

## Not-to-buy trend – the revival of an old phenomenon<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Not-to-buy trend - the idea of an exchange, borrowing things, reconstructing or remaking objects is not a discovery of the present time. Currently the Internet has made us able to increase the speed of communication and has connected people we would not have been able to get in touch before. This tool has given us a chance to reinforce the popularity of a 'Not-to-buy trend'. This article describes elements of the 'Not-to-buy trend' by pointing out sets of characteristic actions, groups of participants and their motivation to take part in (what is referred to by the people surveyed) a lifestyle.

The thesis describes and also comments some of the principles that rule the behaviour of some specific consumer groups, gathering around different virtual spaces on the Internet.

I also point out a different understanding of 'consumerism' used among the anthropologists, sociologists and the people surveyed. The definitions constructed by each of the groups seem to be contradictory.

At the end I am wondering, if "Not-to-buy trend" is only a revival of an old phenomenon or maybe something totally new.

### Keywords

Consumerism, exchange, borrowing things, reconstructing objects, remaking objects

### **What is the "Not-to-buy trend" and why it is worth studying?**

Not buying, which I understand as exchanging, borrowing, reconstructing and remaking objects is one of the basic social behaviours. The exchange of objects preceded the invention of money. It began in primitive cultures.

When I was looking for a research<sup>2</sup> subject I quickly turned towards things, objects. What I found even more interesting were the ways to obtain and consume these objects. Following Aldona Jawłowska's 2000 considerations that "individuals have become the main subject of researchers of consumption owing to their consumption-related choices absorbed by new forms of socialization typical for a global society with it

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<sup>1</sup> This is an English translation of my article published in „Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe” (1/41/2013) ([http://studiumewaluacji.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/Nauka\\_I\\_Szkolnictwo\\_Wyzsze\\_nr1-41-2013.pdf](http://studiumewaluacji.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/Nauka_I_Szkolnictwo_Wyzsze_nr1-41-2013.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> I conducted the studies of 'Not-to-buy trend' between January and May 2012. I conducted 15 personal focus interviews; performed an analysis of the content of websites which matched the topic of the study, transcribed interviews and press article concerning the relevant issues, took part in participatory observation of a couple dozen exchanges and workshops of clothes reconstruction and analysed semantic fields of the word 'consumerism'. More about the described studies on the web [www.studiasocjologiczne.pl/pliki/trend\\_1.pdf](http://www.studiasocjologiczne.pl/pliki/trend_1.pdf) [accessed 05.08.2013].

online agoras” (Jawłowska 2005, p. 11-12), I turned towards the Internet.

The Web – with its possibilities of communication – represents non-buying in a new way or, to be more precise, in another context. The “Not-to-buy trend” became a reality thanks to the World Wide Web not only for people who are acquainted but also for people who never met and may never meet in non-virtual reality. Although these characteristics of the Internet seem obvious, I believe we need to underline them and point out their implications for the “not-to-buy trend”.

## **Exchange**

*“(...) these websites are created to bring people together. (...) A community was born (...) here the connection remains. We know there are people who always upload cool stuff. And there’s the building of new relationships. Just like the group description says, it’s about recycling. And that’s what I like. (...) Not only because you can get rid of stuff. But also to get rid of it in a fun way”. (K2)*

I focused on searching of non-buying on the Internet only. I looked for websites, online forums, groups – all kinds of spaces gathering people interested in exchange, rental, reconstruction and/or renovation. I didn’t take long to explore the “online agoras” Jawłowska referred to. Popular social media proved to be very helpful. I almost instantly identified a group of several thousand members from all around Poland. Through it I could analyse the objects, people and rules of exchange.

Products exchanged included clothing, jewellery, food, cosmetics, home equipment and electronic devices. Owners expected specific products in exchange for what they offered or stayed open to whatever people wanted to exchange<sup>3</sup>. Skills can also be the subject of exchange – for example massage, foreign language skills, cooking or professional coffee brewing lessons, hand-made items or self-prepared food. I found offers to prepare food for a picnic with friends, dinner for a few people, painting pictures, becoming pen-pal, doing an individual lecture on the anthropology of running, giving a tour of a sports club, computer programming or graphic design.

