

COPING WITH CONSUMER CULTURE: ELDERLY URBAN CONSUMERS IN POST-SOVIET ESTONIA

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Abstract. The article discusses representations of consumer culture in today's Estonia by elderly urban consumers. The study, which draws on 30 original interviews with urban consumers over 45 years of age, outlines the clashes between the Soviet consumer culture and its current counterpart. We place the analysis within the framework of Simmel's objective and subjective culture, as well as within that of several sociological and anthropological studies. Based on this, it may be concluded that, for this group of consumers, profusion of goods and free choice are often rendered illusory, as they foreshadow new scarcities that have to be coped with on individual level. This, in turn, generates critical representations on a continuum from micro level personal problems of financial need to a more macro level social divide, as well as on the level of Western consumer society at large.

Keywords: consumer culture, objective and subjective culture, Soviet, post-Soviet, choice

Introduction

The construction of large shopping malls and ever-widening advertising and branding are evidence that Western-style consumer culture has come to stay in post-Soviet Estonia. The main characteristics distinguishing it from the Soviet consumer world of shortage and homogeneity are freedom of choice, abundance of goods and shopping outlets. We assume that many consumers perceive a clash between the Soviet consumer culture and its current counterpart, and that this may be empirically studied.

We focus on Estonian urban consumers over 45 years of age. Since the Soviet period embraces their socialisation and decades of active adult lives, we assume that contrasts between the memory of 'then' and the representation of 'today' are the sharpest in their eyes.

The broader question we pose in our study is: what is the underlying system of concepts used by our informants to articulate today's consumer culture? More

specifically, we seek comparisons between the Soviet past and today, both as accounts of personal experience (micro level) and as assessments of societal development on a larger scale (macro level).

On the one hand, we anticipate complex relations between the memories of the 'old' culture and today's experience of capitalist Westernized consumer culture, and on the other hand, between today's objective culture – that is new consumer goods, consumption practices, spaces as well as public constructs of some consumers as 'deprived' and 'excluded' – and its personal reappropriation or lack thereof, i.e. subjective culture.

Firstly, a theoretical outline is given, after which the selection of this particular sample – urban Estonians over 45 – is explained. Secondly, some quantitative data about this group is provided. The bulk of the article is dedicated to qualitative analysis of interviews followed by conclusions and discussion.

Clash of the 'old' and 'new' consumer cultures

Consumer culture in post-Soviet Estonia is a complex set of interacting influences both on the spatial axis (East *versus* West) and temporal axis (the Soviet heritage *versus* contemporary Estonia). In order to inquire into the juxtaposition of Soviet and contemporary consumer culture by consumers themselves, we rely on various theoretical sources. Our overarching framework stems from Georg Simmel's concepts of objective and subjective culture, which are thematised with the help of several studies of societal transition and changes in the consumer world in particular (see Simmel, 1997 [1911, 1916]). We have been greatly inspired by anthropological studies by Verdery (1996) and Miller (1987, 1995), as well those of Patico (2002), Patico and Caldwell (2002), Rausing (1998), Chelcea (2002) and others. On the other hand, we rely to some extent on sociological work by, for example, C. Campbell (1987), Z. Bauman (1988, 1994, 2000), P. Sztompka (2000), M. Kennedy (2002) and J. Gronow (1997 and 2003). We find a multidisciplinary approach the only alternative in a situation where different research traditions give equally valuable insight into the phenomenon under scrutiny.

One of our starting points is that the Soviet consumer culture and its counterpart in contemporary capitalist Estonia are fundamentally different in various aspects. With the help of Miller's (1987) interpretations of Hegel and Simmel, we may say that, during the Soviet era, the objective culture of the consumer world could be divided into many layers. Firstly, there was the visible part of the official objective culture, consisting of the puritan ethic (see Campbell, 1987) of the communist leaders as well as the rhetoric of the fulfilment of the Soviet consumer's needs, which on actual shop counters meant a limited supply of 'grey homogenised goods'. The anthropologist Katherine Verdery sums it up by referring to John Borneman (1992): 'Capitalism... repeatedly renders desire concrete and specific, and offers specific, if ever-changing, goods to satisfy it. Socialism, in

contrast, aroused desire without focalizing it, and kept it alive by deprivation' (Verdery, 1996:28). On the other hand, the invisible official objective culture consisted of almost 'courtly' systems of privileges to *nomenklatura*, providing coupons for deficit goods and access to special shops, etc.

All this was counteracted by a 'second, unofficial' objective culture of underhanded deals of reciprocity – which has by some theorists (Gronow, 2003) been compared to the clan ethic of Mauss's (2002 [1950]) 'gift economy' – to obtain goods with complex symbolic (and often subversively romantic) value. This part of objective culture acted as a buffer that helped to support the repressive system and ideology of state power on the level of subjective culture.

Simmel claims that while a subject may be overwhelmed by the objective culture, he or she cannot reject it because 'it all belongs potentially to his cultural sphere' (Simmel, 1997 [1916]:92). We may assume that a large part of the Soviet 'official' and deeply ideological objective culture was rejected on a subjective level, having been defined as 'not our own'. But the reappropriation of the object by the subject – the sublation – often did happen in the private sphere of consumption of these symbolic goods, which were invested with diverse meanings and acquired via elaborate practices of the 'unofficial objective culture' or 'second economy' (see Miller, 1987; Verdery, 1996). These were not gifts initiated by the giver (cf. Mauss 2002 [1950] or Bourdieu, 1998) but rather favours asked by the needy, therefore often humiliating, because a favour meant remembering and paying back at a later time with a similar favour. Many people were, however, unable to reciprocate in a similar manner due to a lack of personal connections of their own. These elaborate and often ambivalent practices embraced both, economic and symbolic exchange logics, which often caused tension (Bourdieu, 1998). However, we may conclude that the deficit goods derived their strong symbolic value partly from intense personal relations needed for their acquisition, that is objects were more personified than they are today in the impersonal money-economy of the free market (see also Ledeneva, 1998).

