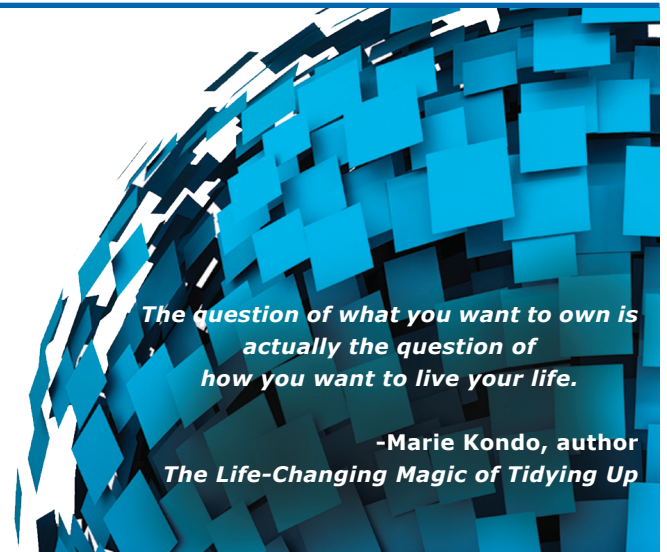


LESS OF THIS AND MORE OF THAT: INDIVIDUALS MOVE AWAY FROM CONSUMERISM AND TOWARD CONTROL



CONTEXT & DYNAMICS

Consumers are becoming comfortable with buying and having less, even as they seem to be finding all kinds of activities that entertain them more. In the decades following the Second World War, during which time the Dispersed Wealth Grand Narrative held sway, Americans pursued growth at any cost – more clothes, flashy brands, larger houses, bigger profits, more energy, more comfortable cars and on and on. “More” was a mantra, and as a result, costs in terms of personal lives and the environment became substantial. As that Grand Narrative fades into history, new ways of thinking and operating are surfacing, and as a result, a new dynamic has emerged between less and more. An increasing number of individuals and companies are shifting the kinds of things they want less of and the kinds of things they want more of, and that shift is becoming critical in consumer markets. A survey of this dynamic has revealed the following examples: Less Stuff, More Access; Less Waste, More Sustainability; Less Consumerism, More Restraint; Less Aspiration, More Pragmatism; Less Stress, More Calm; and Less Rejection, More Adoption. Together, these shifts in behavior and personal preferences highlight a subtle but ongoing restructuring of the role citizens, consumers and employees play in society.

IMPLICATIONS

- As the less-versus-more dynamic spreads, consumer spending habits will shift, offering new risks and opportunities to consumer-facing companies.
- These shifts in individual preferences will become societal norms over time.
- As instant gratification gives way to longer-term perspectives for society in general, marketers will need to adjust their messages and their activities to retain loyalty.
- “More” and “bigger” will come to be seen as wasteful.
- Companies that exhibit sustainability practices will gain a market advantage.
- The “pressure to perform,” which drove growth in the prior era, will slowly lose its effectiveness.
- The wellness market and stress-reducing products and practices will continue to enjoy consumer support.



Is Less More?

"Less is more," a line made famous by German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (d. 1969), was intended to capture the essence of the modernist aesthetic. Stripping away ornamentation and letting the structural elements come through was what the mid-twentieth-century architect meant. In the post-modern era of the decades following the Second World War, a different kind of message emerged. The message surfaced in Burger King's ads about "the bigger the burger, the better the burger," or was intoned by the late David Bowie, "Too much is never enough." It found expression recently in the song "More Is Better" from the current Broadway musical *Mean Girls*.

*More people know my name;
I have more shoes;
More is always better,
'Cause when you have less
You have more to lose.*

According to this message, more of this and even more of that yield more popularity and happiness, while having less of everything undermines one's ability to be popular and liked. Thus, a dynamic between modernist "less" and post-modernist "more" has become part of American culture.

