

TOWARDS A SOCIETY OF SOBRIETY: conditions for a change in consumer behavior

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The negative impact our lifestyles have on the environment means we have to think beyond the circular economy (reuse, recycle, eco-design) and imagine lifestyles marked by greater sobriety. Sobriety is a lifestyle that involves not just consuming better but also, and critically, consuming less. It can be expressed in consumption of energy and digital technologies as well as via material objects. Making the commitment and embracing sobriety to live a more sober life are ways of living that are conditioned by changes in practices on the part of consumers, the units analyzed in this article, at every stage of the consumption process (perception and sensation of need, products purchases and places of purchase, use and non-use of objects, dispossession).

Changing your habits as a consumer entails seeking meaning through other ways of doing and being, which requires revisiting, or even initiating, relationships with objects, the self and others. Sobriety places notions of conscience at the center of relationships with the world, alongside the effort and determination involved in challenging personal and social norms.

Organizations, both public (local authorities, for example) and private (non-profits and businesses), could offer a range of mechanisms, products and services to restore to consumers the skills needed for this lifestyle (the knowledge, know-how and attitudes) as well as the opportunity to pursue it. Sobriety should be a space within which consumers and organizations alike can find fulfilment.

INTRODUCTION: FROM A CIRCULAR SOCIETY TO A SOCIETY OF SOBRIETY

Surely the society of tomorrow should shift from the circular economy to the sobriety economy? After the linear economy concept (produce, consume, dispose) and its limits in terms of waste, societies have evolved toward a circular economy, one that places a value on that materials that have become useless by reintegrating them into the production (eco-design¹) and/or consumption process. Although virtuous, this vision of society focuses on the downstream (recycle and reuse), in other words on managing what exists, with little thought to the upstream, in other words, on ways to avoid depleting reserves of resources. It would appear that, mindful of the state of planet, recycling or reusing the useless is not sufficient to cap carbon emissions. Consuming less would make a bigger impact. "Less and better" is a good way to sum up sobriety, which in academic terms centers on voluntary simplicity. This is a lifestyle rooted in reducing consumption of material objects, digital technologies and energy. Are consumers prepared to shift toward this lifestyle? What are the conditions needed for consumers to switch to sobriety?

¹ Franck Aggeri. *Vers l'innovation responsable. [Toward Responsible Innovation]* Esprit (Paris, France: 1932), Editions Esprit, 2020, pp.40-51.

ADOPTING SOBER BEHAVIORS: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMERS?

Committing to a process leading toward sobriety requires rethinking every practice at every stage of the consumption cycle: the purchase, use and dispossession of objects (A), which leads consumers to rethink their relationships to materiality, the self and the other (B).

(A) WHEN CONSUMING LESS AND BETTER ENTAILS A CHANGE IN PRACTICES

Consuming in a sober fashion starts with the expression of a need, or at least, what the consumers thinks is a need but is in fact often a desire or perhaps a whim. Consumers often purchase through habit, acting impulsively because they think they're getting "a good deal", or "just in case" they fail to find that same good deal. But purchases, especially of non-food items, rarely respond to a need. The function of objects is generally to heighten an experience and, by extension, the stimulating emotions that activate pleasure. The products purchased thus become emotional merchandise.²

To buy only in response to a need is something that can be learned. It implies that consumers ask themselves what their need is truly expressing. This is something that people who joined the Nothing New challenge run by non-profit Zero Waste discovered.³ Through trying to limit their purchases of new objects, these consumers (95% of them women) realized that the consumer society creates frustration that is experienced through the ceaseless quest for the new (spectacle, object, wellness experience, etc.). The challenge also enabled the women to transform their relationships to consumption through questioning the ways in which items are acquired.

A sober acquisition entails rethinking the types of objects to acquire, how and where they are acquired.

