On the meaning of popular representations of low-budget urban practices in Poland: The case of cultural translation*

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abstract

In recent years, the Polish mainstream media have engaged in commenting on diverse economising urban practices including balcony gardening, street universities, barter systems, handicraft, food collectives and so forth. This paper explores the manner in which these practices are represented in the Polish popular press and online media stories, and how this can aid our understanding of Poland’s contemporary consumer formations, especially concerning the relationship between past and present portrayed. Various interconnected reasons have been cited as a background for their current popularity, including a valued return to tradition, anti-consumerist sentiments, their fashionable status in Western capitalist economies, and the financial and social rewards they offer. Our analysis reveals complex ways in which ‘traditional’ and familiar domestic activities such as knitting, gardening, repairing, or popular social institutions from the past such as milk bars, are being recast as socially valuable and ‘cool’, and generally associated with visible, choice- and value-based practices of young, highly educated people with a high level of cultural capital. We explain this ongoing semiotic process by the concept of ‘cultural translation’ (Lotman, 1990), highlighting some of the tensions in the way popular media are implicated in a different valuation of identical practices, and thus in social change. We also reflect on the practice of cultural translation as experienced in the course of collaborating on this paper.

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Introduction

How are urban low-budget practices represented in Polish popular media – in a context where conditions of scarcity are living memories in times of relative, if unevenly distributed affluence? And most of all, what can an analysis of these representations tell us about the production of meanings with regard to contemporary urban consumption practices in Poland?

This paper uses a discourse analysis of media representations to discuss the diversity, salient aspects and tensions surfacing in and by way of media depictions of low-budget practices in the Poland of today. The questions guiding our analysis arose from a review of the literature and concern the connections between past and present practices, discourses of thrift and austerity, and the relevance of thrift-related skills in economising practices. The sense of historicity in popular discourse is conceptually significant: understanding the past is an essential requirement for shaping the future of our society (Turraine, 1977). We were interested in examining the motivations provided for current economising practices, how they are being positioned in relation to Poland’s past experience and present developments as a post-socialist economy, the skills they entail, and the degree to which ‘urban low-budget’ practices are represented as new or long-standing, adopted within or across generations, portrayed as ordinary or fashionably ‘cool’. To answer these questions, we applied a critical discourse analysis to media representations of low-budget practices across popular press and online media stories, producing a variety of representative examples and themes discussed in this paper.

We consider our analysis useful as a diagnostic if preliminary tracing of the contours of today’s popular imagining of urban low-budget practices emerging in Poland. The paper contributes to the growing international thrift/low-budget scholarship by providing a complementary perspective from the relatively underanalysed post-socialist context undergoing transformation here. This reveals and theorises a curious mix of economising practices distributed along class lines and based on choice or necessity, while morphing ‘old’ socialist into ‘new’ aspirational and trendy lifestyles associated with ‘collaborative’, ‘low-budget’, ‘value-led’ or ‘eco-consumption’ aspects. The argument stresses the role of dynamic semiotic processes in the media as an important agent by which low-budget practices are inscribed with value and meaning as reflective and productive of the social context in which they occur. We argue that translation is a mechanism through which these practices are made sense of and shaped in and by way of media representations. The theoretical model of translation applied here opens up novel possibilities for analysing low-budget practices in Poland and other countries by a textual, inter-cultural and comparative reading – treating
low-budget practices as part of the dynamic and interactive local and international system.

The paper is structured in three parts. It begins by bringing together the English- and Polish-language literature to situate our analysis. Polish literature on contemporary low-budget practices is emerging, providing us with a timely opportunity to put it in relation with the English-language literature on thrift. We will then briefly discuss the experience of working on this paper as an insightful but challenging act of translation. The second part will discuss several representative examples of Polish low-budget practices with identified key themes, aspects and tensions. The final discussion section then theorises these Polish examples by applying Lotman’s concept of translation (1990), and proposes directions for further research.

It is important to note in the introduction that consumption practices are specific and operate at the intersection of global, national and local influences. The Polish case is interesting as it contributes a perspective where the context has shaped economising practices in different ways than those familiar from developed capitalist economies in the West, where much of the extant literature on thrift and low-budget is localised. A country with roughly 40 million people (not including the large diasporic community), Poland can be considered as a peripheral cultural space defined by a minor language and as an important economic player in Central Eastern Europe at the same time. It has a relatively large market showing an economic growth of 3.9 % in 2010, one of the better results amongst the stagnating economies of other European countries. Poland’s recent history is significant, with the communist period (1945-1989) being associated with relentless negotiations of political, social and material constraints in households. This period conjures up long shopping queues, an inefficient ration stamp system, and the now nostalgically evoked relationships based on necessarily strong, informal social ties, collaboration and trust, crossing over into underground economies. In a situation of material scarcity, family and neighbourhood relationships were an important currency allowing products and services to be obtained and exchanged. Imaginative household management, thrift and industriousness were commonplace, based on and begetting skills and competences. The transition to a capitalist market economy in 1989 kicked off a process of economic growth with the availability of new consumer markets, resources and products. Gaining membership of the European Union in 2004 gave a further boost to the Polish economy, but the country’s GDP per capita remains significantly below the EU average, with unemployment rates continuing to rank amongst the highest in the Community, despite economic catch-up strategies. Poland’s economy was resilient up to the global financial
crisis; a steady economic growth had seen the country’s GDP rise to 4.3% in 2011, and then drop to 2.0% in 2012.