In the decades of the most recent Grand Narrative – what we called the Dispersed Wealth Grand Narrative and what gave rise to the Golden Age of Consumerism – marketers placed all manner of crave-inducing stimuli anywhere consumers might be, including advertisements on televisions and billboards, logos draped across clothes and accessories, all kinds of online videos, in-store imagery galore, full-page and pop-up ads and even ads inside fiction books. All of this encouraged individuals to spend money to buy more and more stuff. And to many Americans at the time, having more was embedded in the American Dream. In that Golden Age, such omnipresent messaging worked, with two-thirds of the U.S. economy depending on consumers buying things.

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Social media pushed incentives toward addictions, when, to ensure continuous use, they created a "social-validation feedback loop," which set up practices that would trigger the user's brain to secrete dopamine, a neurotransmitter that is part of a natural reward system in the human body (see [inThought 11/20/17](#)).

Recently, neuroscientists Terry Robinson and Kent Berridge of the University of Michigan explained why such aggressive campaigns worked: the "massive" and "robust" wanting systems in the brain, the place where individuals think about what they want, can be activated without triggering pleasure; that part of the brain is "smaller and more fragile." In other words, **wanting something and then having that something can happen without yielding pleasure.** Having more and wanting even more, which the "social-validation feedback loop" facilitates, (according to the two neuroscientists) leads to "impulse-control disorders," and that is what marketers and advertisers have sought to activate in the Golden Age of consumerism, even exploiting a neurotransmitter to circumvent the pleasure mechanism of the whole body. (*Guardian Weekly*, 1/18/19)



"Have you ever tried buying lots of stuff?"

Lately, however, individuals have been pulling back from such messaging, creating, instead, options that do not entail buying and having. The so-called sharing economy, for example, in which individuals lend and borrow (or rent) what they need when they need it, has interrupted markets in cars, clothes, music albums, hotels, apartments, appliances and the like. At the same time, individuals have been acting on the dictates of a “tidying up” model and getting rid of stuff they have already bought. They are, as Mies van der Rohe suggested, stripping away the superfluous and focusing on essentials. To take one example, a recent survey of Americans found that 85 percent felt that a “freedom of choice in how to live” was the American Dream, while only 16 percent said “to become wealthy” was the American Dream, a significant revision in the historical association of the American Dream with wealth. (*New York Times*, 2/6/19)

After decades of a consumer culture that encouraged and rewarded buying stuff, individuals are starting to change their priorities and shift their emphases, if not to something approaching a “less is more” model, then at least from wanting more to desiring less. Evidently, the “robust” part of the brain is learning how to want less.

What Is Happening?

Marie Kondo, the author of the popular book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (2011), is now hosting a “reality” television series available on Netflix, “*Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*,” which has her entering a household and helping its residents reduce what they own. As one observer noted, “It’s about scaling down instead of doing without. It’s about having everything you really need to pursue what Kondo refers to several times as ‘your ideal life.’” (*Buzzfeed*, 1/10/19)

More to the point of a wider shift from having more to living with less, Kondo herself expressed the context this way: “The question of what you want to own is actually the question of how you want to live your life.” The recent turn to less instead of always wanting more is a shift in how individuals want to live their lives. That is where the change is taking place. A survey of some of the more/less dynamics might be instructive.

