When consuming means using, not shopping – are sharing & co signs for a more sustainable consumer culture?

Renate Hübner
Institute of Intervention Research and Cultural Sustainability, University of Klagenfurt, Austria

Short-lived, discards products are characteristic of consumer culture, symbols of an unsustainable society. Money, research and creative potential have been invested in extending the life of products, a key strategy for reducing resources, energy consumption and the emission of greenhouse gases. Nevertheless, with few long-life products to be found in shops, and offers for spare parts, repair, refill, and upgrade increasingly absent, the consumers’ impression is that product life is decreasing. Recent studies and legal conditions (e.g. in France) about planned obsolescence confirm this. As discussion mainly focuses on product design and on companies’ individual selling interests, the user and the using phase are mainly neglected and their potential underestimated, despite having gained in colour and life over the last few years.

However, the World Wide Web, new communication technologies, and a generation of users familiar with them have fostered interest in new patterns for dealing with material goods. Sharing goods, barter systems, repair cafés, and give-away parties have injected new life into the using and disposing of goods. These activities are often consumer-driven and -organized, following different logics to the well-established patterns of shop and discard. Participation in such grass-root initiatives has something subversive (Konsumguerilla, Richard/Ruhl, eds., 2008) and attractive about it, not only for the young, for manifold reasons: new social contacts, online protest groups, caring for others and the environment, self-sufficiency, or just having fun by acting differently to mainstream culture. The paper discusses how this could be understood as a nascent culture towards a sustainable future, what competences consumers need, and how consumer education could support these transition processes.

Keywords: Product use extension, Transformation of Consumption, Product using and reusing patterns

*Presenting author