

Smilies and Shopaholics: The Social Dimension of Facebook Shopping

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Abstract

Purpose

To analyze Facebook shopping groups in a Swedish context, from an anthropological perspective, inspired by fashion studies and consumer culture theory. More specifically the study aims to explain how Facebook shopping groups, as a growing phenomenon in the collaborative economy, relate to late modern consumerism, as well as to fashion, on the one hand, and the trend of sustainability and second hand consumption, on the other hand.

Design/methodology/approach

The empirical basis for this study is derived from nethnography and interviews with a number of group members in nine buy- and sell groups on Facebook.

Findings

The study shows that even though Facebook shopping is one of the most popular web-based, fashion-related, consumer phenomena globally right now, it challenges a common understanding of fashion as a phenomenon driven by superficial consumption of passing fads. The main difference is the pursuit of advanced knowledge, community and trusted social relationships. In many of the groups sustainable consumption is part of the allure. The findings also show that the groups can be highly addictive. The study indicates that shopping groups can be considered to be both a mirror of, and reaction against, globalized late modern consumerism.

Originality/value

The study discusses a highly significant example of the collaborative economy that has been marginally highlighted academically. The paper also illustrates a fashion related phenomenon that markedly differs from how postmodern fashion is generally described as a phenomenon driven by accelerating trends.

Keywords



Collaborative Economy, Consumption, Facebook, Second-hand shopping, Prestige, Shopping groups.

Paper type: Research Paper

Ohh, love your jewelry but will go bankrupt soon because of Luxury Flea Market!
3 people like this.

Ha ha! 
2 people like this.

Ha ha...too true, I hardly want to think about how much I've bought through Luxury Flea Market...but then I think...I have saved so much money...what an investment, huh? 😊
3 people like this.

Ha ha, I see all my purchases as an investment...in my well-being.  
3 people like this.

The quotes that this paper begins with are taken from Facebook, one of the most popular places in cyberspace. One of the services that Facebook offers is the ability to create groups with specific niches for the network members. In the last few years, a plethora of so-called buy-and-sell groups (also called flea market groups or shopping groups) with various themes are to be found on Facebook.¹

The opening dialogue was carried in the currently largest Swedish shopping group on Facebook, Luxury Flea Market (Swedish *Lyxloppis*). It is one of several buy-and-sell groups on Facebook that target so-called designer clothes. As in other Facebook shopping groups, the members of this market advertise their personal clothing for sale. Lyxloppis has in the two years of its existence managed to attract over 35,000 members; new Facebook shopping groups with different themes are continually being born. The variety of these is in principle infinite. There are shopping groups that specialize in retro or vintage, children's clothing, porn, home furnishings, music, and even weapons and drugs.²

The purpose of the paper is to discuss Facebook shopping groups from an anthropological perspective, inspired by fashion studies and consumer culture theory. The empirical material that I refer to was gathered in a pilot study as part of a more extensive research project about social relations and consumption in buy-and-sell groups on Facebook.

To determine the actual number of Facebook groups or how many buy-and-sell groups exist is nearly impossible. Indisputably, however, shopping groups on Facebook are right now one of the most unexpected and rapidly growing consumer-related phenomena. Worth mentioning is that just a few years ago the "digital trendspotter" *Internet World: The Next Big Thing* published an article entitled "The Right Strategy for E-commerce on Facebook" (2014) where shopping on Facebook was not expected to be a large trend because "We are not on Facebook to shop; we are there to check out what our friends do." Contrary to this analysis, however, shopping on Facebook has developed into a massive global trend.

In many ways, commerce in the shopping groups challenges a common understanding of fashion as a phenomenon driven by superficial consumption of passing fads. In groups specializing in retro and vintage clothing, knowledge of dress history and textiles, rather than consumption of trends and luxury, is the main source of prestige. On the other hand, in groups that do revere luxury and current fashion, as for example Luxury Flea Market and “Luxury Fleas” (*Lyxlopporna*), the cycle of fashion is warped as fashion items get renewed life in a virtual second-hand market.

What constitutes the attraction of shopping groups on Facebook? The opening quote of this chapter suggests jokingly that consumer behaviour on Luxury Flea Market can be equated with shopping addiction. Similar allusions to, as well as direct accounts of, shopaholism are recurrent in the empirical material.