Today, a sense of nostalgia for the communist period and its slight social disparities is especially prevalent amongst the older generations. The transition has entailed a range of unintended negative consequences, including steadily growing economic stratification, accompanied by palpable social and political unease between the haves and have-nots. In Poland’s popular discourse, this situation is reflected by references to ‘winners and losers’ of the transition. In the early 90s, a great number of state-run enterprises were privatised, causing mass layoffs. Former historical divisions between a ‘Poland A’ of large cities versus a ‘Poland B’ of small towns and villages not only survived, but even increased after the changeover. The rise of the private enterprise sector with foreign investment has mostly strengthened the economic performance in already well-developed regions. Academic literature notes that less educated parts of the population, living in deprived or rural areas where conditions are not as good as in urban environments, were further disadvantaged by the structural changes, branding them as ‘transition losers’ (Jarosz 2005; Parysek and Wdowicka, 2002).

Academic contexts

The context of the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis has led to a growth in thrift, ‘austerity’ and ethical consumption-related literature addressing different economic, cultural and historical aspects of contemporary economising practices (for a synthesis, see Podkalicka and Tang, 2014). Rebecca Bramall (2013), for example, highlights the complicated ways in which the past feeds into contemporary forms of ‘austerity culture’ in a context of British popular culture. James D. Hunter and Joshua J. Yates (2011) offer a historical account of the significance of thrift in America’s cultural life – arguing for an expanded understanding of thrift as a philosophy for ‘the good life’, rather than a set of practical tools used to get by. There’s also been a proliferation of cultural studies on public initiatives and everyday practices related to thrift across cultural contexts, including food cooperatives, ‘permablitz’ (Lewis, 2014), craft collectives (Orton-Johnson, 2014), shared accommodation (Bialski, 2012), or mending (König, 2013). Collectively, these works elaborate on how traditional activities such as repair or knitting, once associated with necessity, utility and the private domain of (often gendered) household work, are evolving into expressive, social, leisure and value-motivated practices heavily mediated by digital technologies. These trends reflect a shift from the participation in formal political structures and institutions towards ‘the growing politicisation of life and lifestyle practices’ in everyday life (Lewis and Potter, 2011: 5).
The geographical literature has also touched upon thrift as a household consumption practice, for example in relation to commonplace activities in the reuse and recirculation of material goods (e.g. Gibson et al., 2013; Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011, for Australia). Empirical studies, including those from post-socialist contexts, emphasise the important role of skills and social networks in practices of thrift and economising. Focusing on Poland (and Slovakia), Alison Stenning et al. (2010) have shown how skills and circuits of exchange developed in the past (i.e. under scarcity) now coexist with new skills learnt in response to capitalist markets and infrastructures. For instance, ‘traditional’ gardening and cooking skills and local shopping routines continue to persist alongside ‘new shopping skills’ associated with bargain hunting in hypermarket promotions (Stenning et al., 2010: 173). Similarly, in her study of consumption practices in post-Soviet Estonia, Marget Keller identifies thrift and related skills as part of ‘oppamine’ (recreational shopping), characterised by a considered, often laborious calculation aimed at efficiency (2010: 73). Indeed, recent theories have identified skills and capacities as one of the salient dimensions of thrift in English-language literature (Podkalicka and Potts, 2013).

The interest in ‘new’ low-budget practices is gaining popularity in Polish scholarship. Ewa Majdecka’s examines a present ‘not-to-buy trend’ in Poland, identifying the under 30 year-olds (mostly women) and Internet users as its main participants. While practices of exchanging (e.g. clothes), borrowing (e.g. handbags), mending and remaking objects (e.g. furniture) seem familiar, Majdecka (2013: 150) argues that they are different – motivated not by limited access to consumer goods, but by lifestyle and anti-consumerist values and economising, with the Internet playing an important role as a facilitator. ‘Depending on interpretations’, Majdecka concludes, ‘we can talk about [the not-to-buy trend] as continuous with ‘old traditions’ or a common name for different phenomena and practices’ (Majdecka, 2013: 150). Agata Grabowska (2010) focuses on Polish practices of renting goods and services, mainly including citizens aged between 25 and 45 in the ‘borrowers’ demographic, mostly women living in large and medium-sized cities, and driven by various changing motivations summarised as ‘chic and cheap’, ‘aspirational-elegant’, ‘gadget-lovers’ and ‘eco loco’. Grabowska argues that ‘the Polish borrowers are different to the Western ones in that they are often ashamed of borrowing’, and that ‘the eco motivation is relatively rare; tends to occur in declarations’.

There are also emergent studies of Polish food cooperatives as examples of new social movements facilitating access to healthy, organic, local, affordable food and creating active communities amongst their members – especially for the younger generation (Bilewicz and Potkańska, 2014: 2). Krystyna Romaniszyn (2011) takes a broader view and offers a critique of the rise of alternative
consumption under conditions of surplus in today’s Poland, arguing that, after years of limited access to goods, it is very hard for Polish society to restrain its consumption. In one of the contributions, Agata Neale suggests that ‘green consumerism’, for example, marks a reorientation towards a new paradigm where the emphasis is no longer on the quantity, but on the quality of products as a key driver for consumers, referring to it as ‘the ethics of restraint in consumption’ (Neale, 2011: 115).

This emergent work adds to the established analysis of consumption practices under the communist regime (Łaciak, 2005; Sztompka and Boguni-Borowska, 2008; Romaniszyn 2004, 2011; Adamczyk, 2012), which views economising practices (or thrift) as a necessary response to the ‘shortage economy’. Poland’s transition to a capitalist economy and the attendant consumption trends are largely theorised as a shift from restraint to over-consumption. As Bogdan Mróz observes, for example:

> The advancement of sustainable consumption in Poland is a tall order indeed. After decades of ascetic consumption, the Polish consumers will not be easily persuaded to exercise self-restraint, the more so as the world of industry, commerce, media and advertisement sends them compelling signals with enticement to increased consumption. This constitutes a major challenge for central government, local authorities and consumer-education NGOs, while also providing them with room for initiatives and actions to further sustainable consumption. (Mróz, 2010: 14)

Heidrun Fammler (2011) notes that for Poland and other Central Eastern European countries in transition, the ideas of low-budget, value-oriented and sustainable consumption can appear to conflict with the priority given to economic growth and unlimited consumption, with a discourse of desire arguably dominant in post-Soviet countries after years of scarcity and limited access to market goods.

