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Does country of origin matter? Qualitative analysis of young people's choice of wooden household furniture in Germany and Finland

Inkeri Hakala¹, Anne Toppinen², Minna Autio¹

¹ Department of Economics and Management, University of Helsinki, Finland

² Department of Forest Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland, corresponding author, email: anne.toppinen@helsinki.fi

Abstract

Previous studies on wooden furniture have examined the effect of tangible and intangible product attributes and the role of forest certification on the consumer's furniture choice. However, in the comparative European context there is a research gap in studying furniture consumption from the viewpoint of young consumers. This paper examines young consumers' experiences of wooden furniture in Germany and Finland. Qualitative data was gathered in 2013 with ethnographic field work and 22 guided interviews conducted among consumers between 23-34 years of age. The data was content analysed using thematisation. Based on the results appearance, price and quality are found to be three main attributes in both countries, followed by functionality and ecological aspects. From the marketing point of view, (domestic) country of origin was emphasized as an essential attribute among young Finnish consumers, whereas for German consumers domestic origin did not play a role. However, in both countries, the use of tropical wood species was criticized. Although the immediate furniture choices of young consumers may be dictated by budgetary reason and target towards low-end mass-produced market, these individuals may have high respect for handicraft skills associated with traditional wooden furniture and the value of embedded national heritage. In addition, our interviewees expressed a degree of cynicism towards current eco-labels in use, suggesting a need to deepen their information content and accountability in terms of communicating product sustainability. Further research is called for to analyze, among other things, the symbolic value of Ikea for the young generation European consumers.

Keywords: wooden furniture, young consumers, consumer taste, sustainability

Introduction and aim

Consumers value economic, functional, aesthetic, environmental and ethical aspects when they choose furniture and decorate their homes (e.g. Fuentes 2011, Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer 2012). Consequently, home and decorating styles reflect consumers' taste, to which symbolic and communicative values are important. As Knorr Cetina (1997, p. 11) has argued, products are not valued for their intrinsic properties, but rather for what they buy – status, relationships and other objects. Fuentes (2011) has pointed out that even though homes and their decoration are private and physically accessible only for selected people, they are often made more public through spoken description or pictures. Ilmonen (2004) has stressed that the use value of goods cannot be reduced only to their symbolic aspects. Also the functionality and productivity of goods are important. For example, what purpose the furniture is for, and what kind of material is suitable and durable in use. Furthermore, objects can play an active role in our relationship to other people (Ilmonen 2004). Goods, such as furniture, do not speak back unlike humans and yet, they may attract our attention and even become objects of passionate care and great attraction (McCracken 1988, Knorr Cetina 1997, Ilmonen 2004).

However, how consumers of today – or especially the young ones representing the future consumption class – perceive the role of environmental aspects in furniture consumption is not well understood (see, however, Rämö et al. 2012). Does country of origin matter to young European

consumers, who today have often been internationalized through travel from their early years? Furthermore, are there some cross-cultural differences in the comparative European context?

To contribute to this literature, this paper aims at examining young consumers' experiences in case of wooden furniture markets in Germany and Finland. In particular, we will elaborate the importance of country of origin and source of wood raw material for the consumption experience of target sample.

Literature review and conceptual background

According to Baudrillard (1968), for consumers, functionality in furniture constitutes of two aspects: design and atmosphere. In addition to individuality in tastes and preferences, identity and lifestyle also play a role via shared cultural meanings of "what constitutes a good taste", and these standards are being created and replicated via interaction and education (Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer 2011, 171).

Consumer taste plays a critical role in judgment and decision-making of hedonic products (e.g. Holbrook & Hirschman 1982, Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer 2012). *Young consumers* are often seen as spending hedonists, who are socialized in the contemporary society through consumption (Miles 2000). However, young people are studying, working in a low-income jobs or being unemployed, and thus, their financial position is usually weaker than full-time workers. For that reason, young people cannot spend generously on expensive items, such as furniture – if it is not their hobby that they are willing to invest in (for example an expensive design chair). According to many studies young people base their consumption decisions on a combination of the various criteria (e.g. Wilska 2003, Autio et al. 2009), such as being rational (self-control), economical (price, saving), hedonist (pleasures, wasting) and responsible (green and ethical choices). The obstacle to green consumption in the life of young people is the premium prices of organic and environmentally friendly products (Autio et al. 2009; p. 46). In the furniture market, young people could thus favor second hand, inherited, and recycled furniture due to budgetary as well as environmental and ethical reason.

