

# The Value of “Enough”

## Sufficiency-based Consumer Practices and Value Creation in Business Models

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### Abstract

This conceptual paper explores a new theoretical framework of how value creation in business models can address sufficiency-based consumer practices. Applying social practice theory reveals levers in terms of materials, competences and meanings to support sufficiency-based lifestyles. The key challenge is to include consumers as active contributors, prosumers, in the value creation process.

### Keywords

sustainability, sufficiency, business model, value creation, social practice theory

### Introduction

As green consumption and eco-modernism so far have failed to significantly reduce the ecological impact of consumption, new approaches are needed to meet sustainability criteria. Next to technology-focused efficiency (relative reduction of energy and material use) and consistency (cradle-to-cradle design) approaches, sufficiency is a specific kind of behavior-based sustainability strategy that addresses how to make do with less (Reichel, 2013, 2018a; Rockström et al., 2009; Seidl & Zahrnt, 2013; Spangenberg & Lorek, 2019; Wilts & von Gries, 2015).

Sufficiency-based businesses can reduce negative impacts on the ecosystem, while at the same time deliver more prosperity with less need for economic and material growth (Sachs, 2015; Schneidewind & Palzkill, 2012; Stengel, 2011). They focus on demand-side moderation by attempting to reduce end-user consumption (Bocken & Short, 2016; Griese, Wawer, & Böcher, 2016). As consumption is tied to everyday practices of consumers, it is essential to understand what constitutes viable sufficiency-based consumer practices and what part the business model of a company plays in order to facilitate them.

So far, the role of business models in the dissemination of sufficiency-based consumer practices has for the most part remained unexplored. A deeper analysis of how elements of a business model have to be reconsidered when it incorporates and addresses sufficiency is needed to design, adapt and change business models to support a social transition towards strong sustainability. Value creation is not only the centerpiece of business model research, but together with value proposition especially related to influencing and interacting with consumer practices, as will be elaborated below (Freudenreich, Lüdeke-Freund, Schaltegger, 2019). As a starting point, this paper will therefore focus on the implications of a sufficiency-based approach in business models for its value proposition and creation. Drawing on literature on sustainable business models, value creation, sufficiency and social practice theory, this conceptual paper explores a new theoretical framework of how sufficiency-focused value creation can support sufficiency-based consumer practices and which challenges a reorientation towards such practices poses for the business model.

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Sufficiency-based Consumption and Lifestyles*

Sufficiency derives from the Latin word *sufficere*, meaning to suffice or to be enough. In the sustainability discourse it is generally understood as changes in consumption patterns that help to stay within the ecological capacity of the planet, while the benefit aspects of consumption change (Fischer & Grießhammer, 2013). For some, the benefit in terms of practical utility or symbolic meaning might increase, for others this perceived benefit will decrease. Sufficiency-based consumption can be viewed from two different angles: firstly, as refraining from consumption without substitution and reducing resource-use at all costs; secondly as a lifestyle where resources are used in a sustainable and regeneratable manner. The second view allows for substitutions of practices and qualitative modifications

of consumption levels and is therefore seen as the more realistic one in nowadays economy and society (Lütge, 2013; Paech, 2007; Speck, 2016).

Lifestyles represent the way we prefer to live, spend our time, interact with others, indicate where we live, where we shop, and what we consume (Backhaus et al., 2012). They are the “integration of social practices but also [...] the story which the actor tells about it.” (Spaargaren & Van Vliet, 2018, p. 55) Sufficiency lifestyles are found in research on consumer behavior as frugal consumption, abnegation, the simple life movement and other lifestyles that live independently from the market (Linz et al., 2002; Sachs, 1993; Spangenberg & Lorek, 2019). Although there is not one definition for a sufficiency-based lifestyle, for the purpose of this paper, the following understanding is adapted: A sufficiency-based lifestyle is characterized by simultaneously reducing energy and resource-use as well as increasing life satisfaction. It is defined by values such as humility, consistency of one’s own behavior, self-responsibility, justice and the conviction that less consumption means more life quality (Kleinhüchelkotten, 2005). A sufficiency-based lifestyle aims at voluntarily changing, restricting, or replacing resource-intensive practices and reducing the demand for resource-intensive goods and services (Leng, Schild, & Hofmann, 2018; Stengel, 2011). Such sufficiency-based practices may include exchanging, repairing, sharing, renting, and gifting (Fischer & Griebhammer, 2013; Speck, 2016).