To interrogate media representations of low-budget practices in Poland, we build on this diverse literature, especially the works by Stenning et al. and Keller for post-socialist contexts. The discussion of ‘ambivalent valuations of the general process of transition from scarcity to abundance, central control to individual volition, relative equality to growing economic stratification’ (Keller, 2010: 80) is a relevant context to our study. So is the framework of ‘diverse economies’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006), which much of the social research reviewed is indebted to. Our analysis is influenced by a useful broadening of conceptions of thrift and low-budget practices beyond the traditional categories of need and scarcity to an expression of desirable and aspirational lifestyles. This conceptualisation is particularly important in relation to Polish consumption patterns, where the
choice- or value-led dimensions of consumption are emerging in, of interest for and slowly being theorised by Polish scholarship.

However, despite the growing interest in new international consumption trends related to thrift and low-budget practices, there are relatively few up-to-date studies from post-socialist contexts undergoing significant transformation. This article fills this gap by offering a diagnostic account of the semiotic field and the ways in which contemporary low-budget practices are negotiated and mediated in Poland. Our discourse-analysis approach is valuable in exploratory and broadly comparative terms – showcasing a diversity of practices and their emergent meanings in relation to one another, informed by convoluted local and international cultural influences. This textual reading of themes, aspects and tensions usefully complements the class-based analyses of thrift-related practices familiar in Western contexts (e.g. Williams, 2002) or as rooted in post-socialist conditions (Stenning et al., 2010). The broad textual mapping of the field can serve as a basis for future empirical studies in Poland, as well as comparisons with international examples. The article contributes to an essential understanding of ‘low-budget practices’ by noting culturally specific as well as unique aspects of the Polish case, while proposing a general theoretical framework of translation (i.e. a schema for explaining a set of historical and interactive cultural processes – Lotman, 1990) for thinking about new urban low-budget formations.

Methodology

Our study was based on a critical discourse analysis of media representations of low-budget practices in Poland. We adopted the concept of a critical discourse analysis centred on three dimensions including the use of language, transfer of ideas and processes of social interaction to identify the state of knowledge, the hierarchy of values, opinions and attitudes, assumptions, culture and pragmatics of communication typical for a specific time, place and situation (van Dijk, 2001). Applied to media representations, this helps to uncover the vectors of the public debate and popular discourse on ‘low-budget’ practices. Following the media and communication approach, we understand popular press stories as representations of ‘the ways in which our cultural and language group undertakes its particular repackaging of the real’ (Bowles, 2006: 75). These

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1 The idea for the study emerged during the participation in a series of workshops run by the ‘Low-Budget Urbanity’ research network Hamburg, March 2013. The workshops provided the authors with an opportunity to discuss the shared interest in inter-cultural research into contemporary thrift and low-budget practices. The subsequent research and analysis were conducted in Poland and Australia.
mediated representations operate in a two-fold manner: they make sense of the social world they are connected to, and they have a constitutive potential as a discourse shaping the public imagination and social relationships. As ‘meaning-generating mechanisms’ (Lotman, 1990), texts are useful for revealing ‘how people are making sense of the world’ (McKee, 2001: 8). Seen from this perspective, the popular texts analysed by us are useful for understanding what kind of collective frameworks, discourses and local or international knowledge they mobilise (including the ones contained in the ‘low budget’ practitioners’, activists’ and experts’ accounts they feature) as they dynamically mediate, reflect and shape the meaning of ‘low-budget practices’ in Poland’s contemporary culture.

We conducted a broad search across popular press and online media stories (excluding fiction, TV lifestyle programming or social media self-presentations as beyond the scope of this paper) sourced from two databases: the newspaper archives at Warsaw University Library and the Google news archives, across multiple keywords. We chose to focus on the period following the Global Financial Crisis (2008-2013) that had seen the growth of the popular and academic interest in thrift practices. The material to be analysed was selected from various sources with different circulations and target audiences to include a wide range of representations and views. ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’, for example, is a popular daily newspaper, published in a print and an online version. With its focus on a progressive social perspective and interactive content including user forums and contests, ‘Gazeta’ has a significant readership amongst young, highly educated residents of metropolitan cities, playing an active part in co-shaping the consumer preferences in this market. Other articles analysed were published in different web portals dedicated to business (http://pierwszymilion.forbes.pl), politics, public affairs (www.natemat.pl), science and technology (www.compu.pl), non-governmental organisations, and civil society (www.ngo.pl). We also analysed web portals providing local news to local communities (www.trojmiasto.pl, www.mmwarszawa.pl). While ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’ and the portal ngo.pl mostly cater to the middle class, web portals such as (www.trojmiasto.pl, www.mmwarszawa.pl) are also popular amongst blue-collar workers.

Our search turned up a range of texts covering various examples of low-budget practice, which we reviewed with regard to our research questions. Through the sampling process, we selected a dozen of articles and applied an open coding technique available in Atlas.ti. We coded texts to identify common, recurring themes and narratives. Upon reaching a saturation point where the narratives of ‘low-budget’ practices across different texts revealed similar and recurrent
patterns, we selected our examples as representative of the larger popular press representation of the topic.