When Rämö et al. (2012) studied young Finnish adults consuming wood based products, they found two consumer categories. Majority were those driven by environmental and societal values and minority those who reasoned their purchases rather by price and trendiness. According to their study the consumers in the age group between 20-25-years were more likely to be selfish and stress the economical values over the responsible environmental and societal reasons. This was seen to be due to the lower budget in the use of this age group consisting of mostly students.

Besides taste, economical, ecological and ethical issues also safety and material aspects have been topical theme in furniture research (e.g., Pakarinen 1999) and overall home decorating (Kozak et al. 2004). For example, consumers consider wood as a high quality, expensive, aesthetic, and ecologically sound material, especially when used in furniture (e.g. Jaskari 2011). *Ethical consumption*, which also reflects the symbolic value (caring consumer), has been rising in the past few decades in the Western world, which also shows in the volume of research on these issues (Newholm and Shaw 2007, p. 254). In a recent study on Nordic furniture designers, the integration of ecological criteria influences both the perspectives on material and process optimization and the end use of wooden furniture as well as the recycling of these products (Lähtinen et al. 2014). For Finnish consumers the main selection criteria in purchasing furniture have been found to be visual appearance, functionality, and high quality (Valtonen 2008).

Regarding furniture market, significant attributes to consumers can be, e.g., price, visual appearance, functionality and durability, but also the origin of material as well as its safety aspects, procurement policies and sustainability of manufacturing can be influential. According to Peterson and Jolibert (1995), country of origin may significantly affect the perceived quality and reliability of a product during the time of purchase. In case of products with Scandinavian origin, according to Roncha (2008), a key brand asset is the combination of design and responsible manufacturing supplemented with affordability of products, which has resulted in recognition of products in the global markets (see

also Lahntinen et al. 2014). Ikea is arguably the best-known brand for furniture associated with Scandinavian origin despite the fact that a great body of the brand's wooden products are merely designed in Sweden and manufactured via outsourcing elsewhere in lower cost countries.

Previous studies on wooden furniture have examined the effect of tangible and intangible product attributes – and particularly from environmental perspective the role of forest certification – on the consumer's furniture choice, and have in general indicated superiority of wood as a material (e.g. Pakarinen 1999; Bigsby and Ozanne 2002, Jaskari 2009; 2011). The role of the different wood species has been also studied in e.g. Scholz and Decker (2007). Regarding the choice of sustainable wooden products, product safety aspects have been emphasized among Finnish consumers (Toppinen et al. 2013). Paradoxically, furniture industry in traditional production regions of North America and Northern Europe has been severely suffering from low profitability and lack of demand in domestic markets due to emerging low-cost competition (e.g. Lihra et al. 2012).

Ilmonen (1993, p. 203) has used a model to describe the consumer-good relation. It identifies four different dimensions of consumption and actor positions of consumer. A good has value in exchange, but it also is a symbolic channel in communication between two realities: in markets and in the consumers' experiential world. The first dimension is **economic** and related to price of product. In this the consumer has a customer role. In the second dimension product is regarded through its **functionality**, here consumer consumes its various properties and transforms the product eventually to waste. The good's third dimension of being **symbolic** stems from the work by Baudrillard (1970), in which social relationships and communication are essential, and status and brand aspects play a role. Finally, as a **productivity** ('prosumer') dimension, consumer uses products and services to essentially create something new (also Ilmonen 2004). A second hand or antique furniture can include all of these aspects; it is exchanged in the market, thereafter perhaps maintained or modified, and used by the owner both in its physical purpose and in more abstract way to communicate for example the status (eg. McCracken 1988) or taste of the consumer.

Data and analysis

Qualitative data used in this study was gathered in 2013. It consists of ethnographic fieldwork done in furniture stores and fairs and 22 guided interviews conducted among 23-34 years-old consumers in Finland and Germany. The observation material based on the fieldwork consists of written notes and photographs, and has been used as background information to draw the cultural context of the study.

The main focus in this paper is on the interview material. The themes of the guided interviews were (i) furniture in the interviewees' own possession, (ii) furniture purchase reasoning, (iii) environmental and origin labelling, (iv) safety of the furniture, (v) domestic vs. foreign products and materials, (vi) Finnish furniture design and furniture design in general. A guided interview was chosen to allow the informants to explain and discuss the topics broadly and without pre-set hypotheses. The transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic content analysis. The interview themes lead the analysis process, although some unexpected themes, such as the role of both the Ikea brand and the used furniture, also rose from the interviews and were taken to closer analysis.