The group had its rules specifying what can be the subject of exchange, how to phrase the ad, what cannot be published, how to create albums and how to describe objects, whether posts can be promoted (making them visible at the top of the wall). Each exchange was to be described afterwards and information should be provided on the trustworthiness of the person who took part. Cases of dishonesty or unclear situations were widely discussed. These often happened with exchanges by mail. Long conversations that followed (commenting a post with information on a particular exchange) often ended in urging the accused person to explain publicly. Other group members joined (specifically female group members – th

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3 I discuss the process of exchanges in subchapter concerning the involvement of the researcher.

composition was predominantly female and it was difficult to identify a male participant), taking sides or asking about the details. Once these situations became more common, a blacklist of members was made to indicate people who did not sufficiently fulfil their obligations during exchanges. Each name was listed with a description of the situation in question, which served as a proof and justification for adding the name to the list. At some point a document was created in which more active members wrote where and when they had arranged an exchange. The reason for that was the amount of exchanges (I was doing several a day myself) and the document was aimed to facilitate those meetings (often people met at the far ends of the city while it was possible to arrange a similar exchange in closer proximity). The schedule made it possible for several people to meet at the same time in one place.

An exchange group does not only provide rules but also gives members a sense of being a part of a community. The idea of exchange which resulted in the foundation of the group became a part of a lifestyle or worldview shared or supported by many participants. As one of the respondents said: “At that time I didn’t really know I was making a kind of a life decision. Because it’s a lifestyle, isn’t it? It’s really cool. (...) I think this Facebook group ... it (...) opens you up to people some more... to spontaneity... it teaches you in a way to be creative. (...) And I think it teaches you not to get attached to things. Which is really pretty valuable in some way”. (K6) This perception, stressed by many interviewees, made me realize that an exchange can be a way of getting rid of unwanted items (something that was mentioned many times) but in time it may become a way of living, a manifestation of one’s views against consumerism (I will discuss it in a separate chapter) and for fair trade, against the exploitation of workers and non-ecological overproduction<sup>4</sup>.

## **Renting**

Press articles I found some years ago about borrowing designer bags “came back” to me before I started this research. The texts described online companies which offered to rent for a day, weekend, week or longer a bag worth at least several thousand Polish zlotys (some were worth more than ten thousand).

Owners of these shops – or more rental services – (although in some instances there was a buying option, apparently 20% of transactions ended that way (Makarenko 2011, p. 18)) ensured on their website that renting was a way to own many items. There was no need to spend a lot of money to buy one bag. Renting many bags for a limited time cost much less. Appearing with these products might be useful at parties, events in the company of people who believe owning similar items is a sign of status (this immediately brings to mind Veblen's leisure class and some of its characteristics, such as show-of-consumption (Veblen 1971)). These characteristics can play a role during job interviews for example because – according to Jean Baudrillard – “we do not consume a product as such (its usefulness) but we always

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4 All statements taken from interviews.

operate and manipulate objects as differentiating characteristics which either match and include us in our idea reference group or separate us from our group by establishing a reference to a group higher in status (Baudrillard 2006, p. 63-64).

## **Renovation**

*“It is a pity to throw away furniture which has lived longer than our parents and might even come from our grandparent’s generation or even earlier. It’s not worth to do it because of a damaged lock. Or a mismatched leg. Or because they don’t fit into our current interiors”. I think it can easily be adapted to the present conditions. And keep it, right?” (K12)*

The term renovation covers both people who do renovations and offer their services as well as people who want to renovate items and are looking for artisans to do the job. Renovation also means dozens (or even hundreds) of fora, blogs and websites which provide guidance how to do it.

Since a website gathering people who renovate and item owners was developing at the time of my research I had limited options to contact the craftspeople (“artisans of their field” as they called themselves on the websites). For that reason the majority of interviews I conducted were with persons doing the renovations. They described their skills through the website, presented pictures of their work and specified what they would like to work on and how. All my interlocutors regarded the renovation of furniture not only as a way to save money (because with furniture it was not always the case), they also believed in literal renovation. They wanted to bring objects back to life, respecting their history, damages, events they had witnessed or people with whom they were connected. Renovation was among several topics which brought forward the motive of the “soul” of the object – something that transformed it from being a thing to being a symbol of people events, status. It was popular to renovate furniture inherited from grandparents, found in the garbage and looking old or 1950s and 1960s armchairs which have been popular for a few years.

The term “soul” mentioned above was the “patina” described by Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 2005 chapter “Fashion and nostalgia”), raising the value of items. “Patina” means that a thing is old but in positive sense in a given context. The age of the object is not important but where we got it from, who gave it to us, to whom it belonged, what is its history.

Renovation is therefore not the removal of the signs of aging but their emphasising combined with the change in appearance to match the current taste, interior or personal preferences.