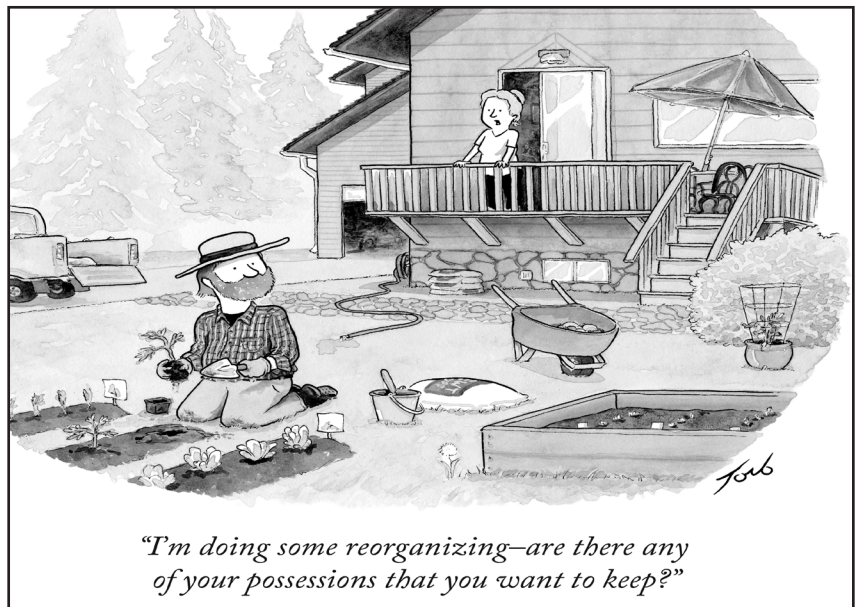
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Less Stuff, More Access, or Movement Away from “Having It All” – The era of “having it all,” as a popular phrase of the Dispersed Wealth Grand Narrative had it, is fading away, and in its place is a more reserved mentality, one in which moderation guides purchases. Lowering the personal value of stuff has helped develop what is called the sharing economy, which essentially means **ownership** (i.e., buying) moves down on individuals’ priority lists and **access**

to what is wanted moves up those lists (e.g., Uber, Rent the Runway). Moreover, when individuals follow the dictates of Marie Kondo and shed stuff they already own, they become more conscious of things they might have wanted to buy in the past but no longer do. As a result of that shift in perspective and the conservation of financial resources it involves, individuals have more available money to “buy” personal experiences (see [IF 3516](#)).

◆ Consignment shops and thrift stores have become loaded with merchandise. “Clothing has really inundated us right now,” said one thrift-store manager in San Francisco. Beacon’s Closet, a used-clothing store in New York City, has more offerings than it has had in five years, and Goodwill in Washington, D.C., has experienced a 66 percent surge in contributions. (*City Labs*, 1/18/19)

◆ Wardrobe is a new digitally enabled peer-to-peer marketplace for the renting of men’s and women’s clothes. Participants can rent right out of their closets to people who would like to wear something different from what they have in their own closets. (*Women’s Wear Daily*, 12/14/18)



Less Waste, More Sustainability, or a Focus on Salvaging and Preserving What Is Valued –

Massive amounts of waste were byproducts of the Golden Age of Consumerism, and that waste has more recently become cause for alarm. For instance, during the prior era of the Dispersed Wealth Grand Narrative and its focus on growth at any cost, industries produced 8.3 billion tons of plastics, and 60 percent of that ended up in landfills or strewn in the natural environment. Meanwhile, every year, three-fifths of all clothing manufactured ended up in incinerators or landfills – that is, 15.1 million tons of U.S. textile waste were cast aside each year. A spreading awareness of “a great garbage patch” of plastic three times the size of France and containing 79,000 tons of waste, floating in the Pacific Ocean, has encouraged a rethink of plastics in general, from banning plastic straws and bags to pushing toward use of more recycled plastics. In the U.S. prior to 1950, reusable packaging, such as glass bottles, attained roughly a **96 percent** return rate, but as the growth-at-any-cost mindset spread, by the 1970s that return figure had declined to **five percent**. Meanwhile, golf courses have lost their appeal, as the number of rounds of golf played continues to decline and as such land and water use is increasingly seen as wasteful of resources...and of human beings’ time. As a result, 200 courses closed in 2017, while only 15 new ones opened. In an interesting twist in perspective, some golf courses that were the centerpieces of housing developments are being closed, and the land being converted to farmland, thereby enabling those living in the development to grow food for their own consumption. (*New York Times*, 12/27/18; *Guardian Weekly*, 11/23/18; *Time*, 2/4/19; *Independent*, 1/31/19; *Wall Street Journal*, 1/10/19)