Inter-cultural research: Challenges and opportunities

We conducted a discourse analysis of popular Polish-language texts, but the analysis itself and much of the critical literature underpinning it has been written in English. This created a range of analytical and practical problems because specific concepts have different meanings in English and Polish. Concepts such as ‘thrift’ are variously construed and used across different socio-economic contexts, making an act of translation not just necessary but often tricky. For example, ‘thrift’ and ‘frugality’ are often used interchangeably in English-language scholarship, to the dissatisfaction of scholars such as Evans (2011) who propose a clearer theoretical differentiation between the two. Even across major English-language countries such as the US, UK or Australia, the content and significance of either ‘thrift’ or ‘frugality’ will vary in the dominant discourse and vernacular. Take the example of the ‘low-budget’ descriptor, proposed as an organising category by this special issue to refer to a variety of observable practices that by and large do not require much in the way of financial capital. Being hard-pressed to apply this meta-term in the discussion presented here, we faced, like Iveson (2013), the challenge of theorising emergent, hugely diverse and multiple micro-scale urban practices. The term ‘niskobudżetowa/y/e’ does function in the Polish language, mostly in reference to ‘tanie’ (= ‘cheap’) but also more broadly as ‘oszczędnościowy’ (= ‘thrifty’). But the articles we analysed deploy varied concepts referring to motivations as diverse as ‘money saving’, ‘thrift’, ‘industriousness’, social justice, anti-consumerism or ecological awareness to express personal and collective values. One of our early reflections therefore concerned the manner in which we were to mobilise the idea of ‘low-budget’ and ‘thrift’ in writing about Polish examples. We were cognisant of overlapping ideas such as ‘gospodarność’ or ‘oszczędność’, both translated as ‘thrift’, and their presence in the Polish discourse of popular culture. There is also another recognisable and normalised term that refers to the popular attitude of ‘kombinować’ (Kusiak, 2012) in the Polish vernacular. Understood primarily as ‘looking for a solution’, according to the Polish Language Dictionary², it also has a strong colloquial meaning: to cleverly carry out plans, ‘conduct suspicious or dishonest business’, to put a spin on things. Undoubtedly tainted by negative connotations with practices bordering on the illegal and off the books, in its positive sense the term conveys a sense of entrepreneurial wit. Some of these connotations surfaced in the examples we used. The actual English word ‘thrift’

² See definition at http://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/kombinowa%C4%87
is very rarely used in the Polish mass media and if it is, mostly in reference to the notion of a ‘thrift shop’, but also in a recent hit song by independent musicians from the US. Other terms borrowed directly from the English language do apply in Polish popular discourse, such as ‘freeganizm’ (= ‘freeganism’), ‘freeshops’ or ‘secondhandy’ (= ‘secondhand’ in relation to shops).

We are aware that ‘well-travelled’ concepts such as ‘collaborative consumption’, ‘economy of engagement’ or even ‘middle class’ cannot be taken at face value. We tried to critically reflect on their purchase in a Polish context by tapping into our own cultural understandings of the Polish situation, consulting, wherever possible, both Polish- and English-language literature, and offering a thick contextualisation. We acknowledge that this process is charged with intellectual uncertainties and frictions: having set out to explore popular representations of low-budget urban practices, we found ourselves spending a great deal of time deliberating over how this can be communicated accurately and meaningfully, translating back and forth between languages. All translations from Polish into English are ours.

**The meaning of low budget practices in Poland**

In this section we will focus on several representative examples from popular Polish writings to discuss their characteristics and significance.

*Example 1: ‘Uliczny uniwersytet’ (‘street university’): Sharing DIY skills and know-how*

The new ways of valuing DIY skills are perfectly captured by the emergence and appeal of so-called ‘street universities’ hosted in squats throughout Poland. From the beginning of the 90’s, squatting has become popular in Poland, with young people occupying abandoned buildings in Warsaw and other Polish cities as an expression of their disappointment with the results of the transition (Wróbel, 2013). Young activists, members of the ‘Wilcza 30’ (also the actual address of the squat) community, are running one of these Universities, ‘Syrena’, in Warsaw3, offering free workshops for knitting, photography, bike repairing, Spanish lessons, degrowth discussion groups, and screen printing. Popular narratives of ‘street unis’ conjure up a participatory ethos of engagement and activism, presenting the appropriated physical spaces as community-led hubs where participants from all over the city can learn new skills, and think collaboratively and purposefully about sharing them with others. The discourse of sharing (rather than buying or individually owning new things) provides the pivot around

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3 See: http://www.syrena.tk/.
which their role is seen to revolve. They are depicted as empowering for the individual as well as the community: ‘I like the fact that you can make something out of nothing, by myself. Some skills such as sewing and knitting are being transferred from generation to generation in the countryside, but in the cities this knowledge disappears’ (Dubrowska, 2013).

Kamil Fajfer (2013) presents the history of another Warsaw-based squat called ‘Elba’, and the complex process of negotiation with local authorities concerning the option of renting the building for continuing the initiative, which was ultimately not crowned by success. The squat survived until March 2013 and hosted a free gym, a cafe, an indoor skate rink and a curriculum of workshop classes. Cumulatively, the image of Warsaw-based squats to emerge from their popular representations is that of an important political intervention in the urban space, where by reclaiming unutilised spaces, they can fill ‘a certain cultural or even catering business gap’ (Erbel in Władyka, 2012), and positively transform the social and cultural life of the city. Re-branded as ‘street universities’, they stand for a mix of somewhat romanticised community agency and governance, for an alternative educational space where skills can be exchanged informally and free of charge, and for a political potential, but at the same time also serve as a reminder of the limits of grassroots social mobilisation. Many of the skills and practices shared at the ‘street uni’ are arguably rooted in Polish tradition and commonly found amongst the older generations, but here they are ‘packaged’ as extending communicative abilities, as aiding decision-making and collaborative problem-solving – turning the university into a school for fashioning citizenship (Dubrowska, 2013).