We may also say, based on earlier research (see Keller and Vihalemm, 2003, Kõresaar, 2003; cf. also Švab, 2002; Chelcea, 2002) and personal experience, that the 'unofficial' or sometimes 'semi-official' objective culture constituted both a pragmatic as well as subversive – even though often unreflective – practice. It was resistance on many levels. Most indirectly it was a macro-level negation of the Soviet power and affirmation of Estonian ideals of freedom. On a micro level it was a construction of personal identity 'enabling you to differentiate yourself as an individual in the face of the relentless pressures to homogenise everyone's capacities and tastes into an undifferentiated collectivity' (Verdery, 1996:29, see also Keller and Vihalemm, 2003).

The meanings of Western goods entering Soviet circulation were not based on the messages their producers and marketers had invested in them, but on the specifics of the Soviet system. We may assume that the driving force of Soviet consumption was not the romantic ethic pushing people to seek ever new sensations and derive individualistic pleasure from specific commodities laden with

complex meanings, usually constructed, in the first place, by branding and advertising (Campbell, 1987). Instead, along with mundane utilitarian provisioning, the Soviet ideology of consumption was characterised by an often puritan frugality, which was a complex result of the official shortage – thus an imposed frugality – and perhaps a more traditional peasant ethic based on ‘only the necessary’. The romantic dimension was there as well, but was of a different nature: not so much individual desire for pleasure as negation of the Soviet power, setting oneself apart from socialism. Western goods symbolised freedom during the Soviet time and, as theorised by for example D. Slater (1997), civic freedom was often conjoined with consumer freedom.

The post-Soviet transition has changed consumer culture and subject-object relations radically. The market economy, based on – at least theoretically – consumer sovereignty, freedom of choice and monetary transactions, has brought along a cultural tension, a new gulf between the objective and subjective cultures. The old buffer of reciprocal deals, with all its humiliation and joy, has crumbled, at least in the sphere of acquisition of everyday consumer items. Rapid development of branding, advertising and construction of shopping malls, as the most vivid examples of the new objective culture, is socialising the Estonian people into a Western-style romantic ethic, which upholds the spirit of consumerism and is based on a permanent desire for novelty. This has been supported by the official ultra-liberal, utilitarian ideology of the country’s economic policy. In essence, the subject faces the objective culture of consumption alone. The primary (and according to Simmel the most universal) mediator is money, but it is also one the most impersonal means humankind has created. However, the Soviet heritage continues to exert its influence, and thus we cannot speak of any simple adoption of Western consumer cultural practices and symbols. Instead, we see a complex localised web of meanings, which brings forth new tensions between subjects and objects, between the subjective and objective culture.

Although the notions of civic and consumer freedom were partly interwoven, thus giving the ideals of freedom a strong connotation of consumer sovereignty, the current situation is far from a full realisation of the dreams of the Soviet Estonian consumers who resisted the system and its ideology. The market has been flooded with, to a remarkable extent, imported commodities. We assume that freedom of choice (both on an individual and national level) as well as objects, and cultural forms symbolising it (such as shopping), once here, are often seen today as having developed according to an immanent logic of their own, producing new tensions, perhaps even alienation. Here we find Simmel’s concept of the tragedy of culture particularly enlightening: the ever-increasing mass of objective culture cannot be fully assimilated by people, sublation of the object by the subject is truncated in many instances and thus the culture, once expected to bring freedom and happiness, feeds feelings of failure and embitterment. As Simmel puts it: ‘The infinitely growing stock of the objectified mind makes demands on the subject, arouses faint aspirations in it, strikes it with feelings of his own insufficiency and helplessness, entwines it into total constellations from which it

cannot escape as a whole without mastering its individual elements' (Simmel, 1997 [1911]: 73).

In contrast to attitudes in the Soviet time, rejection of the system as a whole is very complex. It is not the easy to resist external oppressor's ideology (see Kennedy, 2002), but the independent democratic republic people supported during the Singing Revolution, that is 'our own' creation. However, many elements of it are not fully re-appropriated, and there is no full reconciliation. One of the reasons is social stratification, a differentiation of financial means that differentiates the chances to participate in the consumer culture. We may assume that what P. Sztompka has termed 'cultural trauma' may be encountered here. This entails its own specific ways of meaning-creation, as well as coping strategies (both representational and practical), especially among the older generations whose Soviet experience was more extensive.

Subject of the study – urban Estonians over 45

When choosing the subject of study we sought to focus on representations by informants that expressed the clash of two different types of consumer culture, as well as relations between subjective and objective culture, most vividly. Thus we decided on the group of urban Estonian consumers over 45 years of age. We took as our point of departure the fact that the consumer world constitutes a significant part of the objective culture of today against which the self is identified, i.e. it is also the source of subjective culture. As Lauristin argues: 'The dominant liberal economic success-centred ideology of the transition period has shaped people's self-positioning on the social ladder, proceeding from the criteria of economic success and competitive capacity. Transfer of these criteria and interpretation patterns from the field of ideology into the real world shapes people's subjective evaluation of belonging in social strata in relation to their opportunities as consumers' (Lauristin 2004).¹ No doubt there are better off and worse off people among our informants and one needs to be cautious with generalisations. Nevertheless we assumed that the relative financial deprivation of older respondents amplifies the conflict of two cultural experiences – that of today and that of the Soviet past – as well as between contemporary objective culture, deeply interwoven with the basic liberal-utilitarian message setting individual responsibility for one's consumption opportunities on centre stage, and subjective culture trying to assimilate and cope with the former.²

¹ Self-positioning into a social stratum was measured with the following questions: 'People's social position can be depicted as a ladder, that can take up or down. The 10th step of the ladder shows the highest position, the lowest step is for those who feel almost excluded from the society. What do you think, on which social step are you at the moment?/ Where was your family 20 years ago (at the beginning of 1980s)? / On which step were your parents or grandparents at the end of 1930s?'

² We have not directly asked to extensively describe the Soviet time, instead we have tried to catch characteristic interpretations and explanations. It has to be taken into account, that another factor influencing the representations by these people is the connotation of the Soviet time with their personal

Russians living in Estonia are not analysed here, since for them the trauma caused by social change is more complicated and we assumed that the tense power relations between two ethnic and language communities may also shape the sphere of consumption. Rural population was also left aside, assuming that the urban lifestyle gives more opportunity to enter the romantic hedonistic consumer world.

We decided to focus on the people whose active socialisation period fell in the Soviet era, i.e. they were adult and active in the Soviet environment for at least ten years, being 30 or older at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse.

