

## Consumption and Everyday Use of Design

### Spatial Design & Society

*3. Based on concepts and theories from course and course literature, offer three different explanations why different people buy or/and give second-hand objects.*

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In the epoch of mass consumption and consumerism, the appeal and motivation to buy second-hand varies. This paper will examine three plausible reasons why individuals buy or gift second-hand objects. Firstly, rejecting of the Linear and advocating for the Circular Economic model will highlight the ecological motives for sustainability-conscious individuals, whilst for others, buying second-hand is due to affordability and necessity. Secondly, by examining self-identity, second-hand objects can act as identity signifiers to a sustainability-conscious individual. Self-identity through Displaced Meaning theory will highlight how purchasing luxury second-hand goods can act as a bridge to an idealised wealth. To conclude, the act of finding, buying and owning rare or unique objects and their transformation from being alienable to inalienable objects can also explain motivation in buying second-hand objects.

The unsustainability of the Linear Economic model and the desire to participate in its alternative, the Circular Economic model, can be seen as incentives for buying and giving second-hand objects. Since the Industrial Revolution, the global economy has developed around - and been dominated by - the Linear Economic model. This follows the 'take-make-use-dispose' mode of consumption whereby objects move from cradle-to-grave (Andrews, 2015). This model, however, is unsustainable and encouraged through Planned Obsolescence, whereby "consumer goods rapidly become obsolete and are replaced" (Andrews, 2015. p. 307). This is achieved by either Planned (the use of inferior materials to reduce the lifecycle of the object) or Perceived Obsolescence, wherein it fosters "the desire to own something a little newer and a little better, a little sooner than necessary" (Stevens, 2005 as cited in Andrews, 2015. p. 307). As a result, these now obsolete goods are either disposed of, leading to substantial reserves of waste, or conversely, but to lesser extents, re-used or repaired (Andrews, 2015). Furthermore, as a result of dramatic population growth and its interlinked consumption growth, high demands are being placed on natural resources, and unethical practices to collect and subsequently use the aforementioned resources can ensue (Andrews, 2015). As stated by Andrews (2015, p. 308), this growth is

already having an unprecedented impact on demand for many resources and more metals, minerals and fossil fuels were consumed during the 20th century than in all other centuries together; moreover demand is expected to increase... Supply can also affect health and wellbeing if minerals are extracted and processed without proper care for the environment and workers while the sale of 'conflict minerals' can be used to fund arms and war.

It can thus be argued that by buying or giving second-hand items, consumers are rejecting this unsustainable and out-dated economic model. They are refusing to take part in the continuous production cycle of waste - a counter to the "systematic attempt of business to make us wasteful, debt-ridden, permanently disconnected individuals" (Packard, 1960 as cited in Andrews, 2015 p.307).

By purchasing second-hand objects, consumers participate in - and perhaps even advocate for - the alternative and sustainability driven Circular Economic Model. This sustainable model emulates natural life processes, where “dead organic material decomposes to become a nutrient for the next generation of living organisms” (Andrews, 2015. p. 309). Waste thus becomes a resource again, a cradle-to-cradle of transmission (Andrews, 2015). An object donated to and subsequently bought from a second-hand shop remains in circulation rather than landfill. People may feel an obligation and responsibility to buying and gifting more sustainably, in ways that will not be detrimental to the health of the environment. The practice of second-hand buying and giving could be seen as an act of love, as a service to maintaining environmental health and also aiding long-term health and viability in the life world of the recipient of the gift (Miller, 2004). This draws parallels to Miller (2004. p. 253), whereby selective/health shopping for an informant’s children is construed as a practice of love:

She is constantly concerned that they should eat healthier foods than those they would choose for themselves... She sees her role as selecting goods which are intended to be educative, uplifting and in a rather vague sense morally superior... In short, her shopping is primarily an act of love, that in its daily conscientiousness becomes one of the primary means by which relationships of love and care are constituted by practice.

Through this lens, giving second-hand objects is a practice of love, for the act of rejecting unsustainable practices and choosing to participate in an eco-friendly model of consumption is beneficial for the health of the individual and the earth that he/she stands on. It must also be mentioned that the affordability of second-hand goods is also a factor in participating within the Circular Economic Model, but this stems from monetary necessity rather than choice. The ship breaking business in Bangladesh is a demonstration of this, whereby objects are stripped from end-of-life ships and sold to and appropriated by middle-class Bangladeshi customers (Gregson et al, 2001). Some customers rely on buying second-hand furniture due to monetary necessity:

(it) is within range of our ability and affordability. We can’t buy teak furniture so it is very beautiful and attractive to us. People like us are basically the lower income group and the only option is ship-breaking furniture both for design and by necessity (Gregson et al, 2001. p.851).

Therefore, the buying of second-hand objects and participating within the Circular Economy can be due to financial constraints rather than solely sustainable ethos.