In this respect, the exchange can be seen as characteristic of late modern consumption, as shopping desires and consumerism are key themes in the numerous accounts of late modernity (See for example Baudrillard 1993; Bauman, 2007; Emberley 1987; Featherstone 2007; Friedman 1992; Rocamora 2013 and Todd 2012). In many of these accounts, fashion is perceived to be a capricious, highly superficial, and voracious phenomenon in the full bloom of late modernity. A passionate relationship to clothes and other products for sale is undoubtedly a central feature of many shopping groups. In the group *Cowabunga*, a member responds to a sales ad that I placed for a shimmering golden blazer: “I cannot stand how good it looks!!!! I want it!”

It is not only the actual purchase that arouses feelings of pleasure. To have one’s ad appreciated by “likes” and achieve a rapid sale may also give the seller a rush of adrenaline. As one member says: “The more likes you get on your ad, the better you feel.” Alongside the desire generated by the consumption of goods and the financial transactions, the groups seem to fulfil a significant social function.

An intense text-and-image flow consisting of words, pictures and emoji symbols (digital pictograms) of various kinds characterized the contact between group members. Some of the most important are smileys, likes, thumbs up, flowers, and hearts. Usually it is women, constituting the vast majority of all members, which exchange these signs of confirmation. When a man in Luxury Flea Market attempts to sell a scarf from Chanel, the following exchange between him and a female member ensued:

–OMG what a beauty! 😊 <3 😊 <3 oh I'm in love 😊 <3
–Huh... in me or in the scarf???

In addition to the validating exchange of emoji symbols and positive textual acclamations are many groups – particular those specializing in retro and vintage – characterized by an incessant discussion about the products. Many members, especially in groups with vintage as a niche, relish intensive communication about fashion history, materials, patterns, and designs.

Knowledge of prestigious fashion designers and specialized costume history (for example, the development of particular washing symbols or typical weaving techniques of different labels in different decades) brings prestige and cultural capital but is also a social glue between the members.³ Efficiently organized groups with explicit and detailed rules and norms are considered attractive. Trust is a key word. Given that trust is a prerequisite for the functionality of the groups, it is not surprising that social interaction is so important.

Even though Facebook shopping exhibits a vigorous trait of consumerism and is one of the most popular web-based, fashion-related, consumer phenomena right now, it differs from the conventional understanding of fashion in late modernity. The main difference is the pursuit of advanced knowledge, community and trusted social relationships in many of the Facebook groups. One reason is, undoubtedly, that Facebook shopping is part of the collaborative economy.

Collaborative economy is based on the idea of multiple actors mutually offering and taking advantage, usually via the Internet, of various services. Since the incentive, according to the ideal, is not profit but trust, the model radically redefines market principles (Scarabato 2015). Some typical businesses often mentioned are the online marketplace for vacation homes, Airbnb, and the taxi service Uber. Shopping groups on Facebook are, however, an equally illustrative example of the collaborative economy. Given that trust is a prerequisite, it is not surprising that social interaction is so important in the buy-and-sell groups on Facebook. Another trend, partly related to the collaborative economy and influential with regard to commerce on Facebook, is the anti-consumerist movement of sustainability and recycling.

How, then, can shopping on Facebook be interpreted? Is it an expression of intensified late modern consumerism or is it a reaction against it? Does the consumption activity on Facebook signal consumerist greed and validation needs or does it offer the possibility of creating human relationships based on common interests in quality and sustainability? Based on this study's tentative, but nonetheless illustrative, results, I would say that the groups have elements of both.

In the shopping groups, two of the most distinctive, and in relation to each other, contradictory, aspects of late modern fashion consumption, meet in the groups; luxury and second-hand. In the

Luxury Flea Market, premium goods and luxury clothing are sold second-hand. In retro groups, old, sometimes mundane, clothing and everyday gadgets are metamorphosed into luxury. Shopping groups can thus be considered both a mirror of, and reaction against, globalized late modern consumerism.

In what follows, I will firstly comment on the empirical material in this paper and how it was collected, primarily using the method of nethnography (online ethnography). I then discuss the presence of desire and prestige in the groups and how they affect the dynamic between them. I will conclude by illuminating the social interaction, both amongst members and between members and the products that circulate.