We also took into consideration the way in which older generations are constructed by various public texts. Based on longitudinal research, a model of the generations of winners' and 'losers' (these former are today under 45) has been proposed (see Titma, 1999). This model has been actively used by mass media, where the critical message of the researchers has often been transformed into simplified images: the Soviet Union collapsed and the young coped with it better than did older generations. The older generations are often represented as excluded by the profusion of consumption opportunities. Thus we were able to anticipate that, in the representations by the older generations, cultural tensions would be particularly prominent.

Empirical background – the social significance of consumption in the eyes of older urban Estonians

Since our focus of research was on subjective meaning-creation, our empirical data was gathered and analysed qualitatively (see below). The goal of the present section is to give some empirical background regarding perceptions of social changes, self-positioning and consumption among the studied group.

As no specific research on the consumption culture of the older generations has been conducted in Estonia, we used the results of the survey within the research project 'Formation of the 21st Century Media Society in Estonia', which covered a territorially representative sample of Estonian inhabitants 15 to 74 years of age (N = 1470) (Kalmus *et al*, 2004). We defined a sub-sample of Estonian inhabitants of Tallinn and Tartu over 45 since in-depth interviews were conducted with people with similar characteristics. The sub-sample comprised 171 individuals. For comparison we used the sub-sample of all Estonians³.

youth or active adulthood and may thus be further idealised-romanticised, some details may be overdone etc. But our focus is people's representations as repositories of cultural memory, their expressions of both objective and subjective culture.

³ We chose the group of all Estonians for comparison instead of the total sample because the replies by Estonians and Russians to the questions about social change differ sharply. This would have influenced the respective indicators of the whole sample to such an extent, that the specifics of the generational dimension could not have been analysed. For example the older urban Estonians evaluate societal change more positively than average, because the Russophone respondents' replies are more negative. At the same time, among Estonians as a whole, the older urban Estonians stand out for their more negative evaluation of the societal change.

Comparing Estonians from Tartu and Tallinn over 45 with all Estonians, we can see that the older urban Estonians felt that they had fallen down the social ladder more often compared to all Estonians (see Table 1). At the same time, 66 per cent of urban Estonians over 45 replied positively to the question: *How do you personally evaluate the changes that have taken place in Estonian life during the last 10–15 years?* A remarkable number of older urban Estonians evaluate the change positively. Also the general evaluation of the development of the Estonian economy and of democracy is viewed positively among urban Estonians over 45 – respectively 80 and 64 per cent of respondents said that the changes had been positive in these aspects. The relevant share of positive answers among all Estonians was 77 and 60 per cent. Older urban Estonians are slightly more positive than all Estonians.

Table 1. Self-positioning on the imagined social ladder.

Share of answers in per cent indicating self-positioning (step 1 to 5 and step 6 to 10 are summed up).		Estonians from Tartu and Tallinn over 45	All Estonians 15–74
Self-positioning on the 10-step ladder today	lower steps (1 to 5)	65	59
	higher steps (6 to 10)	35	38
Self-positioning on the 10-step ladder in the 1980s	lower steps (1 to 5)	42	52
	higher steps (6 to 10)	58	37
Positioning on the 10-step ladder in the 1930s	lower steps (1 to 5)	35	43
	higher steps (6 to 10)	65	50

Thus we may argue that older urban Estonians are not more negative towards the social changes, although they perceive a sharper fall on the social ladder during the transition. Indirectly this reflects an adoption of the role of the ‘loser’ and reproduces self-exclusion and a feeling that society develops according to its own logic and the person stands outside the general flow.

The perceptions and practices of older urban Estonians about consumption did not differ noticeably from Estonians in general. For example, there was no statistically relevant difference in the shares of people who interpreted shopping as a means of pastime and leisure: 13.5 per cent of older urban Estonians and 17 per cent of all Estonians replied that visiting shopping centres is a means of entertainment. The personal hedonistic-consumerist practices were somewhat less characteristic of older urban Estonians compared to all Estonians (see Table 2).

Using Spearman correlation analysis, we explore the correlation between subjective self-positioning on the social ladder and consumerist orientation. Two variables were analysed: the question *On which step of the social ladder are you at the moment?* and the index of consumerism (6 steps)⁴. In the case of older urban

⁴ Under the label of ‘consumerism’ we constructed an aggregate variable – on the basis of 18 single variables, e.g.: does not buy clothes only from shops, has them also tailor-made; buys

Estonians, the correlation coefficient was 0.334 ($p = .001$) and in the case of all Estonians, 0.437 ($p = .001$). Thus the higher one's self-positioning on the social ladder, the stronger the consumerist orientation. Although for our sub-sample the correlation was statistically significant, it was weaker compared to all Estonians. On the whole, we agree with Marju Lauristin (2004) who claims that people who have adopted Western consumption patterns consider their status higher in the present Estonian society.

Table 2. Division of the sample of all Estonians and older urban Estonians on the scale of consumerism. Shares in per cent (100% = relevant sub-sample)

Orientation to consumerism is...	Estonians from Tartu and Tallinn over 45	All Estonians 15–74
Missing	29	21
very weak or weak	42	41
Significant	19	22
high or very high	2	4

Thus the personal consumption possibilities are probably one source that enables people to position themselves on an imaginary social hierarchy, but for older Estonians this does not seem to be as frequent a frame of reference as for younger Estonians. It may be concluded that personal life trajectory and the development of society are, for older urban Estonians, to a certain extent, separate phenomena – an imagined personal decrease of status and lesser participation in the hedonistic-consumerist practices do not provide a basis for overall social pessimism. Opinions by elderly urban Estonians are affected, on the one hand, by more limited participation opportunities in the new consumer world and, on the other hand, by a greater difference between micro level opinions based on personal practice and macro level assessments of society. This gave us reason to anticipate unique representations (including critique) of the old and new consumer culture.

certain clothing brands, considers brand more important than price of clothes, has changes interior decoration of his/her flat in recent years, has had several holiday trips abroad during recent years, etc. We assume that in today's Estonia these variables measure aspects of consumption that are related to consumption self-expression and life-style, where cultural and hedonistic dimensions of consumption are of significant importance (styles, brands, design as well as holiday trips and leisure shopping). We formed 6 groups according to the normal distribution of the replies: consumerism missing, very weak, weak, significant, strong and very strong (see also Keller and Kalmus 2004).