First of all, the idea is to swap from purchasing resource-intensive new products to acquiring pre-existing used products. Consumers are increasingly opting for secondhand thanks to the boom in the number of secondhand stores and platforms that bring private buyers and sellers together as part of the collaborative economy. However, it would seem that the portion of secondhand purchases varies according to the product category. Consumer electronics, for example, are less frequently purchased secondhand than other categories of objects: consumers prefer to buy new when it comes to computers, telephones and tablets, as new products come with better warranties (returnable if they break down or don't work properly, etc.) than secondhand goods.

A sobriety-led approach requires consumers to change their practices at every stage of the consumption cycle (defining need-purchase-use-non-use of objects and their dispossession)

Sober purchasing also involves buying quality products that will last, and paying attention to the materials used. This entails not merely thinking of the object but feeling it too, no longer deploying only representations and beliefs but also knowledge and senses (touch, hold, experience through the body). In other words, methods of relating to products and acquiring them that are little explored by consumers.

Consumers then turn to alternative non-market mechanisms to acquire what they need. Donations between individuals or between anonymous people via dedicated drop-off boxes (Givebox), swaps, picking up items from the sidewalk⁴ or, for the more militant, food from the trash, are all practices that save materials from being thrown away. People's motivations to adopting such practices might be economic:⁵ they take remnants and objects no longer wanted by other households,

restore or repair then and sometimes resell then via one of the platforms. Most people tend to be driven to act by the idea of "limiting the wastage that revolts them," a motivation that combines with the pleasure of rummaging through a pile of objects, seeking the hidden treasure and restoring it to use. Renting, lending, borrowing, making available, restoring, tinkering, repairing are also practices that extend the life of objects without purchasing them.

In addition, sober consumption entails selecting purchase places that align with this approach. Local outlets are favored where possible, such as small shops or producers, via local producer-consumer networks for example, where it is possible to ask for advice, create a relationship rooted in trust and avoid the packaging that comes with delivered goods.

In essence, being a sober consumer requires the quest for a type of consumption that takes full account of the consequences of consuming on the environment, doing "all that's possible" to avoid triggering production of a new object (and potentially its destruction at an unknown date in the future). This is an approach that requires time (research, collating information, comparing alternatives), during which the consumer may come to realize that they in fact have no need of the product. However, if a secondhand or free acquisition can be a way to "consume better" that fully aligns with the circular economy, such practices do not always help to "consume less." The lower cost of a secondhand object, or having almost unlimited access to something via a fixed-price rental (clothes for example) often leads consumers to "give in to temptation", failing completely to challenge their dependency on consumption. Sobriety demands breaking this dependency, as much for the acquisition of a product as for its use.

² Eva Illouz (2019), *Les marchandises émotionnelles [Emotional Merchandise]*, Premier Parallèle.

³ Laurence Auzary, Sophie Dubly, Lucie Guillory, Justine Loizeau, Capucine Olivier, Juliette Ricq, Cindy Tieu, Cécile Wajsblat, Philippine Weingarten (2019), *Etre et/ou devenir sobre en participant au(x) défi(s) « Rien de neuf » de Zero Waste France: analyse des profils, motivations, vécu et de la communauté Facebook [Adopting sober consumption by taking part in the Nothing New challenge(s) run by Zero Waste France: analysis of profiles, motivations, experience and the Facebook community]*, in Guillard V. (2019) (dir.) *Du gaspillage à la Sobriety [From wastage to sobriety]*, pub. De boeck.

⁴ Roux, D., & Guillard, V. (2016). *Circulations of objets entre étrangers dans l'espace public: une analyse des formes de socialité entre déposeurs et glaneurs [Objects circulating between strangers in the public space: analysis of forms of sociality between people who drop off and people who pick up]*. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing (French Edition)*, 31(4), 30-49.

⁵ Naturally, people living in poverty also search for items they can gather to have no-cost access to food and other objects. The choice of a sober lifestyle does not include people living in poverty or on society's margins.