The overall cultural value of squats in Warsaw is addressed in the following, if somewhat populist commentary, which we will discuss later on in our argument about the role of translation:

We [Poles] do not have to imitate the ‘other’ – we have our own imagination. In thinking about local places, we don’t have to look abroad but we need to strengthen the positive tendencies that have been emerging in recent years. It is no longer obvious that we need to look for examples from abroad. In Poland right now there are many initiatives aligned with our legislative system and offering responses to our imagination (Erbel in Władyka, 2012)

Example 2: Balcony gardening: Vegetable cultivation made ‘cool’

Growing vegetables in the garden or on the balcony is a long-standing activity, but until recently, popular media in Poland considered this practice to be the province of highly skilled hobbyists. It was mostly discussed in niche hobby magazines such as ‘Pod Osłonami - uprawy w szklarniach i tunelach’ ('Under the
cover – cultivation in greenhouses and tunnels’, ‘Ogrodnik’ (‘The Gardener’), or ‘Nowoczesny Sad’ (‘The Modern Orchard’) catering to a very narrow group of enthusiasts rather than a broader audience. Our analysis revealed a subtle shift in how these practices are now being framed. For example, Urszula Jabłońska (2013) writes: ‘You become a balcony gardener incidentally. Everybody has a pot with basil or rosemary on the windowsill’. The actual activity requiring various levels of gardening competence (and portrayed as proceeding ‘naturally’ from growing basic herbs to tomatoes) is perhaps less noteworthy than the narratives that surround it. The article includes a set of tropes we recognise from other articles discussed here: a reference to similar experiences from different cultural domains (here London), ideals blended with pragmatic considerations, practicalities of the labour involved (e.g. access to knowledge and products), and fun. As one of the balcony gardeners explains poignantly:

I think everyone who has access to a bit of space should grow plants; this strengthens the power of nature in the city. Digging in the soil is revitalising, energising and satisfying. The satisfaction is even greater if you can have a tomato for breakfast that you have grown yourself. (Jabłońska, 2013: 40)

Practitioners’ biographical narratives are used to craft a link between their previous and current practice on a personal level, as in the case of a balcony gardener who evokes memories of owning a ‘box with veggies’ as a child and is now setting one up for her own child (Jabłońska, 2013). The practice is presented as heavily networked, utilising existing and emergent circuits of knowledge, social capital and market forces, as practitioners move through the city and the Internet acquiring, swapping and exchanging indigenous seeds, seedlings, pots and boxes from friends, strangers and ‘famous’ suppliers in Warsaw such as ‘Mr Herb’ (‘sławny pan Ziółko’). As the practice reportedly spreads, the requirements for social visibility are stepped up. The balcony garden can be seen as a signal of ‘green’ competence and values. One person observes astutely: ‘You can read balcony enthusiasts’ blogs, but it is more fun to join the Facebook group, where you can show off a photo of your balcony and answer practical questions such as ‘What do you spray on plants?’ (Jabłońska, 2013).

The practitioners in Jabłońska’s (2013) article are unequivocal about the value of the practice for them being pleasure-driven, rather than capable of replacing traditional shops in a self-sustaining manner. Not productive enough to meet an average household’s needs, the practice is rather seen as a social and ecological experiment of self-discovery, trenchantly captured in the following reflection: ‘We are used to having to spend eight hours at the desk every day to earn money in order to buy food. For us, balcony gardening is a form of experiment to prove that it is possible to work less because you can grow your own food’ (ibid.).
Warsaw-based balcony gardeners are presented as aware of the fact that growing vegetables in backyards used to be an everyday practice, for example in communist times. It would be interesting to consider this example in relation to another longstanding and common practice, that of allotment gardening (see also Stenning et al., 2010). But it is the association with the socially sanctioned positive meanings of urban renewal and community gardening forged in the West that is highlighted as a background for turning this practice into aspirational and ‘cool’ in a Polish media context. And indeed, this is directly voiced by one of the balcony gardeners portrayed in the ‘Grown on the balcony’ article. She wonders if the practice is no longer ‘shameful’ because it has been transformed by its popularity in Western Europe, where it is regarded as an emerging social trend.

Example 3: Knitting: Back in fashion

Another example of a low-budget practice that requires skills and is currently presented as gaining popularity is knitting. In his article entitled ‘Knitting is fashionable again? Crowds want to learn it’, Dominik Werner (2013) describes the motivations of the attendees of knitting lessons at the Instytut Kultury Miejskiej (Institute of Urban Culture) in Gdansk. Knitting is not presented as a response to the economic crisis, because handmade products are admittedly more expensive than mass-produced ones (see also Orton-Johnson, 2014). In Werner’s coverage, the practice being revived in a perceived desire to reclaim traditional customs and history is strongly anchored in Polish tradition. One interviewee emphasises the links to her own biography: ‘In my house, knitting has never disappeared, but I could not learn it well before, and these workshops have helped me’. The knitting group is reported to play an important role in community building, as noted by one of the co-organisers:

People do not need our tips, but they still come in to exchange opinions and to talk with each other. It is like a ‘koło gospodyń wiejskich’ (a rural women’s organisation) but we are not ashamed of it. It shows that people need contact with one another. (Werner, 2013)

The once ‘shameful’ domestic duties pursued by women are being recast as ‘attractive’, and as a sign of independence while the role of women is changing in Polish society. Practices such as balcony gardening and knitting are not only able to provide opportunities for learning or developing forgotten practical skills, but are also represented as a communicative arena of distinction in their transfiguration into something socially desirable and cool.