Data and method of qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis was based on interviews conducted as part of a project dealing with Estonian consumer culture and shopping malls carried out by one of the authors (M. Keller). The set of qualitative interviews consisted of two parts: the first consisted of 12 brief interviews (with an average duration of 10 minutes) with shoppers in the two oldest and largest shopping malls of Tallinn and the largest shopping mall of Tartu. Of the informants, three were men, and nine were women. All informants were Estonian-speaking. Most of them lived in either Tallinn or Tartu. The second set of data consists of 18 in-depth interviews conducted mostly at people's homes. Among the informants there were ten men and eight women. Six of them lived in Tartu and 12 in Tallinn. Most of the informants were between 50 and 70 years of age.

Both types of interviews were coded and analysed together and according to the cross case method. Excerpts on various shopping practices, direct reflections on today's consumer culture as well as comparisons with the Soviet era were coded, whereas the coding scheme was developed after the initial reading of the interviews. The codes stem directly from the text but are developed one step further from simple descriptive codes into interpretive codes (see Miles and Huberman, 1994). The coding included not only manifest statements under each theme, but also more latent or implicit assumptions and connotations informants used to make sense of today's consumer world as well as their memories of the Soviet past. The final result of the coding was a structuring of the analysis according to broader constructions that are termed pattern codes by Miles and Huberman (1994), which in many cases contained more than one interpretive code (for example the topic of shopping malls can be divided into sub-themes or different representations of malls as economic objects or as symbolic loci of today's consumer culture).

Under each subtopic we attempted to structure the analysis on the axis of more micro level personal experience descriptions *versus* macro level societal assessments given. In addition, we looked for juxtapositions of the 'old' culture and the 'new', i.e. Soviet memories and recent experiences. To a certain extent, the construct of the West was also explored.

Representations of consumer culture

Shopping malls as functional and symbolic loci

The current study constitutes a section of a broader research project focusing on the meaning of shopping malls and various shopping practices. Our assumption is that for urban consumers the massive construction of new shopping centres and its extensive media coverage form a relevant part of their everyday consumption experience. (See also Keller, 2005 forthcoming and Keller and Kalmus, 2004).

Shopping malls evoke different emotions and are never absolutely neutral. Interviews conducted on-site in the centres and in-depth interviews at other locations understandably differ somewhat. The meaning of a shopping centre for elderly people ‘caught red-handed’ on the spot was usually more positive, focusing on the pleasant immediate environment offering recreation and enjoyment:

Well, it is positive here... There is air and no problem when you need to go... to relieve yourself and it is possible to eat with children... all such things... It is a whole, there are many things, one can spend the whole day here... and even then there is not enough time...I do not see anything bad here. At least during the time I've been here. Lots of effort has been put into it, lots of effort... (BI, F, 60–70 Tln, pensioner)⁵

Since the format of in-depth interviews allows for more reflection, a more intricate field of meanings is revealed. The shopping mall is often articulated as an economic phenomenon, responsibility for which lies with real-estate developers and managers and not with consumers. Competition between different centres is seen as welcome:

It does not concern me... this is their business who build them and who have to sell there and who have to compete... As far as I am concerned let them build as many... as many as they get... as they find customers for themselves. The more shopping centres we have, the more there is hope that there are discounts more often... and prices fall. Competition is tougher and one can get something cheaper. (IDI; F, 60–70, Tln, pensioner)

In addition to this consumer-benefit centred approach, there were numerous critical evaluations from the point of view of society at large. Firstly, shopping malls were criticised in the economic context. Their number was seen as too large for the low purchasing power of the transition country. A strong metaphor was a ‘ghost palace’, a deserted building of a bankrupt shopping centre. The architectural aspect played a role as well. Cheap and ugly buildings were seen as incarnations of greed for profit and lack of care for the urban environment:

I think it will end with a big blow-up and large bankruptcies. And what will become of those enormous faceless boxes, one can only imagine with horror. But they will be taken down and something new will be built instead... But money has to circulate fast and the owners do not care how this or that box fits into the city milieu. (IDI, M, 50–60, Tln, specialist)

At the most macro level, criticism of the shopping mall becomes a metaphor for the new society, the new social structure. The shopping mall destroys the natural environment and immediate human relations by swallowing small corner shops. It standardises and homogenises people and objects evoking nostalgia for the ‘old’ ways of selling and buying. Here we see how encountering the

⁵ The abbreviations used after the interview excerpts are the following: BI- brief interview, IDI – in-depth interview; F – female; M – male; Tln – Tallinn; Trt – Tartu; the occupation of the informant is indicated with the full word, e.g. 50–60 is the age bracket of the informant.

new objective culture in its most intense forms causes difficulties in subjective re-appropriation. A similar feeling is conveyed by the following interview fragments by people with contrasting educational and financial backgrounds:

Oh well... but it is with these small basement shops that you go there and chat a bit and take your things that you need and go on... Just like you read in pre-war Estonian novels that here you are, there was a shop where your purchase was written down on paper and on your pay-day you came and paid for your bread. But in this centre there is pressure, no time to speak to anyone... (IDI; M, 60–70, Tln, pensioner)

It is interesting, how this, let's say seemingly practical and commercial element, profit-generating, concretely taken care of, managed, people behind it who benefit from it and are happy... But indirectly it constructs a society, it guards and controls people and the functioning of society, regulation of people and so on... (IDI, F, 40–50, Trt, intellectual)

However, a strong concession is made to Western shopping malls, which due to their longer tradition and 'patina' are in a way more legitimate. They seem to fit better into the context of 'old' capitalist societies. Those malls are interpreted as being friendlier, less enslaving and less derivative than their post-Soviet Estonian counterparts:

My vivid positive experience is related to visiting Finnish, Swedish, Spanish and other foreign shopping malls. Because they have this specific smell of cleanliness and a pleasant, cultured atmosphere. There are no beggars or street children... In Estonian shopping malls there are negative experiences ... in them practically nothing has changed since the socialist times. (IDI; M, 40–50, Tln, specialist)

Positive or negative comparisons of Estonian malls with those of the West are directly related to informants' personal experience with shopping abroad. A limited background for comparison with the West usually renders the informants' constructs of Estonian malls less critical.