Facebook shopping groups as a field and phenomenon

The empirical basis for this study is derived both from nethnography and interviews in real life with a number of group members. Compared to traditional fieldwork in a remote location, which may miss all the amenities of the home environment, a study online may seem to be simple and easy. The work, however, has certain difficulties. These concern mainly ethical questions. Until the 1970s, reflections of the fieldworker's ethnographic activities in a moral sense were rather limited. Recent decades, however, have witnessed the development of regulations prescribing how to conduct fieldwork ethically. A core principle is that the researcher should not expose the people in the study to pressure or force. The researcher must always disclose his or her presence and intentions.

When fieldwork is transferred to the virtual world, however, a number of grey areas arise. It is generally not acceptable to study so-called closed communities without disclosing your presence as a researcher. This applies in particular to communities based on a particular problem, such as sexual abuse or anorexia. *Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR)*, "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research", Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0); Berg 2015 Conversely, there are formally closed communities that still more or less act as open. The groups in this study are an example in this regard. Although Luxury Flea Market is a "closed" group, its exclusivity is a mere formality. To be added to the group, it is enough to send a request. Nevertheless, members may lose their membership if they break the rules. A group like Luxury Flea Market with an intense inflow of new members, amounting to over 35,000, can hardly be said to be private. Typical of groups is that they are free from private discussions. The boundary between private and public is diffused. The blurred delineation between the private and public, which is typical for much of the interaction online, demands that the nethnographer be continually reflective (Berg 2015). What is right or wrong in

the ethical sense is not set in stone, but must be considered in each individual study. I started my research by being active as a buyer and seller in groups for a few months. This gave me ideas for possible interview questions. The interviews were conducted via chat or inbox. Before the interview, I informed the respondents about the research and that their responses would be anonymous. Although some themes in the interview material have proven to be both personal and sensitive, I believe that my presence in the groups has not constituted a risk to the members. The administrators of the groups have generally been informed of the research project.

I conducted 14 interviews with members and administrators (usually called “admins”) in the groups Luxury Flea Market, “Retro Clothing – We who are into clothes of the ’50s, ’60s, ’70s”, “Retro ’40s–’70s Sell” and “Swap shop – Vintage and reproduction.”⁴ Six of the interviews were made with sellers and buyers who are mostly active in Luxury Flea Market. Four interviews were conducted outside of cyberspace (“in real life”); the remaining interviews were conducted via Facebook. Besides regular interviews, I have had regular conversations with members of the groups in which I have been active as a buyer and a seller. Examples of such groups in addition to those mentioned above are the “Flower Power Retro Vintage Buy and Sell”, “Luxury Flea Market Stockholm”, “Luxury Fleas”, “Cowabunga ’80s and ’90s” and “Retro Flea Market Malmö/Lund.” The empirical material also consists of participant observation in the groups. In accordance with an ethnographic perspective, I have strived to obtain breadth and variety in the material in order to distinguish the psychological mechanisms that allowed the shopping groups to thrive and grow.

Desire and prestige

Desire and prestige are regularly seen as key components of fashion. Desire and prestige are also central features of the shopping groups on Facebook. The desire to possess and the desire to exhibit drive the consumption of fashion, according to most theories of fashion. The trigger of this yearning to shop and show off is the fashion cycle, which determines the prestige of specific expressions and products according to their relative novelty and trendiness. See for example Baudrillard 1993, pp. 92-98; Fred Davis *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, The University of Chicago, London, 1992, pp. 104-133. The products on Facebook, however, are not desired necessarily because they are new or considered trendy. Personal taste and the niche of the group is equally, if not more, important.

Apart from popular notions of fashion as driven by *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time, most academic interpreters of fashion claim that the fashion cycle is, at least partly, driven by specific prestigious and fashionable sets of people.⁵ In real life, these elitist cliques may consist of movie stars, famous representatives of subcultures, royalty, “edgy” artists or successful fashion

bloggers. On Facebook, a similarly visible hierarchy of coolness is notably absent. The groups are egalitarian in the sense that all members have equal formal influence and opportunity to engage in the ongoing social interaction. There is no principle of exclusivity amongst the members governing access to the products and visibility for themselves. Yet, in the retro groups and the luxury shopping groups alike, elements of prestige and status do exist. They apply in particular to products and brands, some of which hold a greater prestige and thus arouse greater desire. The notion of VIP, thus, is only significant if it were to be translated “Very Important *Product*.”