Another condition for consumers to move to sober consumption concerns the use of products. Sober use equates to using fewer things for a longer time. Digital sobriety, for example, involves not having several devices that provide a similar function (such as computer, tablet, e-book reader and smartphone⁶) but just one, preferably a reconditioned purchase that is used to meet a need rather than to stave off boredom. 90% of total energy use occurs prior to the purchase of a digital device (metal extraction, production, assembly and transport).⁷ Manufacturing a two-kilo laptop computer emits 124 of the 169 kilos of CO₂ emitted over its entire lifecycle, and requires 836 kilos of raw materials.⁸ But consumers do not often wait for a device to break down before changing it. In France, cellphones are replaced approximately every 20 months,⁹ sometimes because they are slowing down but often simply so that people can swap to the latest version, the object representing its owner in the social sphere. Product obsolescence is partly due to aesthetics,¹⁰ technological aspects or, paradoxically, to the energy-saving promises of new objects.

And as for the non-use of objects, their accumulation in the home even when they are no longer used, is this also a practice that aligns with sobriety? There is no easy answer. It depends on the true use made of the object. Let's look at an example: a gardener will store bags, old crockery, old windows "just in case" he/she needs them to cover her seedlings, to make mini-greenhouses during a cold spring. On the other hand, some people tend to "keep everything"¹¹ without realizing these objects have lost their utility, and hence are wasted. Is keeping an object a waste if it serves no purpose? Again, it depends. A gift, personal souvenir or inherited item is rarely wasted in terms of the owner's representation, even when these objects are not used. They embody ties that go above and beyond their mere usefulness.

Lastly, adopting a sobriety-centric approach leads to the dispossession of objects by opting to transform them (for example, turning a pair of jeans no longer worn into a bag), reuse them by giving, handing on or swapping them in place of discarding them, or perhaps recycling them at a dedicated location.

All of these practices needed for a sober consumption approach are challenges to the ways of relating to materiality, the self and others.

6 82% of households owned a computer in 2017 compared to 45% in 2004; 76% have an internet connection compared to 45% in 2004. In 2018, almost 100% of 16-44-year-olds had a smartphone (INSEE, 2019).

7 GreenIT, 2019. The environmental footprint of the digital world: https://www.greenit.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/GREENIT_EENM_etude_EN_accessible.pdf.

8 *La face cachée du numérique. Réduire les impacts du numérique sur l'environnement [The hidden face of digital. Reducing the impact of digital on the environment]*. ADEME. November 2019.

9 <http://www.journaldunet.com/diaporama/0610-mobile/4.shtml> (Source: Observatoire sociétal du téléphone mobile AFOM / TNS SOFRES), in the USA, the smartphone replacement cycle for individuals was 3.17 years in 2020 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/619788/average-smartphone-life/>).

10 Guillard, V., & Le Nagard-Assayag, E. (2014). *Mieux comprendre l'obsolescence perçue des produits durables par les consommateurs [A better understanding of consumers' perceived obsolescence of products that last]*. International congress of the French Marketing Association.

11 Guillard V., Pinson C. (2012), *Comprendre et identifier les consommateurs qui ont tendance à "tout" garder [Understanding and identifying consumers who tend to keep everything]*, Recherche et Applications en Marketing, 27, 3, 57-79.

(B) WHEN SOBRIETY ENTAILS CHANGING WAYS OF RELATING TO THE WORLD

Consumers who commit to an approach guided by sobriety do so for reasons that are economic or environmental, but also because they feel a need to give (back) meaning to their consumption or modify it. Consumption, and the objects, are a means of self-definition in the eyes of the other, but they also give meaning to daily life or work. We may accept a job that is not much fun but well-paid for the "quality of life" it offers, if quality of life simply involves the possession of objects that can be useless or very little-used, or having experiences supposed to be exciting but where the excitements last no longer than the moment they occur.

Finding a meaning to assign to sobriety in consumption can be conditioned by the quality of ties that bind us to the self and the immediate environment. As Françoise le Hénand explains,¹² "the question of the meaning of life for each human being seems to me to be closely linked to the ability to establish relationships. This is as much about creating links between different aspects of the conscious and sub-conscious subjective experience — sensation, affection, thought, dream, fantasy — as it is about situating components of a person's history within their spatial inscription and chronological ordering (past, present and the future to come) [...] This relationship to the self conditions the possibility and quality of relationships we are capable of maintaining with others and the world, our capacity to love." (p.20).

