matters because it shows how upcycling traveled from a design critique of waste and a practical solution to environmental concerns to a cultural label, appropriated in different spaces of fashion, marketing, and consumer culture. In this sense, upcycling becomes a form of quiet luxury insofar as it rearranges the elements of recycling practices into a newly recognized configuration, marked by inconspicuous consumption, artisanal authenticity, and creative appropriation, allowing ecological responsibility to function as a refined marker of taste and consumer morality.

In this context, we can identify two relevant articulations of upcycling in contemporary consumer culture. First, upcycling operates as a market category within fashion production and branding, reframed by logics of exclusivity, curated scarcity, and status, in which sustainability serves as a legitimizing backdrop for fashion-oriented distinction, and cultural intermediaries play a key role in rearranging the nexus between environment and status. Second, upcycling circulates as a consumer DIY (do-it-yourself) practice, whereby environmental concerns are re-embedded in cultures of making, self-expression, and online performance, foregrounding the role of skills and material competences within a regime of enhanced online visibility. Building on Shove et al. (2012), upcycling can be approached as a distributed practice in which competence, materials, and aesthetic repertoires co-evolve, generating different forms of moral and social distinction within sustainability-oriented consumption cultures.

Concerning the first articulation related to the realm of production, marketing, and fashion, the evolution of meanings and representations of upcycling was primarily driven by brand strategies that shape new forms of exclusivity, as well as by cultural intermediaries, such as magazines and blogs, where the production of new status value around upcycling is visually enacted. This shift allows brands to couple sustainability with a discourse of understated exclusivity aligned with quiet luxury and a broader trend toward inconspicuous consumption. Within this framing, the emphasis shifts away from recycling as impact reduction, often linked to anti-consumerist critiques, and toward upcycling as a marker of aesthetic distinctiveness and cultural boundary work. Firms adopting upcycling as a reference propose consumer objects that are crafted, available in limited runs, and made from heritage-rich or high-provenance materials. In this context, brands, designers, and intermediaries elaborate narratives that foreground craftsmanship and exclusivity over explicit sustainability claims. For instance, an article from the major fashion magazine *Vogue* in February 2025 explained upcycling from the perspective of the fashion and accessories industry:

Once the domain of craft enthusiasts and thrifty grandmothers turning old curtains into dresses, upcycling is in the midst of a luxury makeover. Spurred by the economic downturn, the growing concern for environmentalism, and an influx of DIY tutorials on social media, emerging and established brands are embracing upcycling, as a slew of new business models are popping up to engage the masses.¹¹

Here, upcycling is framed in its passage into luxury culture, rather than in terms of the rupture that environmental concerns might imply for the contemporary fashion industry. The “makeover” metaphor suggests that waste-based practices acquire a new status once they are polished to be successfully associated with high-end brands and tastemakers. While environmental value is still present in fashion magazines’ discourse — since upcycling is narrated as a response to overproduction, emissions, and textile waste — it becomes attractive precisely because it can be recoded as a new fashion trend that emphasizes exclusivity, scarcity, and heritage craft. Here, upcycling thus serves as a resource for distinction and for reinforcing brand identity, while environmental concerns are domesticated into a lifestyle narrative that is attractively alternative but not adverse to fashion industry logics. Upcycling operates as a representational form of quiet luxury, where sustainability and refinement converge into a distinctive articulation of brand values, aesthetic canons, and moral capital, contributing to shaping the “moral texture” of contemporary sustainable consumption (Scott et al., 2025).

In the second articulation of upcycling, the practice is framed less as a branded aesthetic and more as a field of doing, where consumers are directly at work, taking the form of a diffuse mode of material transformation enacted through everyday projects, tutorials, and users’ exchanges. In contrast to the fashion-industry articulation, here the cultural center of gravity lies in the cultivation of material competences and their public performance, foregrounding, from a practice theory perspective (Shove et al., 2012), the role of skills like cutting, stitching, sanding, or assembling, their learning as well as their displaying.