Shopping practices

The two basic micro level conceptual pairs evident in the shopping context are purchasing/not purchasing and enjoying/not enjoying. In many cases elderly and financially deprived consumers regard themselves as being outside the present consumer world. Shopping malls and *šoppamine*⁶ (see also Keller, 2005 forthcoming) as a (at least) partly hedonistic practice is perceived as meant for someone else – either younger or richer people – as a pensioner from Tartu puts it:

⁶ This is a new colloquial word in Estonian adapted from English 'shopping'. Its semantic field is rather complex, however the main connotation is with the romantic (Campbell, 1987) pleasure and leisure oriented practice, which may involve excessive buying but, on the other hand, may involve no actual purchases at all, simply an aesthetic pleasure.

This does not apply to us... we do not go for šoppamine, where you specifically go to spend money. Yes this šoppamine is when you really go to buy... this is real buying not like where you jingle your coins... and see if you can afford this or not. This is more for the rich... (IDI; F, 60–70, Trt, pensioner)

However, the level of being switched on or off in relation to the present consumer culture does not depend only on the actual purchases made and financial resources available. On the one hand, we encountered ‘virtual shopping’ on a compensatory level, particularly by elderly women with little money but lots of spare time. Descriptions of direct participation in purchasing varied from complete abstinence from buying to making occasional small purchases that were indulged in as treats (e.g. a cup of coffee or a bottle of shampoo):

Just like me sometimes, alone as I am. The weather is miserable, you cannot stroll outside, it's very slippery. You go in just for a moment, see what there is in Stockmann, walk through all the floors. Maybe you also buy something, something small, that you happen to need. But... but... why can't one go to a pretty, clean, warm place where there are nice kind, smiling people [laughs] and all is clean, why can't one go, I think this is no sin at all (IDI, F, 60–70, Tln, pensioner).

Such compensatory practice is a way of reconciling oneself to the objective culture of consumer society. Although the limited finances of these people make them feel excluded at times, they do find ways of re-appropriating these forms of objective culture in ways accessible to them.

It has been pointed out in other research that enjoyment without making an actual purchase can be understood also in terms of deferred gratification and self-discipline, a mixture of romantic self-illusory hedonism as the main driving force of contemporary consumer culture as theorised by Campbell (1987) and a puritan ethic of restraint and self-control in the environment of an abundance of goods. This applies particularly in cases where the consumer has ample financial resources (see also Keller, 2005 forthcoming and Lehtonen, 1999). However, such constructs were more evident in interviews with younger people and did not seem to form a very relevant frame of reference for our informants over 45.

Nevertheless, it can be said that positioning the self *vis-à-vis* the world of consumption is often characterised by varying degrees of sophistication and self-control, skills and detachment. Submersion in the consumer world cannot result in mass psychosis: self-control is always said to be retained. In these cases consumer culture provides for the construction of independent, reflexive and moral selves.

Another interesting combination – ‘I buy, but do not enjoy this’ – reveals a complex web of notions and relations between subjects and objects. On the one hand, it can be a rather mundane practice, shopping as everyday ‘labour’ which is not particularly reflected upon and therefore does not evoke the connotation of pleasure (see also, Miller, 1998 and Falk and Campbell, 1997). On the other hand,

the responses of our informants bring out a specific critique of the post-Soviet consumer culture that is brimming with colourful but useless, and perhaps even alienated, objects as well as new shopping centres, while lacking specific goods meant for smaller niches and more specific needs. Thus shopping becomes a search for the necessary object, which, when finally found, may turn out to be shoddy or over-priced. A more detailed analysis on perceived lack of choice and relations to objects is outlined in the next sections.

Freedom of choice

Freedom of choice, particularly consumer freedom, has been postulated as one of the defining differences between state socialism and capitalism (see Slater, 1997, Bauman, 1988; 1994; 2000, for empirical data see e.g. Kennedy, 2002). In addition, as Bauman puts it, the current late modern society addresses its members mostly not as citizens but as consumers.

Marketing and advertising in particular generate a romantic ethic (Campbell, 1987), which is based on a self-perpetuating desire for novelty. This, in turn, creates a feeling of lack. The freedom to choose between different consumer options to fill this lack is fundamental. On the whole, macro level comparisons with the Soviet past reveal a rather uniform agreement in which, in terms of choice, the past and present stand in sharp contrast. The general feeling of remarkably better consumption opportunities also feeds general positive assessments of the transition.

However, particularly in the in-depth interviews, a critical disclaimer was often added. Life has not improved unambiguously. Bauman for example concedes that freedom to choose between mass-manufactured items may prove to be illusory (Bauman, 2000; see also Keller, 2005 forthcoming) or even financially prohibitive for large parts of society.

Naturally we cannot even compare the two systems; they are from completely different worlds. We come from an environment of total deficit, monotony and overall homogenisation. Consumption was a part of Soviet propaganda: big words and behind those a yawning void. Nowadays versatility and striving for abundance dominate, but this often proves to be an illusion, because you cannot get the necessary thing as easily as you wish... everybody's opportunity to choose. At the same time there are other restrictions, enslaving advertising and lack of money. (IDI, M, Tln, 50–60, specialist)

On a micro level elaborate descriptions are given of new deficits. Naturally the first shortage characteristic of the transition society is financial resources. The famous sentence 'before there was money but nothing to buy and today there is plenty to buy but no money (see e.g. Hinrikus, 2000 and 2003) was also recurrent in our interviews. Lack of money can be regarded as a painful personal failure, which evokes nostalgia for the Soviet past in which one's self-esteem and perceived social status were higher. The state, the Soviet power with its 'dictatorship over needs', was one definite culprit that could be blamed for everything

(see Feher *et al.*, 1984; Bauman, 1994), which made resistance to power and ideology unambiguous and rather unidimensional. A male pensioner in Tallinn laments:

Yes, nowadays it is so that you have everything, but you are stopped by the lack of money. Before it was this way that... you could have money, but you could not get anything, but then you had a great deal better feeling that this damn state and all cannot provide for you. I personally could... This money has become so important... (IDI, M, Tln, 60–70, pensioner).

