

Doing VanLife: A Social Practices Perspective on Traveling with a Camper Van

ABSTRACT

This study explores how consumers enact Van Life. Drawing on a practice theory framework and a qualitative case study of camper van owners, the study finds that Van Life is constituted by three distinct, yet interrelated bundles of practices, that together resemble a recurring, authentic, and singularizing consumption experience.

INTRODUCTION

Traveling with recreational vehicles (RV's) is a vacation practice that has a long tradition among North American and European consumers. In recent years this trend has gained momentum under the blurring of work-life boundaries (Land and Taylor 2010), the emergence of digital nomadism (Bardi et. al. 2012), the increasing demand for flexibility (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), and the search for authentic travel experiences (Reckwitz 2016). A common practice among consumers is to buy a regular, second-hand transporter and transform it into a customized camper van. Once upgraded, it can be used for spontaneous weekend trips, holiday trips, or as a temporal, mobile home base for nomadic VanLife episodes. Within the European market, the Volkswagen camper van (VW Bus) has gained enormous popularity among young urban consumers. Since the so-called VW Bus has dimensions of a regular car, it provides the flexibility to be used as a vehicle in daily life, and enjoying the freedom of using it as a tiny, yet a fully equipped RV for traveling. To study how VW Bus owners, use their bus provides a fruitful empirical background for a better understanding of the contemporary consumer trend VanLife.

This study draws on practice theory (Reckwitz 2002; Warde 2005; Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012) in order to explore the consumption practices that evolve around the use and ownership of VW camper vans. The study addresses the research questions of: (1) What cognitive, discursive and motivational behaviors do owners develop in the use of their camper van? And, (2) how is the social praxis of VanLife constituted through a combined and coordinated bundles of practices? The findings reveal how VanLife is constituted by three distinct, yet interrelated bundles of practices, that together resemble a recurring, authentic and singularizing travel experience.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Practice Theory

Practice theory suggests that consumption is a 'doing' that is linked to multiple social levels. A recurrent question of a practice perspective is: What do consumers do? This sets the focus on what practices VanLife comprises. This question focuses upon those specific, situated practices that VW Bus owners engage in when

they are living in their camper van. This empirical study draws on the differentiation into three elements of practice theory: *practices*, *practitioners* and *praxis* (Jarzabkowski, Balongu and Seidl 2007).

The first analytical element are *practitioners*. In this particular study, practitioners are defined as VW Bus owners, that are consumers who own and use a VW Bus, and thus develop distinct ways of behaving, thinking, coordinating and adopting their use of the VW Bus. The second and primary analytical element of this study are *practices*. Practices are „routinized types of behavior which consist of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ,things ‘and their use (...)“ (Reckwitz 2002, 249). The term ‘practice’ refers to both, the situated actions individual consumers perform (micro practices), and to socially defined practices (macro practices) that shape consumers in their individual actions (Warde 2005). This sets the analytical focus on activities that are associated, accomplished and developed around using and owning a VW Bus. From a practice theory perspective VanLife is a situated, socially accomplished activity that comprises actions and interactions with other actors and objects (Reckwitz 2002). Hence VanLife comprises all activities that are associated with buying, owning, using a camper van, with the goal of spending longer episodes living in the bus. ,Owning a VW Bus’, is a consumption practice that is constructed as a flow of actions and interactions of multiple actors, practices and objects they draw upon (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). Within this framework a camper van becomes a materially represented practice, a thing in terms of Reckwitz (2002), as it is used in a relatively routinized way.

The third analytical element are social *praxis*. In this case praxis is refers to the whole of human action related to VanLife (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). The social practices of VW bus owners are situated within a wider social praxis of leisure time, vacation and automobile ownership. VanLife comprises dispersed consumers, and the social institutions within which these consumers act, and to which the contribute. It is the social praxis owning and camping and occurs as the nexus between these three elements.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative case study research design (Stake 1995; Flyberg 2006) employing multiple data collection techniques. Over a period of one year, the researcher conducted participant observations during mutual weekend trips, as well as participant-driven photo-elicitation interviews (Rose 2012). The participant observations of Volkswagen bus owners’ behavior and practices were an important data resource. Here the first researcher wants to state, that he does not own a camper van, so this research project was approached from an outsider perspective. Insights gained through extensive field observations served as a basis for in-depth interviews with VW Bus owners. The researcher conducted twenty-five participant-driven photo-elicitation interviews. Participants were selected based on the criteria of owning a VW Bus which they modified for camping, and that trips with their bus played an important role in their life. The VW Bus was chosen because it has an enormous popularity on the European market, and this was considered as an interesting phenomenon.