## **Reconstruction**

*“It was about taking that piece of clothing, one to cut into pieces, another one to add something to it, so that*

*these two pieces made something to be worn and look differently. Different from anything else. My main rule was to actually use the fabrics and clothes which had been produced already". (K9)*

The reconstruction of seemingly useless items into completely new things, both in terms of function and appearance, was the last part of my research into non-buying.

Some examples I managed to observe and study included jewellery made from broken plates, toys from recycled materials and new pieces of clothing made from existing ones. Their creators represented radically different attitudes to consumerism and recycling. Some regarded the materials they used as something regular. They did not attach ecological meanings but focused on underlining their appearance and malleable characteristics. Their approach to these materials and final products was artistic. For others, pro-environmental behaviour was the starting point to educate the society. Personal experiences motivated them to organize reconstruction workshops aimed at "reclaiming" items. They had made a decision to use their resources more consciously the moment they realized that the surrounding products limited and cornered them and became addictive. They decided to share their reflections with workshop participants.

### **Consumerism according to the studied persons, anthropologists and sociologists**

During my study it became evident that sociologists, anthropologists and studied persons defined consumerism – the keyword of 'Not-to-buy trend' – in totally different ways. My analysis of semantic fields revealed that the studied persons defined consumerism as *overbuying, the magic of buying, just buying, without thinking, something indispensable, something very shallow, a filler of void, in contradiction to the reconstruction of furniture, doing recycling, creating something and self-development, looking at the world with curiosity, rare groups of people who live on what they make themselves, conscious thinking and reasoning, recycling of used materials, recycling of trash, not using electricity, thinking if I really need another pair of heels I won't wear at all and put them in a closet, something we are doomed to do, a negative word, a neutral word, hyper-negative word, disgusting, something you can't get away from, trying only to "have", buy, fewer spiritual experiences, doing shopping in a supermarket where you put a lot of stuff in the basket, a child brings Coca-Cola, mom brings tissues even though she's got 20 packs at home because they are sold cheaper but the receipt says 600 PLN, not thinking about it, buying a lot of things you throw away later, something causing unhappiness, dissatisfaction and loneliness among people with consumer attitudes - something I noticed among friends and family.*

Definitions used suggest that the persons studied positioned themselves as opponents of consumerism and anti-consumerists. They made negative comments but at the same time stressed that it was impossible to avoid. They suggested their actions (non-buying) meant their attitudes were good, ecological and conscious. They used the words consumerism and consumerist in a negative sense – not as something bad but bringing

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5 Analysis was based on transcription of in-depth interviews.

unhappiness.

Definitions of sociologists and anthropologists revealed a completely different side of consumerism: Baudillard's thoughts about symbols or Zygmunt Bauman's definition (perhaps the most important for my research): "in the society of consumers and in consumerism it is important to <<fulfil the needs>>" (Bauman 2005, p. 21) but "to have the endlessly repetitive act of buying and getting rid of them [things]" (Bauman 2007, p. 10), point out that the description and study of consumerism should not focus on items themselves but on their meaning in the community and the moment they are obtained or lost. Janusz Barański describes consumption – or consumer culture – as "not only, or rather not the purchase of all kinds of goods to satisfy basic biological needs but the creation of certain images, cultivation of certain lifestyles which also implies attaining communal or individual identities using those goods" (Barański 2007, p. 303). Social sciences present consumerism avoiding the objects and focusing on the needs, image and lifestyle based on consumerism. Definitions which do not make judgments about the phenomenon itself<sup>6</sup> describe the actions of the studied persons as completely consumerist. During my research I experienced what Bauman described as an endlessly repetitive act of buying and getting rid of things (more on that in the subchapter about the researcher's involvement). I felt excited and devoted a lot of time to wait and find "bargains". I saw my behaviour through the above definitions. I felt the more I was engaged in non-buying, the less I cared about the items and the more I cared about the act of negotiating and making deals with multiple partners or exchanges. I was happy to obtain the product and after I put it aside and did not necessarily use later. I began to search for items which I could exchange myself or which could be renovated or reconstructed. Perspective of obtaining a new thing was more important than getting rid of the ones I didn't use. Interviews with the studied persons revealed they too experienced similar emotions.

Anti-consumerism is being questioned by many social researchers, such as Tomasz Szlendak (Szendak 2008, chapter "Half-way anti-consumerism"). They point out that anti-consumerism as presented by the likes of Naomi Klein in her book "No Logo" has become a brand in itself which is in opposition to consumerism. For the studied persons anti-consumerism including non-buying is an attitude against the negative consequences and habits of consumerism.