The goods sold at Luxury Flea Market are generally newer clothes or accessories regarded as “luxury”, which according to the rules of the group means:

Everything that has a brand, except goods from the Swedish chains such as H & M, Lindex, KappAhl, Gina Tricot, Flash, Joy, with the exception of “limited edition” collections. IKEA furniture in good condition is OK, for how luxurious is it not to buy an assembled piece of IKEA furniture?

Although this rule may seem relatively simple, the question of what luxury exactly is appears repeatedly in the group. Why are products from the Spanish chain Zara accepted, for example, and not products from the Swedish clothing chains? And can IKEA furniture really be regarded as luxury?

The sets of rules of the shopping groups with a retro/vintage niche are considerably more extensive and complicated. The group “Clothes from the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s. Sell and buy” (“*Kläder från 50-60-och 70-talet. Sälj och köp*”), with over 15,500 members, is one of the largest Swedish shopping groups. The rules dictate how to photograph an item (preferably in daylight, from different angles, close-ups of the seams and labels), the layout of the ads (how to arrange the images and text), what information the ads ought to contain (for example, measurements, the material, whether the price includes postage or not, and the condition of the item). They also dictate that the ads are to be sorted into specific “albums” and stipulate how often sellers are allowed to “push” their ad upwards in the flow, how to buy, queue, and bid, how long an ad may remain after a purchase, and more.

There is an air of exclusivity in several of the retro and vintage groups. Unlike Luxury shopping groups, the waiting list to be admitted in some of them is several months long and the rules are intricate. Some sellers, amongst them the administrators, have indisputable status: “They can, if they wish, act as feudal lords, and by controlling who is allowed to express their opinion, they

can then, in turn, create a court for themselves,” as an administrator of one of the retro groups expresses it. Individuals with status in Luxury shopping groups are more invisible. They are considered reliable vendors who sell goods of well-known brands in the premium layer.

Despite these differences, there are many similarities between groups that are into retro and vintage and groups that exchange high-end, designer items, such as Luxury Flea Market. A common denominator in both types is the passionate approach to certain garments, accessories or brands. It is considered insulting to make a low bid (“shame offer”) on prestigious objects and sometimes even to bargain, which is almost seen as an insult to the product itself. The following discussion is from a sales ad for a Louis Vuitton handbag at a starting price of 3200 SEK:

- SEK 3000, signed and sealed today? 😊
- Talk about a shame offer, Josephine, 3500 signed and sealed. It is worth 4500-5000. 😊
- I wrote what I was prepared to pay and offered a quick transaction. 😊 You don’t have to accept the offer, the choice is yours 😊 But thanks for the reply anyway 😊
- Of course that I choose myself, I just wrote back and told you what my rates are 😊

The smileys are not able to hide the strained tone of the conversation. The most coveted treasures have close to a royal status in the groups. One member of the group “Luxury Flea Market Stockholm” states in a discussion thread:

- Personally, I die a little inside when I see these beautiful Chanel handbags but I realize that I’ll have to wait a few years before such a bag occupies its throne in my closet.

Retro groups also cherish particular brands and designers, for example, the Swedish textile artist Maud Fredin Fredholm. The descriptions are often loving and detailed. A member of the “Flower Power” group describes a torn so-called cleaning frock in the following way:

- So cute, a tunic loved to pieces. Sleeveless, V-neck model with two pockets and buttoning in front. Flowers in green and white on a light brown background. One button is missing and sadly enough all edgings are very worn, so either you disregard that or you change them. Loved to pieces as stated.

Measurements: Bust: 100 cm. Waist: 102 cm: Hips: Approximately 105 cm. Height: 76 cm. Price: 180 SEK including postage.



Figure 1: Photo of ad in the group “Flower Power”

In many ads, the garments are beautifully arranged and the images are visually appealing. They flaunt meticulous information of the history and material of the garment. A member describes a coat in the group “1900–1970 Vintage de Luxe” this way:

–Swedish industrial history! In Gothenburg there are streets named after J. A Wettergren, the founder of a clothing era of the Swedish textile industry. I have been fortunate to find a very fine specimen of a JAWE-coat from the '40s, from the part of the production where a lot was hand-stitched, despite an otherwise highly efficient factory with industrial sewing machines. Black faux fur with genuine brown mink collar and cuffs. Straight model with recessed pockets and sturdy shoulder pads (cotton wool!) Gold colored silk lining. Externally it is flawless. The lining is partly torn and the armpits are stained. Does not smell. Perfect for those who want authentic 40's and the silhouette is flattering although not fitted. Should be spacious and fits best if you normally are size 38–40. Shoulder seam to shoulder seam 41 cm, armhole to armhole 50cm, waist 50, hip 50, length 115, sleeve 60. Have tried to take pictures of all the “flaws,” which are really hard to find. 750kr including postage. Can wait until salary.