But even in cases where people have the financial means to buy goods, lots of obstacles are encountered within the seeming profusion and endless opportunities. Thus the fundamental consumer right to free choice is represented as restricted. There is a perceived lack of sophisticated, high-quality goods with sensible prices in a post-Soviet market where only a limited number of mainstream brands dominate, as opposed to Western commerce, which is seen as having an infinitely better choice. Secondly, we see representations of frustration and marginalisation based on a personal lack of access to specific goods that cater to specific needs (obesity, illness, etc).

The problem is that people my age... no suitable sizes are manufactured. It is thought that a pensioner will not buy anything or she will buy from the outdoor markets... I do not know, not me alone... these people who buy more, they complain that such things are simply not made, nothing fits you. (IDI, F, 66, Tln, pensioner)

Older, sicker and overweight people were seen as pushed aside, as voiceless niches that will never generate any profit for mainstream commerce. Thus the informants sensed that they did not exist as consumers and felt deeply offended.

The new liberal society, where people have been left to their own devices, feeds personal embitterment and cultural trauma. During the Soviet time the deficit was perceived as public, the 'official' objective culture (although ideological discourse postulated abundance also at those times) against which the self was identified. Acquisition of goods in short supply was achieved through private networking and an economy of favours, i.e. an unofficial objective culture directly linked to the subjective culture of the personal life-world, fostering individual satisfaction and well-being. However, today the abundance is seen as the public and official objective culture, whereas deficit and lack have partly receded to the private world, becoming strong determinants of the reappropriation of the objective culture on the subjective level. In addition, the blame for the lack is placed on the system, which has limited choice on the small market. Whereas the Soviet system created scarcity for all, the capitalist consumer market stigmatises minorities who do not fit into the ideals of a consumer society. It seems in this context that the main source of meaning is not the age of consumers but the failure of the system to provide for the niches, and at the same time, it shifts all the responsibility onto individual shoulders. It is a question for further research as to

whether this perception produces a deepening feeling of exclusion or protest and resistance practices.⁷

Meaningful and meaningless objects

Changing relations between subjects and objects, i.e. particular artefacts, are important reference points when creating meaning related to today's consumer culture (see Miller, 1987). Macro-level references to the Soviet past as well as Western – often a metaphorical American – influence are inextricably tied to micro level personal experience. The Soviet time is perceived as ambivalent. Firstly, as pointed out above, the new objective culture has changed relationships between people and objects. The new materialism has gotten in the way:

Fifteen years ago, when relations between people dominated and things were tied to people, they either existed or did not, but the direct relationship was person-to-person. I have to say with sadness that... very many objects have interfered with relationships between people and this intensity of human-to-human... I can say that... and I do not think it has to do a lot with me growing old. (IDI, F, 45, Trt, intellectual)

In addition, Soviet shortage imposed frugality upon people, which has acquired a positive connotation in the present-day context of perceived excess and waste (even if these are unattainable for a particular individual).

Partly it has become better, partly worse. From the Soviet time I have thrift in me, such a sensible thrift. On many people, however, colourful goods have had a bad influence. (IDI, F, 50–60, Trt, worker)

This Western craze has come here, with so many commodities, production is cheap-cheap and a person heaps things together, buys and buys without knowing what exactly he or she is buying or why he or she is buying it. (IDI, F, 50–60, Trt, skilled worker)

Soviet objects were often idealised as having a much deeper involvement with human contact. Here we can differentiate between two levels of meaning. On the one hand old objects found in the bottoms of drawers bear a symbolism of object value: human handwork.

What came out – hand-painted silk scarves, fantastic crocheted lace shawls, jewels... – handicrafts... That was natural. In short, these things that were presented or brought, even on an everyday basis, had enormous value, they were hand-made or bought from an art shop... How to say it, there were not many of

⁷ Another important dimension that surfaces is cultural consumption (e.g. theatre, concerts etc). Elderly people feel deprived of the possibility to enjoy (high) culture since their financial situation does not enable access to most cultural products due to prohibitively high prices. It has been claimed that (high) cultural consumption was an important feature of the Soviet consumer world, being partly a compensation for the lack of material goods and partly a value *per se*. However, in the present study there is no space to give a detailed analysis of this aspect.

these things, but you would never throw them away... And today a terrible cheapening of things has happened, in terms of material... but prices are not lower, which is very sad. (IDI, F, 40–50, Trt, intellectual)

On the other hand, Soviet objects are recalled with nostalgia because of their subjective emotional value, and the memories of the practices engaged in to obtain them. The objects (especially Western goods) could even be understood as signifiers of national ideals of freedom and/or as trophies acquired via elaborate acquisition processes consisting of reciprocal favours. They were coping skills and small individual accomplishments *vis-à-vis* the regime (see Keller and Vihalemm, 2003; Verdery, 1996; Caldwell and Patino, 2002) that positioned people, with the help of objects, according to a different logic than today:

During the Soviet time I worked at a place where I had an opportunity to obtain all I wished. Because... I had such a job and really, it was 'me for you' and 'you for me'. I must say.. our family lacked nothing... there was no lack. When there was no white bread... there was such a time, I had plenty of white bread ... I remember relatives from the country came and said: 'Oh God, Reet, you have white bread'. I said take some with you, really, I had tears in my eyes. Well I am not completely deprived today either, but those times... (IDI, F, Tln, 50–60, skilled worker)

The new market society based on impersonal transactions and seeming abundance has produced many colourful, but senseless, knick-knacks that are sold to people who are perceived as not 'actually needing them' (cf. the 'gadget', Baudrillard 1998 [1970]). So the disappearance of intense negative and humiliating relations between people and the almost metaphorical shop managers administering the flow of goods 'under the counter' and at their own discretion was represented as laudable. However, along with that, the positive intensity has vanished from goods as well and has been, in many cases, replaced by connotations of manipulation and impersonality.

Price of goods and status of people

As the above shows, the topic of value is significant. By value we mean here a web of notions stemming from perceived cheapness *versus* expensiveness of items. Here we cannot separate assessments of 'pure' use or exchange value, but instead see intertwining romantic, utilitarian and even puritan connotations of consumer items. These accounts are directly linked to both the micro and macro level understanding of morality of a consumer, as well as social stratification. The perceived value of goods helps to make sense of one's own social standing as well as of the general situation in today's Estonian world of consumption.