To question the meaning of consumption is to reflect on relationships to objects. This entails being able to tell the difference, when experiencing consumption and use, between the needs, desires and urges that these objects are supposed to nourish. Being conscious of experiences of consumption that do not nourish a person's individuality is something that has to be worked on, an approach that demands sufficient time be taken to gain consciousness as well as to make the required effort. According to Julia Faure, the founder of a company called Loom, sobriety, the approach she uses when designing her products, demands effort. She explains that one of the problems with our consumption model is the marginal comfort it supplies. A portion of our economy (and source of environmental and ecological problems) is predicated on our greatest weakness: laziness. The concept of effort lies at the interface between the physiology of action and the philosophy of taking action.¹³ Making an effort implies "deploying all the capabilities a living thing is capable of for the purpose of conquering resistance or overcoming difficulty."¹⁴ Effort becomes a category that can be used in the analysis of sobriety because it is so closely tied to the phenomenon that conditions it, an expression of will. Effort — that of doing something as much as of not doing something, of resisting — results from the assessment made to determine the quantity of energy to deploy to attain an objective. This means that to embrace sobriety requires making the effort to

12 Françoise Le Hénand, *La quête du sens [The quest for meaning]*, Cahiers Jungiens de Psychanalyse, 125, pp19-28.

13 Seignan, G. (2013). *Psychologie de « l'effort volontaire »: les déclinaisons de l'énergie psychique entre le XIX^e et le XX^e [Psychology of the "voluntary effort": manifestations of psychological energy between the 19th and 20th centuries]*. Bulletin de psychologie, (5), 407-416.

14 CNRTL, CNRS dictionary.

challenge one's personal norms and habits: downloading films rather than watching them live, reducing temperatures in the home to cut energy consumption, keeping an eye on water use to detect leaks, fitting low-energy lightbulbs, traveling by bicycle not car whenever practical, not spending five minutes under the shower,¹⁵ and so on.

Committing to a sobriety-driven mindset also requires taking a position vis-a-vis the social sphere. Is it acceptable to you, but especially to the other, to receive a secondhand object as a gift? To offer an object that is new is one of the conventions that surrounds gifting (unless the secondhand object is a collector's item).¹⁶ The care, friendship and love that the receiver perceives in the gift depends on the effort made to find the right gift, which corresponds to what they feel the other person thinks of them, but also of the effort involved in having paid a certain price. It is very likely that to be given a designer pullover in perfect condition but that has already been worn and comes without the packaging that gives it all its value will risk damaging the relationship between the two protagonists in an exchange. Aside from gifts, people may encounter difficulties in staking a place in an interaction with others through a refusal, based on belief in their values of sobriety, to travel by plane for a holiday, purchase new trainers for a teenager, order a book from Amazon, or perhaps subscribe to Netflix.¹⁷

To sum up, the ability to move beyond personal and social norms is a necessary condition for the adoption of the sobriety-led approach. How can organizations help consumers with this approach?

HOW CAN SOBER CONSUMPTION BE MADE ACCESSIBLE?

Sobriety is an approach, and like any mindset it is based on willpower, knowledge and action, three characteristics that fall within the concept of skill sets, but also the ability to act, examined here through the prism of the territory.

In terms of knowledge, setting up workshops, conferences, and practical guides are all tools that help people to learn what can be done to consume less and better. The idea is to reduce consumers' ecological mental workload,¹⁸ particularly among women who are the group that feels the most concerned. Consumers need information that is simple, available when they need it, and sufficiently well-presented so that little effort is required to process it.