Figure 2: Photo of ad in the retro group “1900–1970 Vintage de Luxe”

Considering that knowledge is highly respected in vintage shopping groups, it could be assumed that the purpose of detailed accounts like the preceding one is to gain cultural capital and prestige in the group. An equally plausible reason as to why sellers go out of their way to take carefully arranged pictures and describe in such detail the garment for sale is that the image and the text serve as a gateway to the product, a way to get as close as possible in virtual reality. The next comment by Clara, a kindergarten teacher in her twenties, is illustrative in this regard:

–I like to feel the material and try [the garment] on so I really should not be someone who buys online, because I like to look and touch and be close to the garment and create a relationship with it but then, after a while, you learn to create a relationship with the garment on the web.

The relationship with the garment, for example, a pair of shoes that Clara buys from me, is created when she imagines herself wearing the shoes at different occasions:

–I will be so happy when I'm wearing (them) [...] So I need the shoes! Now my life is complete. Until tomorrow.

The emotional attachment to things described in these postings may at first glance be interpreted as an unmistakable example of late modern consumerism. Many would probably equate it to the fulfilment of shopping cravings described by fashion bloggers and their devoted daily reports of new purchases and daily outfits. When discussing fashion and the Internet it is typically the bloggers that are brought up as epitomes of late modern fashion. However, there are major differences between shopping on Facebook and the fashion blogosphere. Contrary to the flow of images of desired products and selfies, the pictures in Facebook shopping groups have no purpose beyond the aim of objectively describing and thereby selling the product. If the former is characterized by a focus on the individual, the fashion blogger (her or his life and shopping) is an individual placed in the shadow in the Facebook groups. Faces are seldom exposed and the focus is always on the products.



Figure 3: Photo of the author, from an ad published in the group “Retro Clothing – We who are into clothes of the '50s, '60s, '70s”



Figure 4: Photo of ad in the retro group “1900–1970 Vintage de Luxe”

Although the picture may be aesthetically pleasing, it always aims to expose the materiality of the garment – which is not the same as using the image to arouse sentiments and tie consumers to a particular brand. This is worth noting since such an approach is markedly different from how postmodern fashion is commonly understood to be a dominantly visual phenomenon (see for example Arnold 2001; Faurschou 1987; McRobbie 1998 and Yoshimoto 1996). The title of José Teunissen’s article, “Fashion: More Than Cloth and Form”, in the book *The Handbook of Fashion Studies* (2013) is illustrative in this regard. The implication of the title and the text is that fashion no longer is about the material, clothes and textiles. Instead, he argues, fashion since the 1960s has dissipated in all possible cultural spheres, such as film, art, theatre, and politics. Consumers no longer just buy things but dreams, experiences, and identities. The increased consumption of the visual is related to an obliteration of the traces of the physical production in postmodern aesthetics.

The phenomenon can be illustrated in the development of the fashion scene, which in the earlier part of the 1900s tended to emphasize the depicted product's utility value, functionality, and prestige. The Internet, is furthermore claimed to have an accelerating effect on the fashion cycle through the contribution of bloggers and other actors in the fashion system. Agnès Rocamora (2013) in "New Fashion Times: Fashion and Digital Media" (2013), for instance, describes the interplay between digital media and fashion as characterized by visuality and speed, and typical for late modern fashion in general.

The sometimes rapid flow of goods in the shopping groups does not have the same accelerating effect on the fashion cycle. One reason for this might be that consumers on Facebook are less interested in the fashion cycle per se and more in the niche of a particular group. This is quite obvious in the retro groups. The effect of groups such as Luxury Flea Market is harder to evaluate. On the one hand, they may stimulate consumption in general, thus fuelling the cycle; on the other hand, Luxury Flea Market may foster love for certain brands rather than reflect an interest in current trends. One effect is undoubtedly that styles continue to be in circulation after they have vanished as a trend, which may have a delaying effect on the fashion cycle.