◆ A recent Deloitte study of individuals’ preferences in spending on products and services found that 68 percent of respondents, regardless of age and gender, said that sustainability – that is, the long-term impact of the product, service or company they are interacting with – now contributes to their purchase decision. (*California Apparel News*, 1/17/19)

◆ Data from J. Walter Thompson Intelligence revealed that 89 percent of those surveyed “care personally” about protecting the planet; 92 percent said they are trying to live more sustainably; and 90 percent

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said that companies/brands have a responsibility to take care of the planet and its people. Also, 70 percent of respondents said they would be willing to pay more for products and services if those products and services do not harm the environment and do not infringe on human rights. (JWT, 9/18)

◆ In the three years ending in 2017, the number of people identifying as vegan had increased by 600 percent, increasing from one percent of consumers to six percent. By ordering a veggie burger, the consumer saves 1,700 gallons of water needed to produce a hamburger. (*Pymnts*, 1/22/19)



“FOR MY LAST MEAL, SOMETHING VEGAN, ORGANIC, AND LOCALLY GROWN.”

Less Consumerism, More Restraint, or Movement Away from a Focus on Spending for Status –

At the various red-carpet events in Hollywood this year, women have been lessening their show of cosmetics, with many preferring to wear neutral lipstick. They are shunning color for a more “natural” look. Meanwhile, Five Below, a dollar-store-type kind of outlet, is prospering with its new Fifth Avenue location in New York City, and it is selling eye-shadow palettes, glitter sugar scrub kits, scented nail polish and other items at cut-rate prices. Beauty 21 produces a line called L.A. Colors with price points under six dollars, and Markwins Beauty Brands distributes one of its key mass-makeup brands, Wet ‘n’ Wild as well as several private label brands, to dollar stores. Last year,

Dollar General opened 900 new outlets and has plans to add another 975 stores in 2019. Also, Family Dollar, which bought Dollar Tree, will open another 450 stores this year. The increasing appeal of discount stores reflects not only the market effects of stagnating salaries in the New Economy but also the downward valuations that consumers are placing on things and an accompanying unwillingness to pay up for “expensive” brands. (*Hollywood Reporter*, 1/4/19; *Women’s Wear Daily*, 12/14/18)

◆ The U.S. now has 30,000 dollar stores, up from 18,000 a decade ago. Collectively, such stores last year sold \$24 billion in groceries in 2018, compared to \$15 billion in grocery sales at Whole Foods. (*Business Insider*, 12/10/18)

◆ Naadam, a knitwear manufacturer and retailer of “sustainably” sourced materials, opened a store in Manhattan that has only one product: a cashmere sweater for \$75. That’s it. (*Glossy*, 1/29/19)

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Less Aspiration, More Pragmatism, or Turning Away from Buying Up and Getting Comfortable with a “Good Enough” Metric – A song popular with Millennials, “Thrift Shop,” celebrates the “[expletive] awesome” clothes the singer acquired at a thrift store. The video has been viewed 1.3 billion times. The appeal of the song is that it praises not paying up for style and putting together one’s own style by outfitting oneself in used clothing. Aspirational spending was a critical component to consumers in the Golden Age, mostly because parading around

in a brand demonstrated one’s status. A Mercedes Benz car, Gucci dress, Coach handbag, Rolex watch, Godiva chocolate, Dom Perignon Champagne and on and on across a wide swath of markets, all gave the owner the outward appearance of steady progress along the pathway of the wealth-associated American Dream. But from the pragmatic perspective, those luxury purchases can become seen as unnecessary expenditures – or worse, as just showing off. Plus, they require hard work to acquire the revenues needed. All of that is being rethought today.