Example 4: Bary mleczne (milk bars) in Warsaw: From relics of the communist era to must-visit locations
In the communist period, milk bars were most popular locations, selling traditional Polish breakfasts and dinners at affordable prices as they were subsidised by the government. In the early 90s, hamburger and kebab stalls became very popular among Poles with the market economy, at the expense of common milk bars, increasingly interpreted as a relic of the bygone economy of shortage. People reacted against the communist dullness and uniform familiarity by turning to a ‘Western style’ life epitomised by fast food and, for those with higher disposable incomes, ‘elegant restaurants’. As a consequence, milk bars lost their commercial viability along with much of their social relevance. This situation has changed in recent times, with milk bars re-emerging as desirable and ‘socially inclusive’ places offering healthy, fresh and local food at reasonable prices.

One of the most popular milk bars in Warsaw nowadays is a place called ‘Prasowy’. ‘Prasowy’ used to operate in the centre of Warsaw from 1954 to 2011. When the city authorities decided to tender the place for rent at market prices, ‘Prasowy’ became a space for civic engagement and grassroots protests which the current manager, Konrad Hegejmajer, describes as ‘an intergenerational fight for ‘Prasowy’ (Majak, 2013). The protest resulted in the local authorities issuing a preferential rental tender under the condition that the location be continued in the tradition of a low-budget restaurant. Wojciech Karpieszuk (2013) begins his article with this description:

Milk bars became the most popular canteens in Warsaw. There are hipsters wearing fashionable zero-lens glasses, pensioners, students and white-collar workers sitting side by side and gorging themselves on meatballs with beetroot or dumplings.

This juxtaposition of ‘hipsters’ and ‘dumplings’ is as humorous as it is revealing. The analysed articles frame milk bars as places the city should be proud of. The availability of their affordable food is presented as not only linked to the chance of saving money but especially, in a somewhat grotesque rhetorical move, to egalitarian values and social inclusion. Jarosław Zielinski says:

Milk bars have always had a democratising quality. This hasn’t changed. In Prasowy, one and the same queue will feature variously dressed people with different socio-economic standing. Milk bars are practically the only place where they can meet. And they connect over dumplings. (Karpieszuk, 2013)

Unlike the early 90s, when students constituted its typical customer base, the Prasowy bar now attracts a cross-section of consumers. As its manager observes: ‘Our guests are local residents, people working in the area and, of course, young

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people spending their time in the nearby Zbawiciela Square, where several trendy cafés and bars are located (Karpieszuk, 2013). ‘Prasowy’ is thus imagined as a place where people with low budgets mingle with others eager to explore a low-budget lifestyle.

There are a couple of reasons for the shift in cultural perception of milk bars among different social groups as presented in popular and academic discourse. Błażej Brzostek from the University of Warsaw argues: ‘For young people, the communist period represents retro land, a lost world which they only know from photographs. It is interesting for them’ (Karpieszuk, 2013). For older generations, there is also an important element of nostalgia for the communist period as a time of adolescence and perceived slight social inequality, with the bars arguably presenting a levelling ground. Above all, the articles capture the perceived sentiment of asserted desire for home-made food at reasonable prices, without social complexes or cultural cringe. The manager of ‘Prasowy’ observes: ‘Prasowy’ has shown us that the sentiment for milk bars is strongly linked to the places where they once existed or still exist, but their form is far away from today’s expectations’ (Majak, 2013).

**Example 5: The ‘Warsaw Jars’**

The media have also focused their attention on a subset of Warsaw’s population who actually come from smaller cities. For them, Warsaw is the place where they work while they spend their weekends and money at their home locations, mostly provincial towns and villages. This group of people is disparagingly referred to as ‘słoiki’ (‘Warsaw Jars’), conveying the notion of saving costs by bringing back food supplies from the province every week. Even if the label ‘Warsaw Jars’ is only applied in the Internet, as Wąsowski (2013) argues, it is still a clear sign of growing disparities amongst Warsaw’s residents, and a related urge to boost the self-esteem of natives by mocking ‘others’ (Blumsztajn in Wąsowski, 2013). We also noted that Warsaw City Council has recently launched a social campaign ‘To wróci do Ciebie. Rozliczaj PIT w Warszawie’ (‘It will come back to you. Lodge your tax return in Warsaw’) to encourage new Warsaw residents to pay their taxes there. The campaign is intended to loosen ties with their places of origin.

**Discussion**

Our analysis has yielded a number of related points. First, it showcases a diversity of low-budget practices ranging from public, participatory initiatives such as squats, milk bars and knitting to privately enacted, socially valued everyday lifestyle practices such as balcony gardening, and finally the devalued
economising by ‘Warsaw Jars’. Secondly, we identify a number of key themes and aspects of the analysed media representations. The key issue relates to the dynamic process by which mundane socialist economic tactics are transformed into trendy lifestyles associated with aspects like ‘collaborative’, ‘low-budget’, ‘Western’ ‘value-led’ or ‘eco-consumption’. We argue that this fluctuation of meaning can be explained by the concept of cultural translation.