Several characteristics associated with postmodern fashion, which is largely associated with activity on the Internet, are thus noticeably absent in Facebook groups. The focus is on the garment, not the wearer or his or her lifestyle. (If "post" is in any way relevant in the shopping group context, it may denote posting an ad or going to the post office – not post-modernity!).

Focus on materiality and production does not exclude the presence of consumer desires. The pilot study suggests that the groups can be highly addictive. That social media like Facebook are addictive is not new information (Westlake 2008). The fact that shopping groups now grow and multiply can probably be explained by the fact that social media are fused with another stimulating activity, namely, shopping. Several of the participants in the pilot study described the feeling they got from scrolling through ads, selling, and buying as euphoric. Sometimes this feeling is followed by anxiety. Linda, who is a broker in her thirties, describes her behaviour in the following words:

–If I have nothing to do, I can easily visit the groups four, five times a day...I scroll, scroll, scroll... It consumes a lot of time. I know that I should not go in there so often but I do it anyway so I try anyway to just go in once a day ... Is it then something I want? I just feel like "Wow, I want that."

Clara has a more problematic relationship to shopping with a strong element of compulsion and has been in therapy for her addiction:

–I bought more when I was working full time [...]. You come home. You're tired. You can't stand meeting up with someone, but you still do something. It is still as an activity [...] something happens [...] I have to be in the groups on line all the time so I don't miss anything [...] I want to find those things that make my life be wow!

Elin, who is in her forties, is a member of 46 groups. As with Clara, the consumption causes her anxiety:

–The problem is that this constant buying and selling has created tremendous anxiety. It does not always affect me, as long as I keep up with the selling. I buy too much. It's hard. There is a satisfaction that only lasts a short time. Being the one who writes "buys" first in the comment field is like throwing yourself across the finish line in an important race. You have to be first. This lasts seconds. Then comes the anxiety and the feeling "I do not need this. Why did I buy?" It's like the consumption must fill a void, a big black hole. Maybe it's because I don't feel quite ok with myself. I must turn off the notifications from the groups...it triggers an internal stress. It's like a drug, a toxin, like an addiction. Just as hard to stop as with sugar, alcohol or smoking.

Renate, a middle-aged administrator, confirms the existence of shopaholics in the groups:

–Shopaholics... I think I see that there are some people who buy and buy and buy constantly. I met a girl in a group with this particular behaviour. She lives nearby and I was invited to her home for a snack. Her entire home was completely cluttered with garbage bags full of stuff she had shopped online in Facebook groups. We talked a lot about this and it became apparent that she was feeling incredibly bad.

The overwhelming majority of the informants confirm that the groups are more or less addictive. I have personally experienced the frenzied desire for a product and the adrenaline rush that follows an intense bidding, as well as the feeling of emptiness when realizing that the product does not live up to my overblown expectations. This combination of exhaustion and confirmation, transaction, and social exchange is likely a key reason why shopping on Facebook has become so popular. It is symptomatic of the centrality that consumption, desire, and acknowledgment occupy in our time. Paradoxically, the shopping groups are also an expression of a sustainability trend and the collaborative economy. Shopping groups can thus be considered to be both a mirror of, and reaction against, globalized late modern consumerism.

Social interaction around and with things

The desire of consumption may not necessarily be considered a longing for lifeless stuff. British anthropologist Daniel Miller (2009; 2010) argues that the objects actively, as subjects, impact us. In that sense, we are part of a dynamic relationship with things. Far from being passive, objects are actors in their own right, argues Miller. This view can be illustrated by the following quote about an Indian sari:

–[...] The sari forces a continued engagement and conversation with its wearer, and a constant pressure to RESPOND to one's surrounding environment [...] The sari is like a fellow actor, constantly on stage, whose presence must always be remembered. The sari turns a woman into a person who interacts with others and the self through this constantly shifting material (2010: 30-31).