Two types of definitions – by the studied persons and social researchers – stress and deal with different issues and images of consumerism. The studied persons have judged the phenomenon negatively because they perceive it as constant overbuying. Sociologists and anthropologists focus on obtaining and getting rid of things and on their meaning (not functionality) for users and their environment. In my opinion it is difficult (and we should not) assume one of these definitions is more important. They are not mutually contradictory. In my opinion these two definitions are linked only by the term "consumerism". Semantically and axiologically they are not connected.

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<sup>6</sup> Even though sociologists and anthropologists have produced these, I did not take them into consideration based on my intuition of what such definition should be built and what it should refer to and which definitions should be dismissed due to their slandering character in the context of social sciences.

## **“Research through common experience”**

The above quote from Anna Wyka (Wyka 1993, p. 56) describes a research perspective developed by her and proposed earlier by Alvin Gouldner. It assumes that both the researcher and the studied person equally participate in a research process and the research relationship becomes a subject (Wyka 1993, p. 48). The study includes researcher's emotions, his or her bodily reactions, in general non-intellectual elements (Wyka 1993, p. 57). Wyka argues that the study of culture which undoubtedly includes the non-buying trend, work very well from the perspective of a study through common experience.

During my study I participated in several exchanges, clothing reconstruction workshops and I have been reconstructing and renovating objects for many years. The only aspect of non-buying I have never been part of is renting.

My experiences gathered through the application of this research perspective have led me to conclusions which I probably would not have made if I decided to perform a different type of study. They proved to be helpful not only in building research tools and preparing interview instructions. In the case of renovation and reconstruction I knew exactly which questions to ask, what was important in these activities and in the work of artisans. All this contributed to a precise description of the analysed part of reality using the research material.

Participation in exchanges gave me an overview of the whole process – from publication of pictures of items, through searching of products for myself, negotiating with owners and finally meeting them. All these stages are usually very similar. Having done a number of exchanges I noticed certain rules and models of behaviour. Pictures of items in albums should be described according to a formula in order to avoid repeated questions and facilitate search and decision-making process. Negotiations usually started with the presentation of one's offer or from questions about what was offered in exchange. Messages should contain links to albums with items for exchange. There were no courtesy titles used, everyone was on first name basis.

Having done the study through common experience I learned about a different side of non-buying. Triangulation of methods and techniques made it possible to verify and complete the information gathered. Had I not participated in non-buying I would unknowingly present an incomplete picture of non-buying and probably believe it was complete.

## **Myself – the participant – the researcher**

My enthusiasm about the results of the study through common experience was slightly diminished by doubt whether and how its consequences might be dangerous in the context of drawing conclusions. Was there a link between the research and the researcher's involvement and where? Has my involvement not impeded

complete analysis of material collected?

Wyka stresses the importance of personal experience. She recommends to integrate different source of information (Wyka 1993, p. 57) and underlines the importance of self-reflection. She fails to notice the threat of crossing the line or seems to believe this problem does not exist. If so, perhaps my doubts are not justified?

They certainly arise from a not-so-popular point of view that the researcher equalled the studied subject and that the latter had the same right to draw conclusions as the researcher. I think that this research perspective, despite its rising popularity, is still difficult to put into practice. The placement and relationship of the researcher and the studied person – determined many decades ago – is still the most common option. Despite declarations or intuitive acceptance of Wyka's recommendations researchers still find it difficult to get away from approved and widespread models. Therefore I do not think my doubts are completely justified even though they seem natural for someone with my education background. One may ask whether a study without the researcher's involvement is at all possible and makes sense.

### **The revival of an old phenomenon?**

Certainly exchanges as part of the not-to-buy trend resemble the activities from many thousand years ago. It is not only the new quality that this and three other elements of non-buying have acquired thanks to the new means of communication, i.e. the Internet. In my opinion the very reasons and aims of exchanges, renting, renovating and reconstructions have changed. We do not refuse to buy items because we cannot access them but rather due to our anti-consumer (in the popular meaning of the word) beliefs or the wish to save money. Non-buying may become a part of our lifestyle or its manifestation. On the one hand there is not much difference between the "old" and the "new" versions of non-buying. Items are exchanged for items, skills for skills, broken things are repaired, objects are turned into different objects and products are rented from people. At the same time motivations are changing. Depending on the interpretation one may talk about the recalling of "old traditions" or just of a common name for different phenomena and activities.



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