In terms of know-how, it seems that consumers need (and want) to learn by doing. How can they learn sober practices? How to find help putting them into practice? Knowing how to sew, drill a hole, plant lettuce, prune fruit trees or repair a bicycle are all skills that have been abandoned to the market for many years. Which does not mean that they could not be reintroduced as part of the curriculum at schools or even universities. Some habits require a real learning process, even though consumers fail to appreciate this. Home organizers, for example, teach consumers how to reconnect with objects, space and others through sorting and tidying their homes. But this as yet little-known profession, despite the popularity of Marie Kondo, is completely in tune with the idea of implementing a sobriety-led approach.¹⁹ Yet home organizers provide a know-how-to-be service, in the sense that they teach consumers to retain only that which truly corresponds to them by purifying their relationship to consumption.

The ability to act, in other words, the existence of suitable mechanisms, remains essential. People living in rural areas feel "penalized" by the lack of such mechanisms, which paradoxically leads them to increase their ties to the town in order to put their sobriety approach into action (buy in bulk, secondhand, attend workshops, etc.).²⁰

IN CONCLUSION: IS SOBRIETY REALISTIC IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HEALTH CRISIS?

The Covid pandemic leads us to question our lifestyles, which have suddenly become more sober. Consumers are focusing on buying only essentials, and have also become aware of the dangers that delivery workers are exposed to when delivering non-essential products. A social life that is absent, or limited, also leads to a fall in consumption. In September 2020, 54% of people interviewed, up from 49% in April, stated that they "want to enjoy life differently, by consuming less and renouncing purchases now seen as useless in the light of lockdown."²¹ The health crisis has strengthened ties between consumers and local producers, mainly but not only in the countryside,²² which has helped to initiate new practices.

Nevertheless, the road to hell being paved with good intentions, will these new habits continue over the long term? On the one hand, the negative consequences on national economies of reduced consumption are all too clear. On the other, sobriety can be an approach that offers potential in the economic (responsible production of good quality products or services that transform business models), social (reduce the inequalities caused by the purchase of social markers) and ecological spheres. Realizing this potential will take a great deal of will, especially political will.

15 <https://www.ademe.fr/sites/default/files/assets/documents/guide-pratique-economiser-eau-energie.pdf>.

16 Montant, S. (1998). *L'invention d'un code: du malaise à la justification [Invention of a code: from uneasiness to justification]*. Ethnologie française, 445-456.

17 Monjaret A. (1998). *L'argent des cadeaux [The money behind gifts]*, in Chevalier S. and Monjaret A., Ethnologie Française: Les cadeaux à quel prix?, XXVIII (4): 493-505.

18 Guillard V. (2020). *Etre ou ne pas être soi face aux autres dans un contexte d'anti-consumation, Une explication par le concept de congruence [Staying or not staying true to yourself in relation to other In an anti-consumption context]*, French Marketing Association symposium, May.

19 Mental workload is the cognitive load represented by all the domestic and professional tasks a person is required to think about (not just those that the person has to do themselves), leading to mental and physical fatigue. For example, thinking about having to pick up bread for dinner while you're in a meeting. Aurélie Schneider, La charge mentale des Femmes et celle des hommes: mieux la détecter pour prévenir le burn-out [Women and men's mental workload: Improving detection to prevent burn-out], Editions Larousse, 2018.

19 <https://theconversation.com/comment-expliquer-le-succes-du-home-organising-147768>.

20 Ben Kemoun N., Caitucoli PM and Guillard V. (2021), *La déconsommation en ruralité comme axe de développement territorial, L'analyse du lien au territoire dans le cadre du défi « Rien de Neuf » de l'association Zero Waste France [Deconsumerism in the rural environment as a strategy for territorial development, analysis of the ties with territory as part of the Nothing New challenge run by Zero Waste France]*, Revue d'Economie Régionale et Urbaine (awaiting publication). OR FORTHCOMING ?

21 Crédoc, Lifestyle and aspirations surveys, April 2020 and September 2020.

22 Salomé Berlioux (2020), Nos Campagne Suspendues [Our countryside suspended], La France périphérique face à la crise, Editions de l'Observatoire.