### *The Ecological Impact of Sufficiency-based Consumer Lifestyles*

Sufficiency on a household level means implementing modified consumption practices in various household-related activities, such as mobility, food, grocery shopping, building, living, and leisure (Lukas, 2015). Consumers attempt to reduce negative ecological and social impacts of these household practices within established social structures (Speck, 2016). This can for example involve commuting by bike or public transportation instead of using the car, living in co-housing facilities and reducing the consumption of pollutive food such as processed meat and dairy products (Leitner & Littig, 2015; Profijt, 2018; Stengel, 2011).

Lukas (2015) showed that sufficiency-oriented households have a significantly lower material foot-print per year<sup>1</sup> than conventional households. This applies

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<sup>1</sup> according to MIPS = life-cycle wide material input per unit of service to estimate the input oriented environmental impact potential of a product (Lettenmeier, Rohn, Liedtke, & Schmidt-Bleek, 2009)

especially for mobility, nutrition and leisure, although their total footprint still ranges above the recommended level for a truly sustainable consumption (Lettenmeier, Liedtke, & Rohn, 2014). A conventional one-person-household has a material footprint of 2,666 tons per year, while the maximum for a sustainable footprint lies at around seven to eight tons per year per person (Lettenmeier et al., 2014). A sufficiency-oriented household's footprint ranges around 36 tons per year. Lifestyles of voluntary simplicity, as an anticonsumption lifestyle aiming at reducing one's clutter in life and obtain life satisfaction by cultivating nonmaterialistic values, even showed an overall lower ecological impact than environmentally concerned consumers (Iwata, 1999; Kropfeld, Nepomuceno, & Dantas, 2018). This supports the assumption that sufficiency-related lifestyles are more sustainable concerning their resource consumption than common, and presumably even 'green' consumer lifestyles.

### *Sufficiency-based Business Models*

Companies can support lifestyles striving towards strong sustainability, such as sufficiency-based lifestyles, by offering suitable products and services (cf. Profijt, 2018). For that they will have to adjust their business model accordingly. A sustainable business model "helps describing, analyzing, managing, and communicating (i) a company's sustainable value proposition to its customers, and all other stakeholders, (ii) how it creates and delivers this value, (iii) and how it captures economic value while maintaining or regenerating natural, social, and economic capital beyond its organizational boundaries." (Schaltegger, Hansen, & Lüdeke-Freund, 2016, p. 6). *Encouraging sufficiency* can be understood as one of the sustainable business model archetypes, next to e.g. maximizing material and energy efficiency or creating value from waste (Bocken, Short, Rana, & Evans, 2014). Further types of sufficiency-based business model approaches according to Bocken et al. (2014) are for example consumer education, demand management, and premium branding.

Sufficiency as a business strategy aims not only at reducing resource consumption on a corporate level, but foremost at providing products and services that moderate end-user consumption to encourage consumers to do more with less (Bocken & Short, 2016; Gossen & Schrader, 2018; Reichel, 2013). This includes reducing consumers' absolute material and energy use, while avoiding sufficiency-related rebound effects (Reichel, 2018b). In our current market economy, sufficiency-based business models are best understood as business architectures that allow putting a sufficiency strategy into operation. For that, sufficiency-based

business models strive towards sufficiency while they act within a certain corridor that is framed by a minimum of financial stability and social justice, and a maximum of sustainable ecological impact (Reichel, 2013; Reichel & Seeberg, 2011).

Empirically observable sufficiency-based business model initiatives focus on decluttering, slow movement, de-commercialization (or subsistence), and unbundling towards more regionalization (Sachs, 2015; Schneidewind & Zahrnt, 2014, based on Sachs, 1993). This includes for example sharing, contracting, extending products' lives, slow streaming, slow travel, re-learning skills, open-source initiatives, volunteering and a local supply chain and products (Gossen & Schrader, 2018; Paech, 2007; Schneidewind & Palzkill, 2012). Another sufficiency-oriented strategy is the *dematerialization* and *tertiarization*, i.e. substituting products with service offers (Reichel, 2018b).

According to Griese, Wawer and Böcher (2016, based on Bocken et al., 2014), the three main elements of business models focusing on sufficiency are characterized as follows:

- (i) Value proposition based on a reduction of consumption, which is approached by longevity and modular expandability of its products and by consumer education.
- (ii) Value creation has to ensure that all activities of the business, its partners and customers contribute to this reduction of consumption, along with a reduction of waste and longer use of the product(s).
- (iii) Value capture results from long-term customer loyalty, growing market shares because of reliable quality and a higher price level. Furthermore, social and ecological value can be created and attributed to the business and its customers, such as consumer education, reduced resource use and increased reuse and recycling of products.