Theorist of cultural semiotics Yuri Lotman has outlined five stages of the cultural translation process when one culture comes into contact with another (Lotman, 1990). This cyclical process entails alternating capacities of reception, transformation and the generation of ideas by a given culture. ‘Translations, imitations and adaptations multiply’, argues Lotman, whereby imported ideas are first idealised and ‘domestic’ traditions devalued. This then reverts to a state marked by

a tendency to restore the links with the past, to look for ‘roots’; the ‘new’ is now interpreted as an organic continuation of the old, which is thus rehabilitated. Ideas of organic development come to the fore. (Lotman, 1990: 147)

From a sociological perspective, the invention or reinvention of practices is brought about by a range of social and market processes that could just as well be seen as ‘translations’, where new elements (including images and artefacts) circulate and are actively integrated with and shaped by existing, previous or related practices, in an interaction between consumers and producers (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Using the spread of the practice of Nordic walking as an example, Elizabeth Shove and Mika Pantzar argue that it is best understood as a ‘successive, but necessarily localised, (re)invention’ (2005: 43).

At the representational level, there is a great deal of tweaking and reworking of local and foreign cultural references. Polish examples are being compared to parallel social movements in Western capitalist economies, and often narrated as modelled on practices originating elsewhere where the concepts, activities and organisational dynamics they integrate and take on in a Polish context are concerned. Many articles acknowledge distinctly indigenous influences, drawing attention to ideas and examples from the Polish past, thus enabling the contemporary instances to be placed in a historical and dialogical context. ‘Home’ influences are woven in as part of the unfolding reconfiguration of what people have been doing for many, many years into ‘a new form of fun [which] is itself impressive’ (Shover and Pantzar, 2005, emphasis in original). Elizabeth Shove and Mika Pantzar (2005: 46) put it this way in reference to Nordic walking, successfully ‘commodified and marketed as fun’, although it is essentially based on walking, which ‘people have been doing for 1.6 million years’. In Polish historically situated accounts, readers are reminded of how the
meaning of organising concepts can shift over time. The example of the concept ‘spółdzielnia’ (‘cooperative’) is telling in this respect. The experience with the communist system arguably provoked a negative view of the notion in Poland. This meaning could only be reworked once the communist context had faded from public memory, allowing the concept to signify something positive for a new generation of consumers looking to rebuild a culture of cooperation (Potkańska, 2013). Similarly, the example of knitting workshops highlights the transformation of a once gendered and ‘embarrassing’ activity into a desirable, skilled practice reclaimed by today’s self-professedly liberated and independent women. Different generational contexts and cultural points of reference affect the social perception and application of mundane activities: what was once shameful for or ‘taken-for-granted’ by older generations is now associated with social capital and kudos.

The articles we analysed enable a cursory understanding of some of the mechanics of cultural translation that are socially consequential. Media images shape the meanings of contemporary consumer culture in Poland. Markets respond and contribute to the semiotic and material possibilities of the moment, constituting practices of consumption (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). The space of ‘semantic potential’, as Lotman puts it, is ‘complex’ (1990: 104). Different co-existent ideas from ‘domestic’ (Poland) and ‘imported’ (West) culture circulate and ‘restructure each other’ (Lotman, 1990: 146). As Lotman notes:

[Cultural translation] demands favourable historical, social and psychological conditions. The process of ‘infection’ needs certain external conditions to bring it about and needs to be felt to be necessary and desirable. (1990: 147)

The relationship between the locally indigenous and ‘alien’ (Lotman, 1990) is directly evident in the commentary on what is perceived as the declining need to ‘imitate the other’ in relation to Warsaw’s squats (Erbel in Wladyka, 2012), which can be interpreted as corresponding to the later stages in Lotman’s scheme, weighted towards valuing what is local.

We would suggest that the entire project of consumer formation in Poland (and elsewhere) can be usefully explained by the framework of cultural translation – with echoes to the ‘domestication’ lens employed by Stenning et al. (2010). The situation of consumption in Poland stands out, marked as it is by the experience of post-socialist transformation and persistent socio-economic tensions. And although we have noted that the concepts of ethical, lifestyle-related or alternative consumption increasingly feature in Poland’s public debates, their meaning is also specific – itself the consequence and substance of cultural translation. It is therefore important to sharpen the analytical categories applied – precisely because the historical predicaments and today’s social changes in Poland provide
multiple layers to unravel beyond well-travelled concepts or a construed theoretical separation between the frameworks of ‘shortage’ and ‘catch-up consumption’.

In our analysis, we chose to focus on a consideration of skills – and noted that much of the media discourse frames skills and competences as privately and publicly valuable, enabling people to be less wasteful, more resourceful and more fulfilled. Rosenberg (2011) extends this argument by the notion of self-governance and self-improvement. Desirable social and practical skills are perceived as accumulated capital enabling people to change their career trajectories or even their lives. Practitioners’ accounts mobilise the rhetoric of sharing (of skills and competences) to drive this narrative. A related effect is the signalling process, where people learn thrift-related know-how to make it publically available and attractive as a sign of cooperation (Podkalicka and Potts, 2013). The way the example of balcony gardening is represented shows how skills of planting and looking after vegetables or plants can be shared and communicated through blogs and social media, lending visibility to the results and benefits, offering them up for coordination and collaboration. Also, street universities are represented as focused on creating additional social capital and value by enabling people to exchange knowledge and skills such as bike mending or speaking Spanish.

In this sense, these Polish representations resemble accounts of low-budget urban practices from other Western cities, constructed by drawing on empowering discourses of self-expression, social connection and value-led consumption. Much of this work highlights lifestyle politics as a productive trope for understanding contemporary political activism and social transformation (Lewis, 2014: 4). Our analysis further substantiates this, illustrating how low-budget initiatives generate social, cultural and political outcomes. Urban squatting, for example, is perceived as a grassroots initiative aimed at leveraging public resources for the community’s cultural development, indicating the purchase of communal values also in a formal political context (e.g. the cited social commentator Erbel as a Green Party candidate for President of Warsaw). Similarly, ‘new’ milk bars are exemplary of the social impacts of traditional political activism based on street protests and value-led consumption.