Blogs focused on sharing upcycling techniques and outcomes frame the practice as sustainable self-expression, linking it to consumers’ creative identity and the pleasure of materially transforming old goods. Quiet luxury emerges from the foregrounding of embodied skill, expressive consumption, and the performative display of a morally charged consumer identity. An example of discursive articulation of upcycling within DIY-centered blogs is *Pillar*

11. <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-fashion-execs-guide-to-upcycling>.

Box Blue,¹² run by a single creator, Claire, who combines step-by-step tutorials with autobiographical storytelling, presenting upcycling in ways that foreground the everyday, personal side of consumer transformations. On *Pillar Box Blue*'s "About Me" page,¹³ Claire frames upcycling through the lens of personal craft practice and embodied creativity, introducing herself as a "messy-handed, glue-covered, fabric-hoarding crafter" and defining her orientation as turning "something old into something fabulous". This self-presentation foregrounds the maker's identity and the pleasures of hands-on transformation, positioning upcycling as an intimate, skillful relationship with materials rather than a purely environmental issue. The examples she lists (like a denim scrap becoming decorations or a vintage wallpaper turned into decoupage projects) read as a repertoire of competences, a catalog of techniques that signal aesthetic imagination and creativity.

Social media platforms are crucial, as they do not merely circulate guides, instructions, or tutorials, but constitute the proper spaces where consumers' upcycling practices can be enacted and displayed in visual form, therefore representing the stage on which consumer distinction can be performed within DIY communities. Here, sustainability still provides a moral horizon, but this time it is discursively re-embedded in a DIY grammar, where ecological virtue is demonstrated through what consumers, with their skills, can do with material goods. An example is the dedicated subreddit *r/Upcycling*, with roughly 250,000 members and a sustained activity, which works as a high-visibility infrastructure where DIY competencies travel, are publicly displayed, and become part of the framing of consumer upcycling. In this online setting, upcycling is enacted in a tight connection of discourses and material practices: users document their upcycling transformations visually, while comments circulate practical know-how and evaluative judgments. Garments and other items are decorated, re sewn, or reassembled, and the community responds by discussing tools, steps, and replicability, as well as by recognizing the skill involved in giving objects a second life. Here, the value of upcycling is re-embedded in a performative culture of skill and identity expression, rather than in exclusivity or style alone.

Across these two articulations, we see that, when addressed within organized practices, environmental values and sensitivities are recombined in different ways, according to the diverse trajectories that these practices undertake in consumer culture. In fashion branding, upcycling is aestheticized and marketized through the emphasis on scarcity, the use of heritage materials, and a constructed exclusivity, so that sustainability can be translated as moral legitimation for a renewed hierarchy of taste; among consumers involved in upcycling works, by contrast, sustainability is re-embedded differently, following the syntax of the DIY grammars of making, skills, and tools, where embodied competences circulate through social media and become performative resources for identity display and recognition. Taken together, the two articulations of upcycling show that, much like decluttering and forest bathing, simplicity and environmental sensitivities function less as an alternative to consumer culture than as a reworking of its hierarchies, through which sustainability is mobilized as both a moral horizon and a differentiated resource for status, recognition, and identity.

6 Discussion and Conclusions

The three practices examined in this article — decluttering, forest bathing, and upcycling — can all be read as contemporary responses to the perceived excesses of consumer culture. Each

12. <https://www.pillarboxblue.com>.

13. <https://www.pillarboxblue.com/about-me/>.

of them promotes a reorientation toward materiality that privileges restraint, attentiveness, and experiential depth over accumulation: owning less, sensing more, and revaluing what is already present. Across these cases, sustainability is articulated not primarily through reduction of consumption *per se*, but through reconfigured relationships with space, nature, and objects.

However, as our analysis has shown, these practices do not simply stand outside consumer culture or oppose its logics. Rather, they are increasingly shaped by processes of aestheticization, mediation, and selective commercialization that reposition simplicity itself as a site of distinction. Practices oriented toward divestment, nature, or reuse are frequently incorporated into competitive circuits of visibility, expertise, and taste, where moral value and environmental sensitivity become resources for social differentiation. In this sense, the “other” of consumerism — less, nature, waste — is not rejected but reformulated in ways that can reproduce hierarchies of status and symbolic capital. We have conceived of this trend as *quiet luxury*: a form of relation to consumer materiality which places value on the senses and the depth of the encounter with space, nature, and objects. But rather than dissolving status competition, these practices rearticulate it in quieter, more reflexive forms, whereby sustainability and simplicity function as aesthetic and moral markers.