A subsequent explanation for buying second-hand objects can be examined through self-identity. Two examples will be used to exemplify this: semiotics of an eco-conscious person and Displaced Meaning Theory of a person wishing to project an image of wealth. From a theoretical standpoint, semiotics “emphasizes the ability of

objects to represent or signify something in social discourse” (Woodward, 2001. p.118). A person buying second-hand goods may identify with being eco-conscious. The purchasing/wearing/displaying of these goods is then a physical presentation and symbolic proof of the eco-conscious narrative they wish to establish both outwardly and inwardly. The objects serve as a “plausible narrative which links one’s choices to desired characteristics of the self” (Woodward, 2001, p.115), and for this narrative to be convincing, these objects must exist as evidential proof.

Buying/wearing/consuming/displaying these objects thus can be a signifier of this eco-conscious status both publically and personally, whilst affirming and aiding to manage an individual’s self-identity as being so. A subsequent example to explain the importance of self-identity through buying second-hand objects is shown via Displaced Meaning Theory. Displaced Meaning Theory “consists in a cultural meaning that has deliberately been removed from the daily life of a community and relocated in a distant cultural domain” (McCracken, 1988. p.104). In the case of a less affluent individual striving to obtain wealth, wealth is the displacement. In order to get closer to the ideal image that the individual wishes to embody (affluence), the individual can buy objects to take possession of a small part of this style of life to which they aspire to obtain. These objects become bridges to the goal attainment. As stated by McCracken (1988, p.109) “goods serve both individuals and cultures as bridges to displaced meaning. They are one of the devices that can be used in the recovery of this meaning.” In reference to this point, the buying of second-hand luxury items can thus be a bridge towards a perceived life/identity of affluence and wealth, a bridge between the gap of the real (less affluent) and the ideal (wealthy) (McCracken, 1988).

The act of finding, buying and subsequently owning rare or unique objects and their transformation from being alienable to inalienable objects can explain motivation in buying second-hand objects. Taking a leisurely Sunday stroll in any metropolitan city or bustling town, one is likely to come across a flea-market potentially filled with a treasure trove of second-hand goods. What may seem as trash to some, translates as treasure to others. Taking the second-hand vinyl record stand as an example, the thrill of the chase of ‘crate digging,’ whereby one engages in a blind search for potential collectibles, can sometimes lead to valuable findings (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2013). As stated by Bartmanski and Woodward (2013. p. 11) “Part of the excitement, and enchantment in the vinyl market is in the chase for collectibles... The digger never knows what they might find and at what prices it might be offered.” This also translates to other second-hand items such as second-hand clothing, trinkets or old furniture (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2013). The chance finding and buying of such rare or unique objects imbeds extra value into the pieces, as “the cultural value added resides precisely in rarity and serendipity factors” (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2013. p.11). When these pieces are found, bought and transmitted to the personal or home space, the object undergoes a transformative process. Prior to being found, the object is an alienable entity, void of embellished sentiment but full of price value (Woodward, 2001). After a serendipitous find, already the object is embedded with

extra sentiment: the treasure was found within a laborious task of sorting through the trash. The object may be seen by the individual as unique, or a rarity due to its chance find and singularity. This process of becoming an inalienable entity is highlighted by Miller

...consumption as work may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition; that is, from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations (1987 as cited in Woodward, 2001. p.120).

Once brought and assimilated into the personal or home space, these unique items have an ability to transmit status, perhaps of individuality or being a music aficionado with a collection of rare or obscure LPs and EPs. An example of such an individual piece is as follows:

For Julie, the 'big blue' vase is a status object that gains value primarily through its uniqueness. Despite being led by the interviewer at one juncture, Julie does not talk about aspects of the vase's style or aesthetic features. Instead, she gives prominence to the uniqueness of the object: it is not available to others and therefore is more valuable to her (Woodward, 2001. p. 129)

The desire for owning and displaying unique second-hand objects can thus be seen as status building, showcasing a person's individuality, a concrete contrast to the Ikea constructed moulds, whereby "having too much 'IKEA' is suggestive of an inability to be an individual or show personal history" (Garvey, 2011. p.149).

It has now been examined that the appeal and motivation for buying or giving second-hand objects are multiple. Seeing the unsustainability of the Linear Economy and the advantages of the ecologically viable Circular Economy could explain people's desires for buying and gifting second-hand items, whilst the affordability of these goods can also be a factor. Second-hand objects aiding self-identity has shown the semiotic capacity of objects in reference to eco-friendly image. Furthermore, an individual with a modest income may purchase luxury, albeit second-hand goods in order to create a bridge to the ideal image they wish to embody (in this example, a person with a higher socio-economic status). To conclude, the act of finding and buying rare or unique objects and their transformation from being alienable to inalienable objects can also explain motivation in buying second-hand objects.

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