The first dimension of meaning is tied to price and the quality of goods. Cheapness is inevitable for many financially hard-pressed people. At the same time, low-cost purchases almost always invoke a danger of low quality and a short lifetime for the commodity. Very inexpensive goods are represented as meant for seducing consumers into buying excessively and often unreasonably.

They were cheap [the scissors] but their quality was not good. They went askew somehow on first cutting and they have to be tapped now... The moral is of course very simple, do not buy very cheap things... well in such a discount store... there are all kinds of knick-knacks they sell. I do not want to buy these, they are so trivial ... all kinds of plastic trinkets and stuff... (IDI, M, 70–80, Tln, pensioner)

The ideal is a product with a ‘sensible price’, positioning its buyer as a reasonable consumer. Thus a low-priced product can be simultaneously an expression of a thrifty and moral consumer spending reasonably, as well as having a haunting low quality with an inherent danger of the item breaking down and becoming a useless piece of garbage very soon. It is moral not to overpay for one’s purchases: the vanity of lavish squander is deplored as unjustified social climbing, conspicuous consumption by those who are ‘actually’ not able to afford such ostentation. Although promotional discount campaigns like ‘crazy days’ featuring specially procured cheap goods are, on the whole, viewed in a negative light, the end of season sales or occasional discounts of quality goods are assigned a quite different meaning. Their acquisition can sometimes become even a micro level symbol of resistance, as most of the goods are seen as overpriced and as reaching their legitimate price level only when discounted:

Yes, we do follow these discount offers... When we see that prices have fallen considerably... let’s say some time ago children’s tights were very cheap, well then we do buy, yes... (IDI, F, 60–70, Tln, pensioner)

Low prices evoke a connotation of low purchasing power and poverty, even social stigmatisation, based on shopping in low-market outlets and buying the least costly items. Representations of self-positioning on a social ladder can be placed on a continuum from completely deprived people who distance themselves from the colourful consumer market to well-off, skilful consumers who nevertheless do not waste money on the ‘useless object’.

The social divide was seen as regrettable and harmful for the whole nation⁸, and commerce was accused of not providing enough for the ‘average person’. These representations were often based on personal contact with poverty (on an individual or family level).

In itself it is a great pity that we have this class distinction... that this differentiation between people is so sharp. The average citizen should be satisfied, there are so few of us, Estonians anyway, and when such a large social divide emerges in this tiny nation... well more should be thought about it and more analysis is needed... (IDI, F, 40–50, Tln, worker)

⁸ It is important that the nation means here ‘Estonians’, that is ethnicity not a civic nation, that would include also Russian-speaking population. It may bear a connotation of constructing the latter as ‘other’ and different as consumers for whom the same categorizations do not apply, but the current research does not pursue this line of interpretation for the lack of material and reserves this for further research.

Such representations present the consumer (here in an interesting fusion with the citizen) as repressed by a system, which fails to provide for them and generates social exclusion.

On the other hand, the uneducated masses rushing to discounts in department stores were often represented in a derogatory light, providing a negative reference point for the self-identification of a competent and affluent consumer:

My attitude towards 'buying rallies' and 'crazy days' is very negative because low quality goods are released to attract simple-minded poorer people. For a wealthier person like me, participating in them would be humiliating. (IDI, M, Tln, 40–50, specialist)

Here we can even see an implicit justification of social hierarchy, particularly by those who position themselves higher and do not express explicit concerns for solidarity.

Summary of critique of the 'new scarcity'

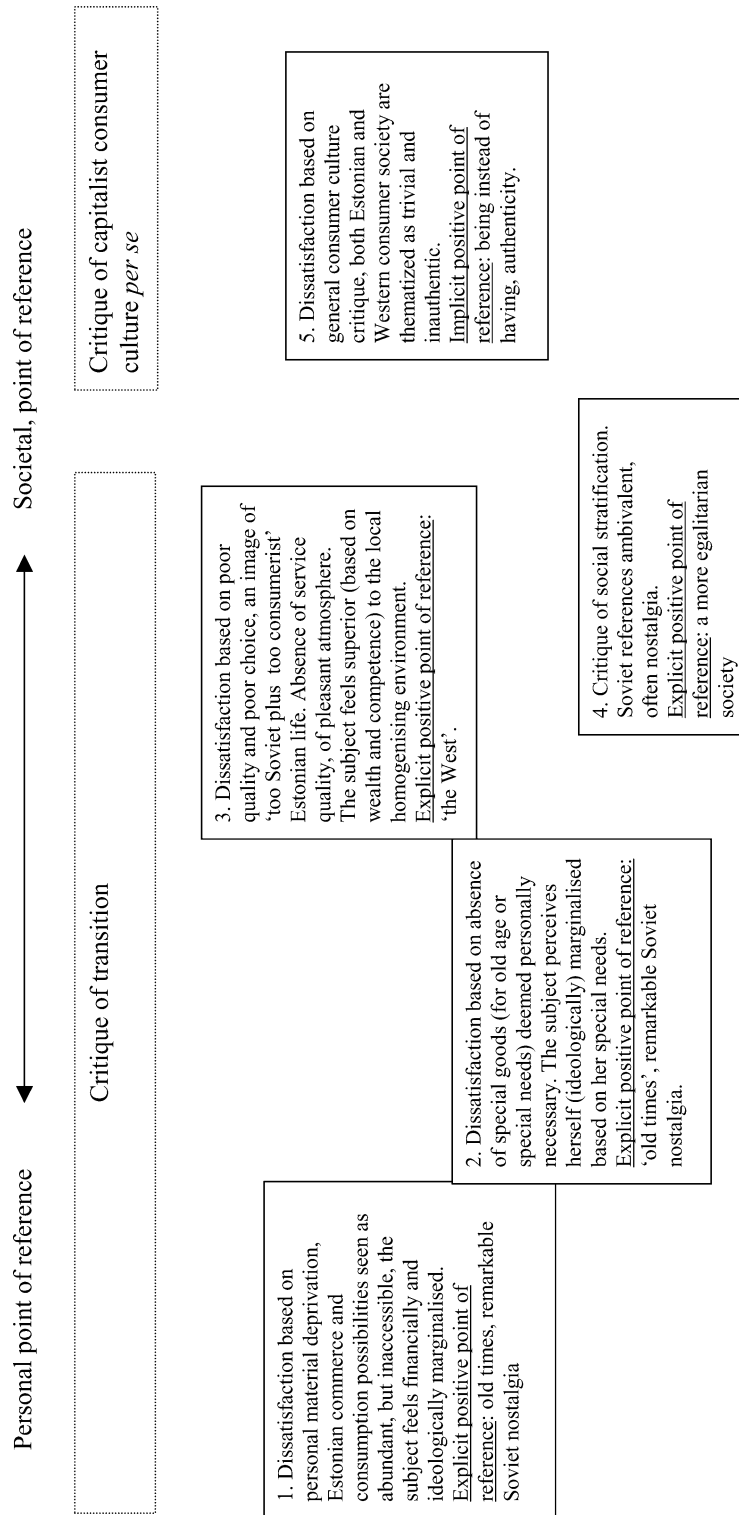
While many informants acknowledged the overall positive transformation of post-Soviet Estonia on the macro level, as well as occasionally describing their own pleasurable consumption experiences, a more interesting picture emerges when summarising different types of critical reflections as those depicted in Figure 1. In each box the key words of each critical representation are outlined. They can be placed on a continuum from intimate micro level accounts to almost theoretical macro level portrayals. Definitely the informant's capacity and willingness to generalise and analyse depended, most of all, on his or her cultural capital, that is reflexivity.