We may place quiet luxury within a broader trend: the backlash against overconsumption, driven by alternative consumption and practices (Humphery, 2009; Littler, 2009; Sassatelli, 2006; Schor, 2011; Soper 2020; Willis & Schor, 2012). These practices range from boycotting or buying ethically produced products to broader lifestyle shifts that emphasize reuse, sharing, reducing, and reframing in more ecologically sound ways. One prominent example is the “Buying-nothing Day” and related groups, a public celebration of restraint and the creation of circular economies where possessions are given away, used, and passed on again (Bargain-Darrigues, 2023; Sassatelli, 2006). Still, several practices are developing in the Global North, like in the cases presented here drawing on Eastern traditions especially (Japanese) or on assorted artistic currents (such as avant-garde “Assemblage Art” and Duchamp’s Readymades, Italian “*Arte povera*” as well as “Eco-Art” of the Seventies; see Chiaia, 2022) — which bend anti-consumerism and a return to the slow, creative sensory appreciation of nature and materiality in therapeutic, commercialized and distinctive ways. Rather than viewing them simply as lifestyle trends, they can be approached as configurations of practical elements, both material and symbolic, that generate new forms of moral and social distinction within sustainability-oriented middle-class cultures.

To be sure, quiet luxury as a cultural framing contains not only *diverse* but also *diverging* practices. Framings are constituted by loosely structured cognitive and practical schemata that share overlapping features, rather than by strict definitions (Goffman, 1974). They amount to variable configurations that develop from different positions and yield different consequences. By and large, while simplicity-coded and sustainability-driven ways of consuming may offer alternatives to status-driven consumption for those who can engage with them, they may also, even simultaneously, take on a distinctive flavor. Just like the consumer is a socially and culturally constituted persona, whose practices and representations mediate power, morality, and subjectivity, revealing both the constraints and the possibilities of contemporary consumer culture (Sassatelli, 2009), so the implications of minimalist and voluntary simplicity practices remain deeply ambivalent. Ambivalence, indeed, is inherent in the complexity of the framing of quiet luxury, and yet we may try to approach some analytical disentanglement through our cases.

From this perspective, the three considered domains of practice can be understood as occupying different positions along a continuum between two broader configurations of consump-

tion. At one end are intermediary-led or *commercial formations*, in which meanings, aesthetic codes, and evaluative standards are stabilized through branding, expert discourse, and mediated representations. At the other end are practitioner-led or *profane formations*, where value emerges more incrementally through embodied competences, situated experimentation, and everyday practices of doing.

Decluttering, especially in its globally popular forms inspired by Marie Kondo minimalism, aligns closely with intermediary-led configurations of practice, in which cultural intermediaries play a central role in stabilizing aesthetic and moral meanings. Lifestyle experts, bloggers, and minimalist brands promote a curated vision of “proper” simplicity that relies on standardized aesthetic codes: neutral palettes, empty surfaces, clean lines, and uniform storage solutions. These visual and material conventions actively construct a vision of middle-class moral legitimacy and personal well-being, linking simplicity to self-control and emotional balance. Positive meanings and aesthetic repertoires are clearly recommended by experts, thereby turning decluttering into a performance of moral order and self-improvement, often tied to consumerist logics (e.g., buying “minimalist” storage and replacing mismatched items with coordinated ones).

Forest bathing represents a more hybrid configuration and occupies an intermediate position along the continuum between intermediary-led and practitioner-led practices. On one hand, it has been commercialized and aestheticized, which is framed by wellness industries, health experts, and tourism boards as a therapeutic practice. This aligns with the first configuration: intermediaries provide meanings (calm, healing, mindfulness), curated imagery (serene forests, slow breathing), and structured indications. However, forest bathing also draws from long-standing profane and subversive traditions of simply “going to the woods”, walking, wandering, and spending unsupervised time in the wild. These practices (often rooted in working-class, peasant, familial, or informal leisure cultures) rely on incremental embodied competences (navigating trails, reading landscapes, collecting herbs or wood, etc.). Arguably, both directions, as forms of embodied, reflexive engagement with woodlands, can be understood as contemporary examples of quiet luxury with distinctive components.