The interviews aimed at uncovering stories, memories and experiences that participants had with their busses. The photo-elicitation technique is especially well-suited, as “images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words” (Harper 2002, 13) and helped to paint a clearer picture of the different behaviors and practices unfolding around the use of a VW Bus. Secondary data was an important resource for the analysis, including community forums (i.e. <http://www.thesamba.com/vw/>), VW Bus subreddits (i.e. <https://www.reddit.com/r/VWBus/>), Instagram posts (i.e. #vwbus), do-it-yourself YouTube videos, as well as national and international media coverage. The data analysis followed an inductive coding approach in order

to identify emergent themes and patterns (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Following Eisenhardt's (1989) methodological principle of 'enfolding literature', emerging themes were refined in the light of the practice theory perspective.

FINDINGS

Within the data three interrelated bundles of practices emerged: a) owning, b) traveling, and c) decelerating.

Owning

Personalizing. VW Bus owners are notoriously fond of their cars. This fondness becomes apparent in practices that aim to personalize their van. A common practice is to modify the interior and exterior of the van. Many consumers go as far as buying a bus without interior and building the entire camping equipment in a do-it-yourself fashion. This includes the construction of a kitchen, a bed and wardrobes as well as the exterior. This personalization of the van has a key role in establishing strong emotional bounds to the VW Bus. The customization of the VW Bus is often shared, presented and discussed with friends. Social media and online forums are used as a platform for inspiration and discussion with other owners.

Personifying. Practices of personification involve naming the van with a nick name, emotionally and verbally adopting the bus into the family, displaying pictures of the bus and taking intensive care of their van. The emotional attachment with the van was also apparent in the interviews, where participants described their VW Bus using names, gender specific pronouns and human traits such as strong, fragile, bitchy and iffy, persevering, down to earth or moody and fickle. The VW Bus is humanized by describing it with human features such as friendly eyes (headlights) and big smiles (radiator grill). Narratives often involve success stories about teamwork with the bus, the bus as a friend and faithful companion, or as a savior.

Community. VW Bus owners represent a subculture (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) with communitarian bounds (Muniz and O'Guinn 2002). For instance, when a VW Bus driver sees another VW Bus driver, he or she salutes and honk. This is especially the case, if the van is an older model. Stories about helping out, when another VW Bus on the side stripe needs help were regularly reported in the interviews. Online activities, such as posting pictures in social media, participating in online forums and following social media accounts of other VW Bus owners, resemble aspects of an online mediated brand public (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016).

Travelling

Freedom. Traveling with the camper van was associated with the feeling and desire for freedom and adventure. These feelings of freedom and adventure are enacted through the routinized practice of weekend trips. These overnight trips resemble bundles of practices which are a complex combination of entangled elements that are encountered together (Woermann and Rokka 2015). Practices that involve structural elements of the bus involve cooking in the bus, reading in the back of the bus, sleeping in the bus and enjoying the landscape. These short trips involve a specific material-setup of the camper van and a range of bodily routines and skill elements (Woermann and Rokka 2015), such as searching for a perfect spot and how all daily activities are adopted to the spatial requirements of the van. Weekend trips are often combined with sport and leisure activities, that require skilled elements, such as climbing, surfing or mountain biking. The VW Bus serves as a mobile home that allows the freedom to enjoy spatial mobility and being closely related to the nature.

Spontaneity. Participants stated that a fundamental aspect of being on the road with a VW Bus is, that trips are planned only rudimentary, and that travel decisions are taken spontaneously along the way. Bus owners find themselves far from home and reliant on their Volkswagen camper van, a major, often very time-consuming and potentially frustrating aspect of a VW Bus trip is to search for the perfect camping spot. Spontaneity also means that the VW Bus allows surfers to go where the waves are best, or climbers to switch locations when the conditions change. Overall, VW Bus owners displayed a strong motivation for self-sufficient, independent traveling. Traveling with the van allows to escape time pressures and social obligations, and therefore to enjoy traveling without boundaries and constraints.

Risk taking. The bus can serve as a motivational factor for owners to be more adventurous and risk taking during their trips than in their ordinary life. Stories about getting lost in nature, breakdowns in remote areas, and dangerous encounters with local animals, or unplanned and uncomfortable overnight stays were reported proudly in the interviews. These experiences were recounted with a sense of pride and praises for their adventurous spirit.