In line with Breuer, Fichter, Lüdeke-Freund, & Tiemann's (2018, p. 278) understanding of sustainable business models as "boundary-spanning and interactive systems", the focus of the value proposition and creation of sufficiency-based business models is on the customer relationship and on influencing consumption behavior. It underlines the importance of the organization's relationship to the consumer, who increasingly acts as a prosumer by becoming part of the value

creating activities (Toffler, 1980). This will change the way the organization interacts with consumers, thereby changing the way value is created and also changing the prosumers' life world (Hankammer & Kleer, 2017; Reichel, 2013, 2017; Toffler, 1980).

## Social Practice Theory Perspective on Sufficiency

If sufficiency-based business models are to support sufficiency-oriented lifestyles, while at the same time creating novel, more sustainable value for companies, we need to understand how consumer practices are constituted and how they can be transformed. Recognizing the shortcomings of purely behavioral approaches, social practice theory offers a societal and contextual view on consumption (Hampton & Adams, 2018, Spangenberg & Lorek, 2019): according to social practice theory, more or less sustainable patterns of consumption are embedded within and occurring as part of social practices (Spaargaren, 2003; Warde, 2005). Pro-environmental patterns of consumption can therefore not be triggered by educating consumers to change their attitude or beliefs alone, but rather by offering more sustainable alternatives to their usual daily practices (Spangenberg & Lorek, 2019).

A practice is a "routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). The three central elements of a practice are (cf. Figure 1; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012):

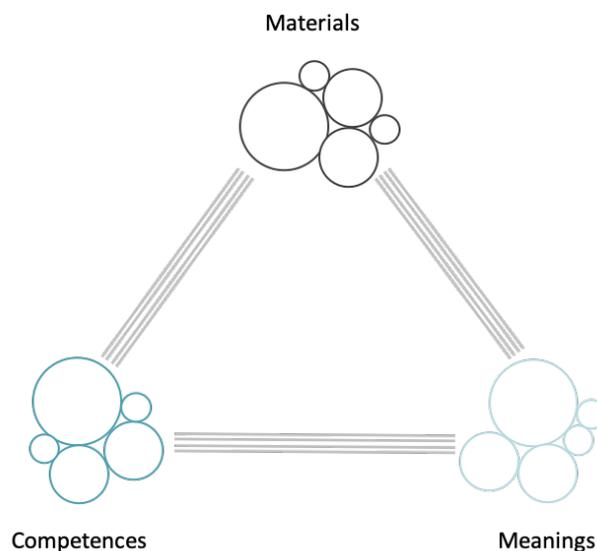


Figure 1: Elements of a social practice, own illustration

- (i) Materials, including the body itself, objects, tools and infrastructures;
- (ii) Competences, know-how, practical knowledge, skills and a shared understanding of appropriate performance (e.g. rules, social norms);
- (iii) Meanings, images, emotions, motivational knowledge or mental patterns connected to the practices.

Comparing various sufficiency-oriented consumer practices found in the relevant literature on sufficiency and consumption practices, some commonalities regarding the necessary materials, competences, and meanings can be observed (cf. Table 1). Recurring materials across many sufficiency-based practices are for example open (public) spaces and tools for subsistence-connected practices such as gardening. Especially for sharing practices, a (digital) platform and communication technology are vital to plan and coordinate the sharing of cars, tools, or meals. Food and waste containers can support the avoidance of plastic waste, food waste and the collection of organic waste for reuse (Daly, 2015; Schröder, 2013).

| Practice                   | Materials                         | Competences   | Meanings                               |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Repairing</b>           | Repairing tools                   | Creativity;<br>repairing skills                           |  |
| <b>Sharing</b>             | (Digital) communication platforms | Communication skills;<br>planning skills;<br>adaptability | Environmental concern;<br>saving money |
| <b>Reducing food waste</b> | Food & waste containers           | Planning skills;<br>creativity                            |  |

Table 1: Examples for elements of sufficiency-based consumer practices

While providing customers with the materials they need to perform sufficiency-based practices, the education of customers to equip them with relevant competences and know-how, is even more important. Of course, communication and planning skills are required to participate in sharing and communal living practices. Being able to plan one's daily life more carefully and with respect to others' needs also implicates questioning one's own consumption desires and might in itself lead to restraining from unnecessary or impulsive consumption practices. Adaptability and creativity in finding new solutions are just as important for sufficiency-oriented practices. Downsizing, reducing and shifting from product to

service-based consumption often requires doing things differently and consumers are challenged to adapt their practices to new circumstances. For all subsistence-related practices, in the sense of self-sufficiency and independence from the market place, do-it-yourself skills such as repairing are central (Daly, 2015; Hole, 2014; Krasny et al. 2015; Latouche, 2010; Reichel, 2018b; Trainer, 2012).