◆ Clothing resale sites, such as Depop, which has more than 12 million users, have become popular lately, surpassing \$20 billion in sales last year in the U.S. alone. (*Fashionista*, 1/16/19)

◆ The average size of new homes in 2018 shrank for the third straight year, declining in that time frame from 2,500 square feet on average to around 2,300 square feet. (*Washington Post*, 2/14/19)

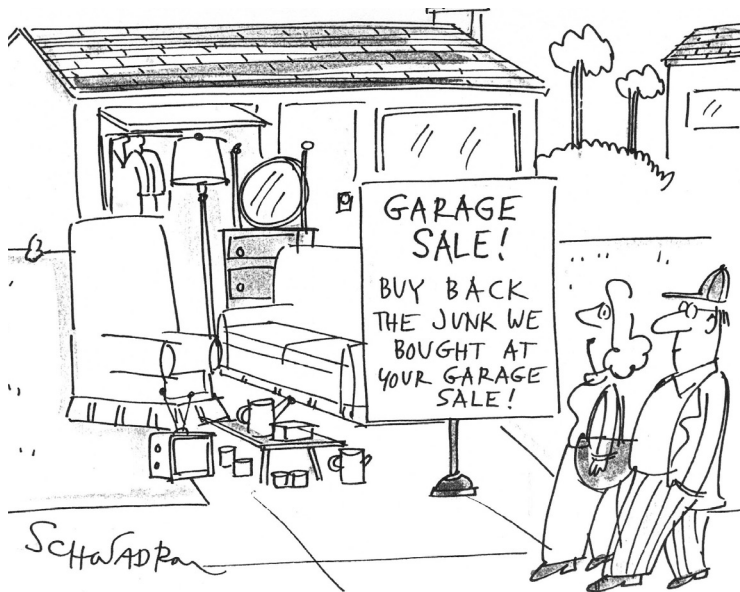
◆ Start-up companies, such as Bubble, a software-writing enterprise, and Proper Cloth, a clothing



Among Americans between the ages of 18 and 29, support for capitalism hit 45 percent, while support for socialism reached 51 percent.

company, were part of a gathering in New York City of companies who are turning away venture-capital (VC) money, because, as one participant explained, "They [venture capitalists] make you feel inferior if you're not playing the game." Even though venture-capital investments soared to \$99.5 billion last year, more and more companies are saying the growth expectations of most VC investors are too excessive for their new enterprises. (*Wall Street Journal*, 1/17/19; *New York Times*, 1/11/19)

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Less Stress, More Calm, or Movement Away from Accepting the Pressure to Perform – As we have written, anxiety has become a normal condition of contemporary life. While some of the causes of such anxiety are beyond individuals' control, the regulation of stress, one contributor to anxiety, is often within their grasp. Reducing the importance of work in one's life can reduce stress, as can putting away digital devices for a quiet weekend. A recent study revealed that 33 percent of Americans say work-life balance is their number one concern, more important than compensation, advancement and job stability. In another study, one-quarter of respondents said that "flexibility" in their work life was a principal motivator for a career as an independent contractor. At an even more personal level, **an Ikea study revealed that 45 percent of American respondents retreat to their cars in the garage for peace and quiet.** Women have lately been retiring to

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their "she sheds" for quiet and for some "on-my-own time." Others have turned the candle industry into a fast-growth industry, with people buying candles to read books by, cook dinner by and to illuminate any other non-stressful activity. Even luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Dior, have entered the candle market. (*Quartz*, 10/16/18 and 10/27/18; *New York Times*, 1/3/19 and 1/13/19; *Business of Fashion*, 11/26/18)

◆ Ridgefield Public Schools in Connecticut has placed a limit on the amount of homework that can be assigned. The Lafayette Parish School System in Louisiana has told teachers not to grade homework. Other districts have eliminated homework on weekends and more and more are doing away with all homework. A consortium of 100 private prep schools have eliminated all grades, replacing them with a narrative of each student's improvements and problems. (*Wall Street Journal*, 12/13/18)