Upcycling is the practice that most strongly underscores the central role of practitioner-led configurations of practice, in which profane, embodied competences and creative problem-solving have become highly relevant as a form of consumer engagement. Here, quiet luxury is enacted not through removal or retreat, but through making and repair, repositioning ecological commitment as a form of practical competence and aesthetic creativity. We see in this case how DIY makers and community-based practices cultivate repertoires of reuse, such as fixing, sewing, sanding, and woodworking, which often circulate through informal learning environments and digital platforms. While these repertoires frequently contrast with the standardized aesthetic codes of minimalist simplicity, distinction, and status-making emerge from the public display of knowledge and competence, in connecting with ecological creativity. However, although upcycling is strongly aligned with practitioner-led configurations and foregrounds embodied competences, it also retains a significant intermediary-, or even production-led dimension, as design industries, fashion brands, and cultural intermediaries increasingly appropriate and stabilize its aesthetic and moral codes within market-oriented frameworks.

Looking at these practices together shows that they are not merely lifestyle choices but dynamic arenas in which new moral and social distinctions are being reconfigured within the cultural landscape of renewed environmental sensitivity. Decluttering thrives on top-down aesthetic standardization; forest bathing blends institutionalized wellness meanings with long-standing folk woodland practices; and upcycling re-frames and re-values waste through profane, everyday cultures of embodied competence and craft. Together, they illustrate how

sustainability-oriented consumption cultures mobilize different configurations of practice (materials, competences, and meanings) to shape the emerging intersection of ethical concerns and aesthetic lifestyles. Still, these practices are increasingly confronted and often pulled back into a neoliberal logic that reframes ethical or ecological self-cultivation as an individualized, market-aligned project of sovereignty. This is especially visible in decluttering discourse. As Kondo writes in her book (2014, p. 217):

There is another reason that my clients never complain about throwing things away and this is the most significant. Because they have continued to identify and discard things that they don't need, they no longer abdicate responsibility for decision-making to other people. When a problem arises, they don't look for some external cause or person to blame. They now make their own decision and are aware that considering what action to take in any situation is what really matters [...] It is by putting one's own house in order that one's mindset is changed.

In this framing, the management of material environments and objects becomes a means of cultivating the autonomous, self-regulating subject central to neoliberal governance, linking personal order to moral clarity, self-responsibility, and proper decision-making. Appropriation and narrativization of embodied experience are key to this. While appropriation allows consumers to actively shape and personalize even digital technologies, materiality still “bites back” in everyday consumption practices (Magaudha, 2011) and, as we have seen, is narrativized in simplicity practices. Embodiment — and the sensory in particular — is central to consumption, and even more so to reflexive, critical practices such as decluttering, forest bathing, and upcycling. These practices may be understood as embodied and gendered forms of subjectivity constitution negotiating social hierarchies as well as ethical and environmental orientations. If the body is a key site where social norms, inequalities, and moral expectations are inscribed through practices and institutions including consumer ones (Sassatelli & Ghigi, 2024), contemporary cultures of simplicity increasingly call for reflexive bodily practices that reconcile values held in tension, such as restraint and fulfillment, or authenticity and healing.

All in all, such practices should be considered *not* only as responses to environmental concerns but also as markers of cultural competence that are disproportionately accessible to middle-class subjects. In its different guises, this articulation of quiet luxury appears as an embodied moral project through which aesthetic, taste, and ethical awareness are displayed and negotiated. By translating structural advantages into *embodied* virtues and framing a renewed encounter with materiality and sustainability — less as a collective political challenge and more as a personalized, gendered, and classed mode of self-fashioning — these practices embody quiet forms of luxury that dance at the music of social distinction and status remaking. Yet, like a Pandora's box, they may also hold creative openings that allow for more radical reframing, hinting at renewed possibilities for legitimation that may be explored in alternative ways.

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