Finally, appealing to recurring meanings connected to sufficiency-based practices, will be the challenge for sufficiency-oriented businesses' value propositions. Central meanings attached to sufficiency throughout various practices is of course a high concern for the environment. Some consumers are willing to change their consumption practices to use less resources, decrease their emissions and to avoid waste. For others, health concerns for themselves and their family might lead to reducing the consumption of processed foods or cycling to work. Saving money and time are meanings many consumers value and which can be a valuable argumentation in the 'less is more' narrative. An important aspect is also the wish for social integrity and communal living, which can support the establishment of sharing practices (Daly, 2015; Schäfer et al., 2018; Scholl, 2009).

## **Value Creation for Sufficiency**

As introduced above, value proposition and value creation are key points in a businesses' relation to sufficiency-based practices. In the following, it will be elaborated from a social practice theory perspective, how the value proposition and especially the value creation process of a business change with a focus on sufficiency.

All practices of the business and its stakeholders will be directed towards using less resources, avoiding waste and producing made-to-last products (Bocken et al., 2014; Griese, Wawer, & Böcher, 2016). More radical approaches include a shift from selling goods to selling performances and aiming at substituting customers' needs towards more sufficient ones (Paech, 2007; Stahel, 2001). This involves a close relationship with both consumers and the value-chain and a change towards an *extended value creation* towards including environmental and societal aspects beyond the firms' boundaries (Bocken & Short, 2016; Breuer et al., 2018, Schaltegger, Hansen, & Lüdeke-Freund, 2016).

A business model's value proposition for sufficiency should revolve around the materials, skills and meanings connected to sufficiency-based consumer practices, as introduced above. It has to target its products and services, selection of

customer segments and relationships and the proposed value to fit sufficiency-based practices (Short et al., 2014). It can provide the consumer with the material and skills needed for a specific practice. Customer segments to be addressed would value sufficiency-connected meanings, such as ecological concern or sociality as inherent part of their lifestyles. The rather diverse and individual meanings connected to sufficiency-related practices are both a challenge and an opportunity for a business. It has to carefully frame the proposed value of a product or service not only in terms of value to the customer, such as saving time and money, but also to the environment, the local community, or society at large (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013).

While the value proposition of a business can be framed by the company itself, the value creation processes will have to include the consumers, as a close relationship to and education of customers are essential for sufficiency-based business approaches. This supports the understanding of a business model as “not just a rationale of organizational value creation [...] but also as an approach to building and maintaining relationships.” (Freudenreich, Lüdeke-Freund, & Schaltegger, 2019) A company will have to open up to a higher consumer integration in its innovation and production process to create products and services that not only reduce resource consumption and waste production, but also meet its customers true needs to offer alternative, sufficiency-based practices that increase their life satisfaction. For that a company has to offer room for participation, be willing to share information and knowledge and frame the collaboration process with meanings appealing to sufficiency-oriented consumers. The customers’ role then will change from a passive consumer of ready-made products and services towards an active prosumer that is integrated into the value creation of a company (Reichel, 2018a; Toffler, 1980).

Focusing on sufficiency-oriented consumer practices by providing the right materials, competences and meanings to consumers while integrating them into the value creation process will impact a company’s business model (Osterwalder, Pigneur, & Tucci, 2005). The following section will outline these impacts from a social practice theory perspective and give examples for sufficiency-related business practices (cf. Table 2).

Providing the appropriate materials includes lowering the amount of resources and energy used for production, designing products to last longer (in a physical and aesthetic sense), and an effort to regionalize the supply-chain; but it

also requires a company to reconsider the value creation process as a whole. Does it sell finished products that might help consumers do more with less? Does it focus on providing the right resources and tools for consumers to create the final product themselves? Or does it move towards dematerialization by substituting the product with a service offer? The identified commonalities between sufficiency-based consumer practices point towards a need to provide the space, platform, communication means and tools for consumers to take up subsistence-related, sharing and repairing practices. In that sense, the business' contribution to value creation focuses on facilitating the creation of sufficiency-related products and services, while consumers adopt the role of prosumers by actively engaging in the value creation process. Examples for sufficiency-related materials that can be provided by companies are repairing tools, sharing platforms, and co-housing facilitations. Products such as repairing tools would have to be accompanied with consumer education services such as (virtual) workshops on how to use the tools for the intended practice (Fuentes, 2015; Paech, 2007; Schneidewind & Palzkill-Vorbeck, 2011).