◆ The wellness industry, which seeks to help individuals remain or get healthy in an unhealthy world, grew 12.8 percent between 2015 and 2017, reaching \$4.2 trillion, according to the Global Wellness Institute, a nonprofit organization that monitors wellness activities. (*New York Times*, 1/3/19)

◆ The Wellspring Wellness Festival was held in Palm Springs (CA) with the intention of providing "seekers the tools to learn and take action in real time for a healthier mind in a relational platform" or simply to provide ways



to stay calm in an anxiety-driven society. The festival was organized by the company Wanderlust, which is "a multi-channel company focused around mindful living." (*Atlantic*, 11/19/18)

◆ Sale of Lush's bath bombs have roughly doubled in the last three years, from around eight million units to more than 15.6 million in 2018. Meanwhile, bathtub sales have increased from \$9.69 billion in 2017 to \$10.34 billion last year. (*New York Times*, 1/3/19)

Less Rejection, More Adoption, or Companies See What Consumers Are Doing and Take

Action – More and more companies are turning away from the past era's focus on profits and growth at any cost and turning, instead, to more sustainable practices that meet consumers' changing perspective. They are less often rejecting pressure to address external problems such as environmental issues and are more often taking actions to help mend the troubles they might have helped create (see [inF 1314](#)).

◆ Ikea, the manufacturer of less expensive furniture, is launching a leasing program for its furniture. When the lease period is over, the company will take the pieces back and perhaps lease you different furniture. The plan calls for the availability of a "scalable subscription service" that will encourage ongoing leases with the possibility for exchanging items at will. Kitchens are next on Ikea's list of possible leased products. (*Pymnts*, 2/4/19)

◆ J. Crew launched a program in partnership with Habitat for Humanity, which will have the retailer buying back worn jeans and recycling them into insulation material which the housing nonprofit will use in its homes. (*Glossy*, 1/11/19)

◆ In late 2017, designer Stella McCartney partnered with TheRealReal to encourage customers to resell her designs when they have finished using them and offered \$100 store credit in return. In 2018, consignors of Stella McCartney's designs increased by 65 percent. (*Fashionista*, 12/20/18)

◆ H&M, the fast-fashion company that made buy-it-and-trash-it popular, started a free mending service for its clothes. That project joined a textile recycling program, in which customers could dump unwanted textiles (not just clothes bought at H&M)

and receive a "sweet voucher." In 2017, the company took in 17,000 tons of used textiles. (*Guardian*, 12/19/18)

◆ Tesco, the English grocery store chain, started stocking Wicked Kitchen vegan foods in January 2018. In April, the store reported its earnings had jumped one-third, pushed upward primarily, according to store managers, by Wicked Kitchen products. (*Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, 12/24/18)

◆ Fast-fashion and extremely inexpensive retailer Primark is launching a take-back scheme, set to start this year. (*Guardian*, 12/29/18)

◆ Aveda, the botanical hair and skincare brand, has more than 85 percent of its casings, bottles and

jars composed of 100 percent post-consumer recycled materials. Meanwhile, Kiehl's rewards customers who return empty full-sized containers with a free Kiehl's travel product. (*Independent*, 1/31/19)

◆ By 2025, L'Occitane Group will move to 100 percent sustainable packaging, up from its current 30 percent. (*Glossy*, 2/5/19)

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What Effects Will “Less” Trigger?

Paul Dolan, professor of behavioral science at the London School of Economics & Political Science, warns in his book *Happy Ever After: Escaping the Myth of the Perfect Life* (2019) that cultural narratives – that is, society’s storylines that suggest how individuals should live their lives – might be good for society but are not necessarily good for individuals. For instance, his research shows that education past high school can actually make people less happy, as does having children, as does pursuing greater wealth, and even marriage. Cultural stories further the needs of society, encouraging education, home ownership, marriage, bearing children and holding down a job, even at the cost of less happiness for the individuals trying them. (*Guardian Weekly*, 1/18/19)

Individuals seem to be waking up to the reality that the narratives they have been shown, concepts such as “Bigger is better,” “Those who work hardest always win,” and “Seek the American Dream,” do not necessarily work for them and do not always make them happier, and they seem to be pulling away from or at least questioning

those pursuits. These changing individuals are pursuing fewer of the kinds of things the economy and society might prefer that they pursue and more of the kinds of things that yield personal meaning, happiness and sustainability.