But squats in the form of ‘street universities’, or ‘milk bars’ as trendy urban landmarks, still differ from also present, necessity-driven strategies for keeping poverty at bay in household economies (Stenning et al., 2010). Our analysis highlights interesting tensions in the way identical skills can be variously valued, depending on their context and application. Just take the example of ‘balcony gardening’ being promoted as ‘cool’ and juxtapose it with the phenomenon of the
‘Warsaw Jars’, connoting an embarrassing, rural or provincial status and activity. This quite despite the fact that both practices draw on useful skills and competences essentially to do with gardening and the preparation of food. We therefore highlight social class as a crucial factor in how a particular image of urban low-budget practices is forged and communicated in the media and discourse of popular culture. What this discursive divergence implies, we suggest, is a reflection of experiential and social divisions within Polish society.

Popular representations centre on choice-based low-budget practices enacted largely by young, highly educated professionals as a form of lifestyle, sharing the stage with the image of the ‘Jars’ as a vivid reminder of the persistent imperative to ‘make do’ (or even ‘survival strategies’, Stenning et al., 2010). The latter falls outside the empowering framework that essentially describes ‘Poland A’ (which can be argued to show similar consumption patterns as Western cities), while ‘Poland B’ follows the narratives associated with the ‘shortage economy’ of socialist Poland.

We consider the disentanglement of how low-budget practices are formed and enacted by different demographics, and how ‘new’, publicly visible activities relate to well-established social practices such as foraging, goods repair, allotment gardening, vegetable and fruit preserving, the use of discount shops, or hobby pursuits is a much needed and exciting study area. The prosaic and habituated instantiations of ‘thrift’ or ‘industriousness’ are clearly part of social life alongside mediated ‘new’ initiatives, but their ‘ordinary’ status renders them either invisible or even devalued, hinting at the persistent social divisions between the rural or provincial and the metropolitan or upwardly mobile. This could help to determine the manner in which ‘ordinary households’, as in Stenning’s study (2010), contribute skills and relationships to the contemporary fabric of the city and its emergent, more ‘visible’ economic and social practices, rather than positioning ‘low-budget’ practices as strictly subversive or alternative to mainstream tactics, which the subcultural language in some articles appears to prefer.

Conclusions

The interest in low-budget practices is growing in the West following the Global Financial Crisis. Academic studies have explored the political potential of low-budget urban practices for reshaping consumption and democratising cities, while calling for more work able to theorise them in all their diversity (Iveson, 2013). Much attention has been drawn to the shift from practical, utility-led aspects to value-led lifestyle consumption. The interest in contemporary
consumer formations, its visible sites and mediated manifestations, is also increasingly a topic in the popular press and emergent Polish academic studies. The intention of our study was to investigate media constructions of low-budget practices in a context where conditions of scarcity are part of the living memory in times of relative, if unevenly distributed affluence. We adopted a discourse analytic perspective of media representations as a way of uncovering the little understood parameters and meanings of changing consumption patterns in Poland. In doing so, we paid special attention to the extent in which low-budget practices are depicted as being rooted in informal, socialist and pre-socialist economic and social activities.

While ‘semioticising processes’ (Lotman, 1990) are underway, the media discourse approach has provided a number of valuable insights that contribute to our understanding of ‘low-budget practices’. In contrast to much empirical work focusing on a single urban low-budget practice (e.g. couch-surfing, car-sharing, etc.), this approach has enabled us to map a range of aspects of low-budget practices, variously linked to nostalgia, curiosity for the past, Western fashions, anti-consumerist sentiments, the appeal of alternative economies, and a host of social and financial rewards. We note that the representations of Polish low-budget practices in the popular press are not homogenous overall, despite a clear narrative focus on the young and professional as key groups involved. For young Poles born after the transition, many low-budget practices are depicted as being appreciated as extraordinary and cool, similar to the West. But the representations in the media exclude and draw in the Polish past at one and the same time. Some examples narrate cultural influences from the West over domestic continuities as drivers for these practices. The example provided by the re-emergence of milk bars in Warsaw is interesting as it clearly bridges the gap between the Polish past and present and productively exploits it as generative and innovative. Here we encounter a language that interweaves evocations of changing urban life (including today’s growing social stratification) with references to a new Polish ‘hispterism’ and the avant-gardist potential of bars on a European level.

The curious mix of low-budget practices in Poland derives from and engenders a multiplicity of entangled motivations, models, applications and experiences that require sophisticated theoretical tools and detailed studies on the ground. The problematised link between thrift-related skills and social class is one such dimension that could be usefully explored further. With the growing academic and policy interest in ‘thrift capital’ and its potential for creativity and social innovation, the Polish case could be illuminating. It is useful on the analytical level, we argue, to consider various low-budget practices in relation to one another and alongside other operative concepts such as ‘kombinowanie’ as part
of a larger semiotic and social system. For this reason, this article makes the case for a broad translation framework, operating at different levels of critical reading, analysis and comparison. Translation is useful as a theoretical framework to explain how low-budget practices are formed and imbued with meaning at the intersection between dynamic local and international cultural influences and socio-economic contingencies. The value of translation is also highlighted by the type of engaged inter-cultural research we have pursued here, helping us to refine the terms, categories and communicative techniques to effectively describe and analyse what is generally a broad notion of ‘low-budget practices’. There is a real opportunity for offering a richer historical analysis of how current ideas and practices of ‘low-budget’ (or thrift) have evolved over time. This discourse analysis is a first step in this direction. Polish studies could serve as important sources for a historical and comparative perspective on the international literature about low-budget practices, as well as the mechanisms explaining how cultures are made and remade.

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