Objects not only have a special bond with their owner, but furthermore, are attached to the cultural context where they are found. Miller, 2010, for example, illustrates how globalized consumption objects may receive a unique and meaningful content in different local cultural contexts. A mass-produced garment such as a pair of jeans has entirely different connotations in London and Rio de Janeiro. The transaction and exchange of products has a central role in creating and maintaining social relationships. The most famous anthropological example of this role is probably the ceremonial exchange system, the *Kula* (meaning “ring”) of Papua New Guinea, described by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922). The valuables traded, shell necklaces and bracelets, are transported by canoe long distances according to fixed routes. The purpose of the Kula according to Malinowski is, with the help of trade in jewellery, to foster solidarity amongst a people who are geographically dispersed. Unlike goods in a market economy, the value of the jewellery in the Kula is not generalizable. It is instead dependent on the status of a particular owner. According to this view, the owner is always tied to the object. Since the transactions are not financial in a gift economy, but socially reciprocal, they are deeply embedded in the cultural context and manifested through symbols and rituals.

Malinowski strongly questions the universalization of the theory of *homo oeconomicus*, the idea of the human as a profit-maximizing being. An individual involved in the Kula ring, as noted, is not trying to maximize profits on the basis of minimum effort: “On the contrary, much time and energy is spent on wholly unnecessary effort” (Malinowski 1922: 60).

Although the members of Facebook shopping groups live in a market economy, a similar approach can be seen in the groups. A large amount of time and effort is spent photographing the clothes, writing about them, commenting, answering questions, going to the post office, meeting up to exchange clothing or objects and money. But rather than being regarded a nuisance, it seems to be precisely this activity that brings to the groups a dynamic and an attraction. Eleanor describes the interaction in the groups in these words:

–I love the social interaction in the groups. Since I don’t have anyone around me who shares my interest in this, I think it’s even more fun to talk to people with the same interest. You almost always create a little discussion with the person you are buying from or selling to. In these groups, I think the social is important because all share the same interest.

An important reason for the success of the groups seems to be that they satisfy a social need. But the communication in the groups also serves to establish trust. Consumption in many of the shopping groups is usually accompanied by a communication exchange that I almost want to describe as small talk, focused on the products. Gunnar Ekman, a business economist at the Swedish School at Stockholm University, has researched the benefits of small talk in

organizations (2003). Ekman observes that small talk creates, fosters and cultivates social ties and trust, something that is extremely important in connection with financial transactions. In the collaborative economy, trust is paramount. It is the very condition for the system to work.

A central aspect of the small talk in the shopping groups on Facebook are the so-called emoji symbols, that is, emotional symbols such as hearts, roses, blushing smileys, thumbs and, as in the opening quotation, a girl who dances. These symbols are generously sprinkled through the communication amongst members. At the beginning of my presence in the groups, I could be a little amazed at receiving messages with images of pounding hearts, cute animals, kissing lips, and flowers. I learned quickly, however, that the emojis hardly reflect intense feelings amongst the members, but rather for the goods circulating. The emojis also appear to act as a lubricant in the communication, especially in financial transactions. Sofia Andersson, administrator of Luxury Flea Market states that a heart “shows that there is a person with a heart behind.”

Renate points out that emojis

—... can be very important as the written word can be perceived differently by different people. A winking face softens a comment, a smiley signals friendliness. A heart signals great kindness.

Communications online both resemble and do not resemble communication offline. The main difference is that the contact does not take place face-to-face. Although emoji symbols are not able to create lasting social ties outside the groups, they soften the communication in cyberspace, which might otherwise be marked by hostility.

For the most part, communication in the groups is marked by cordiality and some initial calls for kindness (“I ask all members to maintain a polite tone towards each other – it will be so much nicer then!”, “Hug each other online”).

In addition to his studies of consumer goods, Miller also delved into the cultural dimension of Facebook, as it is used in Trinidad. In the book *Tales from Facebook* (2011), Miller describes how Facebook functions as a network for reproduction of social reciprocity through the exchange of gossip and emojis. He does not mention shopping groups, which were just coming into existence when the book was published, but Miller believes that the emojis and “likes” serve a similar function to gifts, that is, strengthening social relationships. This assumption differs from a common image of Facebook as superficial and erosive to authentic relationships. Miller comments on this view:

Much of the most tedious literature on Facebook concerns the question of whether a friend on Facebook is a real friend. This blithely ignores the vast spectrum of people we may choose to call friends in offline worlds [...] This is the fear that we are all becoming

more superficial, that Facebook friends represent a kind of inflation that diminishes the value of prior or true friendship (2011:166-167).