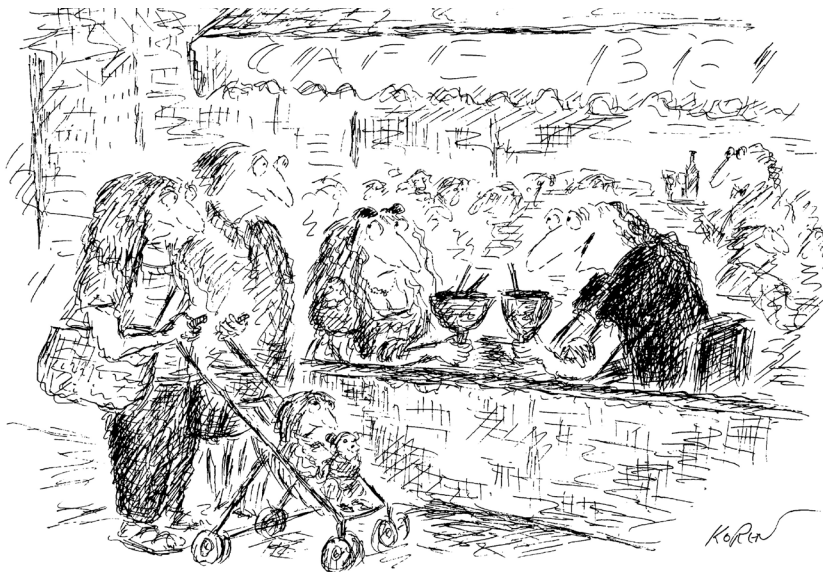
These kinds of changes fit within several contexts we have outlined over the past few years. For one, the old Grand Narrative of increasing and spreading wealth

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no longer attracts followers; rather, individuals are starting to choose not to include attaining wealth as a primary goal. The emerging Grand Narrative might include a focus on meaning and happiness rather than wealth and acquisitions. In another context, the New Adulthood has been an outline of different ways to attain adulthood, including delaying marriage, childbearing and homeownership, while pursuing personal experiences instead of focusing on a career. Evidently, the New Adulthood has been contributing to this dynamic between less and more. And finally, the shift of emphasis from pursuing a Better Living to looking

for a Better Life starts with the shift away from focusing on increasing wealth and toward concentrating on what creates a more meaningful life (see [IF 3820](#)).

As the dynamic of Less of This and More of That spreads, it will not only affect society’s narratives. It will also affect consumer markets, personal behavior, entertainment offerings and workplace appeal.



“Today, we examined our life style, we evaluated our diet and our exercise program, and we also assessed our behavioral patterns. Then we felt we needed a drink.”

Some of our previous looks at this topic:

inF 1314 Companies Doing Good 2.0, 11/12/18

IF 3904 Rethinking The Way Things Are: A Battle For Control And The “Same Ol’ Shit”, 3/16/18

IF 3901 Anxiety Becomes Normal: Anxiety Settles In To A Society In Transition, 1/29/18

inThought 11/20/17 Digital On Defense: Negative Effects Of The Great Digital Experiment Challenge Silicon Valley

IF 3820 On The Road To A Better Life: Movement From A Focus On Rising Standards Of Living To Higher Standards For Life, 10/11/17

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IF 3609 Growing Up Isn’t What it Used To Be: Society and an Emerging New Concept of Adulthood, 6/1/15

IF 3603 The Right Mix: Consumers and Companies Seek A More Effective Blend Of Digital and Physical Activities, 2/6/15

IF 3516 A Better Living Or A Better Life? Individuals Shift Personal Priorities And Start Redoing An Economy, 10/29/14