The first two types of critique were based on personal experience, ranging from financial deprivation and the resultant humiliation to the feeling of (at least occasional) marginalisation based on special needs or wishes that are not catered to by the small and relatively homogeneous post-Soviet market. It is noteworthy that the memory of the Soviet era shortage and lack of goods has been transformed into an experience of 'new scarcity', be it money or specific goods or services. In both of these, Soviet nostalgia is explicit. The West does not figure as a prominent point of reference.

The third type of critique is a hybrid of micro level personal experience and more detached macro level evaluations. It is based on both financial access to foreign travel and versatile goods, as well as sophistication. It is a rather bitter transition critique in which the West (particularly Western Europe and Scandinavia) constitutes a remarkable positive reference with which Estonia has a lot of catching up to do.

The fourth type is a general critique of social stratification, as elaborated above. The fifth type is the most macro level of all and the only one where the focal point is not transition but rather capitalist consumer culture in general. Here the West ceases to be a positive role model. Sometimes even elements from the Soviet past are utilised as reference points symbolising more natural and authentic life, as

Figure 1. Different types of critical discourse



depicted in the quotes above. The last type of critique does not require so much financial access to bases of comparison in the West as cultural capital and reflexivity to analyse the 'evils' of consumer society.

Conclusions and Discussion

Our theoretical assumption was that we are faced with a tension, even a clash between the Soviet type and the present Western type of consumer culture in the representations' of elderly consumers in contemporary Estonia. We saw mixed and often contradictory recollections of the relations between the 'old' objective culture in both its official and unofficial (or semi-official) version, as well as subjective culture, which form the basis for interpreting the relations between the 'new' objective and subjective culture. The new objective culture of a profusion of consumer items and various new cultural forms such as advertising and recreational shopping is seen to be backed by a powerful but almost invisible ideology of consumer society, which is a mixture of liberal utilitarian traits, in turn supported by the new economy-centred state policy as well as romantic hedonistic features fostered primarily by marketing communications. This ideology, as well as the new objective culture permeated by it, is versatile, almost impossible to pin down and can therefore neither be fully assimilated and re-appropriated nor rejected. The result of this may be a rather strong feeling of confusion, even exclusion verging on estrangement. This, in turn, is closely related to an understanding of social stratification on the macro level, as well as subjective self-positioning on the social hierarchy, which is to a remarkable extent based on personal consumption opportunities.

Our focus on elderly urban consumers justified itself, because these consumers had extensive experience with the Soviet type of consumer culture, but they are not complete outsiders (especially the urban dwellers) in today's consumer world either, as shown by the quantitative background analysis. Their attitudes and practices did not differ significantly from Estonians in general. However, their self-evaluation was substantially more pessimistic – they have partly internalised the role of 'loser' in the whirlwind of societal change. At the same time, this does not determine assessments of the whole society as unambiguously negative.

Qualitative analysis revealed the system of concepts underlying these consumers' understanding of the current consumer culture and themselves in it, shedding light on several axes on which the cultural tensions between the 'old' and the 'new' and the objective and subjective culture are played out most sharply. Different representations of critique may be interpreted as ways of coping with cultural tension and constructing competent and moral selves.

The most fundamental differentiation between the Soviet consumer culture and that of today – freedom of choice – is seen as illusory on many levels. Instead of the shortage generated by the mechanism of the Soviet objective consumer culture, which was faced by everybody, the new lack is a private problem of the subjective

culture. The lack ranges from shortage of money and absence of goods which cater to niche needs to quality of service and atmosphere in new shopping outlets. The most abstract critique of capitalist consumer culture laments the lack of the values of authenticity and personality that the new objective culture does not seem to offer on many occasions.

This reveals that relations between the subject and object are perceived as transformed. Drawing on Miller (1987) and Simmel (1997 [1911, 1916]) it may be concluded that post-Soviet consumers, particularly older generations, often encounter an incomplete objectification. They are aware of myriads of new objects on the market, but they do not recognise themselves in them: that is, these objects are devoid of human relationships dear to them or their own needs, lifestyle or memories. 'If objectification is truncated, so that we have an act of externalisation without subsequent sublation, then that act of externalisation would have to be seen as negative, as a situation of rupture, representing loss to the subject, rather than gain' (Miller, 1987:30). Many mass-manufactured commodities remain strangers to people and can thus become metaphors for societal alienation.

In addition to the feelings of estrangement described above, adaptation practices (either compensatory 'virtual' shopping by the financially deprived or genuine enjoyment of purchases made under the, at least seeming, conditions of absolute freedom of choice) exist that help to make the 'new' culture more meaningful. It is a task for future research to compare the respective practices of younger consumers and find out how these people, who have no extensive basis for comparison between contemporary conditions and those of the Soviet regime, interpret relationships between subjective and objective consumer culture.

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