Facilitating consumers to do more with less and creating value themselves also relates to the competence-aspect of social practices. A company has to provide its customers with the right know-how and skills to engage in the intended practice. Many sufficiency-oriented practices require for example a certain amount of adaption and creativity to find innovative solutions in substituting common consumer practices with more sufficient ones. This also relates back to materials: the product or service design in itself would have to be as intuitive and easy-to-use as possible to lower the hurdle for adapting the new practice. A company can support the adaptation of new practices by providing accompanying services teaching consumers how to use their product or service, and by sharing stories of successful practitioners or providing the means for consumers themselves to share their stories with one another. Collaborative innovation also offers the opportunity for a business to understand its consumers needs and to jointly come up with new solutions and practices, engaging both the company and the consumers in a mutual learning relationship (Reichel, 2019). A focus on consumer education and collaborative innovation puts an even stronger emphasis on a well-designed customer relationship management (Posse, 2015; Schneidewind & Palzkill-Vorbeck, 2011).

Not only materials and competences would be created together by companies and consumers, also the meanings connected to sufficiency-based practices can be developed in a joint process. As a first step, companies can recruit sufficiency-

affine consumers by framing marketing and communication to correspond with the set of meanings attached to their practices or certain enabling products and services. Ecological concern still is one of the central meanings attached to sufficiency practices. This includes motivations to reduce resource and energy consumption, avoid waste, reuse and recycle items, seeing waste as a valuable resource. Recycled products or services to reduce resource consumption and reuse waste would appeal to this meaning complex. Another meaning that has many connections to sufficiency, as it particularly enables sharing practices, is the desire for being part of a community and a rich social life. A company can design products and services that enable this kind of community, and it can actively support the creation of a sense of community amongst its consumers. Again, this requires a close collaboration between the company and consumers, in which not only the functions of a product or service are developed together, but also a common understanding of the meaning behind this product and service. It implies not only a communication from the company to the customer, but a dialogue between the two parties (and other stakeholders as well) that shapes the value creation process, but also impacts and possibly changes the value proposition of a business (Fuentes, 2015; Gossen & Schrader, 2018; Griese & Halstrup, 2013; Reichel, 2018a).

|                       | Materials   | Competences  | Meanings  |
|-----------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Value Creation</b> | Lowering resources and energy use for production<br><br>Long lasting, intuitive product design<br><br>Regionalization of supply-chain<br><br>Dematerialization by offering services instead of products<br><br>Providing space, platform, communication means & tools | Providing sufficiency-related know-how & skills<br><br>Supporting adaptation & creativity of customers by sharing user stories<br><br>Facilitating exchange of experiences among customers<br><br>Engaging in collaborative innovation | Framing marketing & communication around sufficiency-related meanings<br><br>Focusing on ecological concern, incl. resource & energy use, waste avoidance and re-use<br><br>Creating sense of community among customers |
| <b>Examples</b>       | Repairing tools, sharing platforms, co-housing facilitations  | Repairing skills, communication skills, planning skills  | Reducing CO2 emissions, saving money, being part of a community   |

Table 2: Value creation for sufficiency-related practices

## Conclusion

This conceptual paper contributes to our understanding of how businesses can support a social transition towards strong sustainability by reflecting on perspectives for value creation for business models addressing sufficiency-based consumer practices. These first insights support the proposed shift of consumer roles from consumers to prosumers. It could be shown that the need for customer integration and collaborative innovation increases for sufficiency-based value creation. Sufficiency-based consumer practices' influence on a business' value proposition and their active involvement in the value creation forces companies to carefully (re-)consider their processes and especially their customer and stakeholder relationship management. Applying social practice theory reveals several levers on the level of materials, competences and meanings, which companies can serve to support sufficiency-oriented consumer lifestyles.

As this short paper has only looked into the impacts on value proposition and value creation between a company and its customers, further research could expand the proposed framework by looking into other elements of sufficiency-based business models, such as value delivery and capture. Digital marketing as a communication channel for sufficiency-based practices bears potential for further exploration (Gossen & Schrader, 2018). The impact of value creation for sufficiency on other stakeholders should also be taken into consideration (Freudenreich, Lüdeke-Freund, & Schaltegger, 2019). Also, there is a need for more empirical studies in the field of sufficiency-based consumer practices and sufficiency-oriented business models on their actual ecological and social impacts. Research in this field will facilitate transformations towards business models that support sufficiency-based consumer practices in a transformation towards more sustainable production and consumption.

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