Bundle of Practices	Example quotes
<p>Owning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personalizing - Personifying - Community 	<p>“He (the bus) was seriously rusty and was a real grandpa. He was really cool, don’t get me wrong and I loved him [...] Me and my dad, we did a lot of work on him, it was time consuming [...] we did the entire interior by our self, the bed, the kitchen, everything.” (Participant 10, f)</p> <p>“When you are so far away from home, you develop a real relationship with your bus and a unique dependence. I was not worried about my girlfriend back at home or my parents. There was only my bus. Is he parked safe? Is he locked? Is the battery charged? Worries that seem mundane [...] but if you are literally at the end of the world, it becomes clear how much you depend on the bus.” (Participant 2)</p>
<p>Travelling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Freedom - Spontaneity - Risk Taking 	<p>“There are days when I leave in the morning, return in the evening and simply park somewhere with my bus. Just let the day pass and prance around (...) I just cook something and then open the hatchback, read and enjoy the view of the lake and the mountains” (Participant 2 m)</p> <p>“The fact that we could park wherever we wanted was the best thing in Norway. It was also this feeling that we enjoyed so much while travelling with the bus. We were not dependent on highways or public transport. We could camp wherever and whenever we wanted to. And we saw the most beautiful sunset next to a tiny road in some Fjord.” (Participant 8 m)</p>

<p>Decelerating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ritualization - Decelerating - Daydreaming 	<p>“When I get into the bus it needs to rattle and clatter. You need a big window because it is similar to a cinema. The world goes by your windows, time passes and you don’t care. You drive slowly on the road and are deeply relaxed while enjoying the whole experience” (Participant 19 m)</p> <p>“Whenever I sit at the university, I always think about future traveling possibilities and where I want to go with my bus. These thoughts are my anchor for stressful days, because I know that I will have some free time soon and I can drive away with my VW bus” (Participant 16 f)</p>
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Decelerating

Ritualization. Participants describe how preparing and starting a trip becomes a ritualistic activity for them. Packing their stuff and preparing the bus for the planned trip becomes an integral part of the traveling experience, often starting days before the trip starts. The interviews contained extensive accounts of describing the feeling of stepping into the bus, sitting behind the wheel and starting the engine. As soon as the owners hear the roaring of the engine, feel the vibration of the bus, and smell the fuel burning, the trip begins and stress fades away. When the participants arrive at their destination, they have developed specific routines of occupying the spot and transforming it into their temporal home-base. First, they search for the perfect spot, then park their bus (preferred is a remote and secluded spot with a scenic view, not at a camping ground), open the hatchback, take out their cooking and leisure appliances, pose with the bus and take picture, and then start enjoying the surrounding landscape and their vacation.

Driving. Participants describe driving the bus as a calming ritual, that alters the way how they experience the flow of time (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Woerman and Rokka 2015). The bus is driven slowly and enables to decelerate from their accelerated daily life. Driving a VW bus is associated with the sound of the engine, listening to music or tune into a radio station. Also, in everyday life, driving the VW bus becomes a short retreat, a spiritual and relaxing experience, associated with the materiality of the bus. The deceleration through driving the VW bus is associated with elements of listening to music, voluntary slowing down the speed, driving on scenic country roads and avoiding highways. Driving the bus was described as an experience of deceleration, an activity in which all stress and worries fades away. In the bus, there are no obligations and no time pressure. The journey becomes driving the bus. The description of the role of material components, such as the distinct feeling of the driver seat, the big steering wheel, the big windows and nice views, the loud, yet relaxing sound of the engine, and the natural speed limit of older VW camper van models, played a key role in establishing the feeling of deceleration. This spiritual experience of driving transfers to everyday commuting. For instance, one participant was late because he was driving his bus and enjoying the road too much.

Daydreaming. When VW Bus owners are not able to travel, all reported to engage in the cognitive practice of daydreaming about the bus and future trips. VW Bus owners mentally plan the next weekend or summer trip, or recall past experiences to satisfy their need for travel and adventure. Photos of the bus are treasured and often help in recollecting memories. Pictures featuring the bus are shared on social media, and owners follow social media influencers.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an empirical inquiry into consumption practices that develop around the use of the VW Bus camper van in order to understand the trend of VanLife. Drawing on practice theory (Warde 2005; Reckwitz 2002; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007), the analytical focus was set on understanding what owners do with their VW Bus. This study addresses the first and the second research question: (1) What practices do owners develop in their use of the VW Bus? And, (2) how are different practices combined and coordinated into bundle of practices that constitute the social praxis of VanLife? The overall finding of this study reveals how VanLife is constituted by three distinct, yet interrelated bundles of practices: (1) owing, (2) traveling, and (3) decelerating with a camper van. Each of these three social practices consists of a bundle of combined and coordinated, yet distinct actual routinized behavior. Together they resemble a recurring, authentic and singularizing travel experience.

The findings contribute to our understanding of consumer- object relationships (Holt, 2002), the consumption patterns of liquid consumers (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2017), that seek authentic and singularizing consumption experiences (Reckwitz 2016), as well as the role of objects in structuring the temporal experience of consumers (Husemann and Eckhardt 2017; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Whereas current research on consumer-object relationships has pointed towards the declining role of solid possessions for liquid consumers (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), the current study clearly shows how persistent and recurring consumption practices can constitute a strong and enduring consumer-object relationship.

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