Miller emphasizes that he does not see any signs that this would be the case. In fact, social relationships on Facebook substitute, complement, or even strengthen the bonds of offline friendship. He points out that for over a hundred years, modern society has been accused of wiping out “tightly-knit social communities.” The emergence of a market economy with a largely anonymous exchange of goods is seen as one of the main reasons for this loss of community. Modern technology is often regarded as an accomplice in this development. But as Miller shows, based on how Facebook is used in Trinidad, there are no signs that people socialize less with each other with the emergence of Facebook. The groups seem equally to fulfil a social function. Facebook affirms relationships both between individuals and between individuals and products.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that buy-and-sell groups have been able to achieve such success. Although the groups in different ways are related to fashion, they differ from how late modern fashion is usually understood. Although interviewees testified to both shopping desire and shopping addiction, the goods exchanged in the various Facebook groups are hardly part of a feverishly fast fashion cycle (“fast fashion”) where the desire serves as a lubricant.

Shopping desire merges instead with notions of sustainability. The groups, as already noted, seem to fulfil a social function, with relationships between individuals and individuals and products. A number of anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai (1988), Mary Douglas (1979), Daniel Miller (2009; 2010) and Marilyn Strathern (1988) have shown that consumption objects are always involved in collective social processes. Relationships can occur between sellers and consumers in a local context, and goods can have values beyond their financial value when they are exchanged as gifts. The collaborative economy further erodes the rigid model of exchange of goods in a capitalist system and reinstates trust as a currency. Perhaps Malinowski’s interpretation of the Kula as a way to create unity and solidarity in a vast and fragmented archipelago is also applicable amongst shopping groups on Facebook. They function as micro-communities with clear rules and trust amongst group members. Trust becomes necessary to enable financial transactions with loved things without any other security than a benevolent smiley. As a cherished currency, trust fulfils the emotional need that forms the basis of all human relationships.

Acknowledgment: The research is funded by a grant from The Swedish Retail and Wholesale Council.

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¹ The rate of growth of Facebook groups (not necessarily shopping groups) can be seen in a report conducted by Google in 2010. During the three months of that year, the number of groups grew from 52 million to 620 million. (*All Facebook blog*, 2014). The earliest articles I find that concern buy-and-sell groups on Facebook are from 2011 and 2012. The text from 2011 is published in the blog *Geek Tips for Marketers: Technical Strategy Advice for Persuasion, SEO, PPC, and Traffic Strategy* (<http://www.geektipsformarketers.com>. Retrieved 2014-04-29); the text is about shopping groups targeting children's clothing and the social networks that arise in connection with the business. The title of the post is "The Facebook Underground." The article from 2012 is published in *Examinerar.com* and has the title "Local Facebook Yard Sale Group Increasing in Popularity" (<http://www.examiner.com/article/local-facebook-yard-sales-increasing-popularity>. Retrieved 2014-04-29).

² The terms "retro" and "vintage" overlap and the difference is relatively blurred. In general, retro is used in a broader sense in the groups to denote clothing and other items/clothes from the mid-20th century, while vintage is reserved for high quality clothing, at least 50 years old. I will use the terms interchangeably here.

³ For the term "cultural capital" see foremost Pierre Bourdieu (*Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge, London, 1986).

⁴ All of the informants referred to in this text are women, but besides their gender and ethnicity (they are mostly ethnic Swedes), they are relatively heterogeneous in terms of age, occupation and social background. The youngest is in her twenties and the oldest around 60 years old. Among the interviewees there is a preschool teacher, a broker, a former horse breeder, a store manager, and an assistant. Some live in a big city and others in smaller towns or in the countryside. The names given in the text are fictitious except Sofia Andersson, founder of Luxury Flea Market. Since this study was conducted, I have interviewed informants with a non-Swedish background. My perception so far is that especially the retro and vintage groups are dominated by Swedish women, while the other groups are more mixed ethnically.

⁵ There are several theories of the fashion cycle. The most famous (later denoted "trickle down theories") were formulated by Georg Simmel ("Fashion", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 62, no. 4, [1895] 1957) and Thorstein Veblen (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, [1899] 2007), who both claimed that the durability of the cycle equals the time it takes for a particular fashionable style to "trickle down" society's hierarchy, i.e. to become adopted and gradually abandoned by the different social layers. Since the latter part of the 20th century, alternative interpretations of the fashion cycle, in which marginalized groups can also act as "fashion feeders", have challenged the older trickle down model (See for example Meyerson and Katz 1957).