The results give an understanding of which way consumers discuss about their furniture choices. The findings should, however, be treated with caution since the data was collected in two large cities in Germany and Finland, and therefore not representing the German and Finnish consumers. Also the interviewed were all young adults, who had either graduated with or were at the time studying for a higher education degree, so the results are likely to be weighted towards youth representing higher education background.

Results

Consumers were asked to tell in their own words which factors affect their furniture purchases. In Table 1, different aspects that were mentioned in interviews are classified under key themes. The

themes were found to be fairly similar between countries; price and quality as well as the appearance and functionality were considered to be key issues. There were, however, also some differences, such as higher recognition of environmental friendliness in Germany. Therefore, we will focus the role of raw material origin and question “what constitutes environmental friendliness” in more detail.

Table 1. Consumer argumentation for furniture purchase (in order of importance)

Germany	Finland
Price/available budget Limited budget as student; readiness to save money; careful consideration if more expensive product	Appearance Attractive, catches eye; image when entering the store
Appearance Compatibility with existing furniture; naturalness; traditional appearance – history in furniture, colour, size, inspiration from books	Price/available budget Limited budget as student; related to quality
Functionality A clear need to purchase; fits well to intended use	Quality Durability; longevity; recyclability and second use; quality materials;
Quality Durability, solid wood as material	Functionality Fits well to intended use; comfortable
Origin How and in which country manufactured?	Environmental friendliness (Occasional remarks)
Environmental friendliness Use of wood; eco-label	

As results in Table 2 show, from the marketing point of view, (domestic) country of origin was emphasized as an essential attribute among young Finnish consumers, whereas for German consumers domestic origin did not play an important role. Environmental friendliness of product or country-of-origin were not often spontaneously brought up in interviews when talking about decision-making related to purchasing household furniture. One female from Germany raised the issue of retail stores lacking information on environmental aspect. However, when the topic of “environment” was introduced to interviewees, they found it relevant and this produced a lot of speech. For example, interviewed young consumers commonly discussed their role as an ethical consumer and related idealism.

Table 2. Summary of main findings regarding environmental friendliness, eco-labels and origin of the wood

	Environment and origin labels	Domestic origin
German consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rainforest wood ▪ Avoidance of origin information for budgetary reasons ▪ Unable to name specific labels ▪ Critique towards labels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not relevant ▪ Less transportation ▪ Trust in German forestry practices and the legal system guiding it ▪ German wood species good
Finnish consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Made in Finland and Nordic labels ▪ Swan label (Nordic ecolabel) ▪ Rainforest wood mentioned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The most important assurer of product quality ▪ Expensive ▪ Long-standing traditions in Finnish wood industry

The consumers can be roughly divided into following categories according to their way of stating their standpoint on ecological and country-of-origin related issues:

- i. Does not talk about environmental issues or manufacturing conditions
- ii. Mentions them, but tells that they don't influence own choices
- iii. Mentions, but because of higher prices avoids only rain forest wood
- iv. Tells that has already made ecologically / environmentally aware purchase(s)
- v. Does not buy furniture in stores at all

Only a few of all the interviewed consumers (iv) described any actual furniture purchase they had made with careful consideration of environmental and origin aspects. In these few cases, the question was about buying a specific piece of furniture, such as outdoor set or kitchen table. There was often a conflict with individual action and ideals, which they willingly admitted. In both countries, the use of tropical wood species was criticized. Especially German consumers voiced (iii) absolute criticism against not buying furniture made of tropical wood. However, otherwise they acknowledged that due to higher prices, the choice of sustainable products had to be compromised. For example one German male interviewee was frustrated of having to compromise idealistic world views at this age until he can afford to choose more responsible furniture at later stage of life span:

“[W]hen you still have your ideals you don't have the money to follow up your own ideals, because you're still a student.” (Male 30b Ger)

Instead, from ethical perspective, the Finnish consumers mentioned employee conditions and illegal loggings of wood, but more often they (ii) claimed that they did not think about the issue when purchasing furniture. Despite several questions about environment and origin of wood, some Finnish consumers (i) neglect ecological aspects and production conditions. They perceived origin to strongly associate with “Made in Finland”-concept, that they viewed through two main aspects: product quality and design.

Among the German consumers furniture was also made by hand. Some of the interviewees (v) explained building their own furniture or purchasing it used. These people did mention the ecological and origin issues of the furniture available in the market, and that they did not buy new furniture. In addition, consumers in both countries expressed a degree of cynicism towards current eco-labels in use, suggesting a need to deepen their information content and accountability, as the following two quotes illustrate:

“So the thing I’d trust would be the sort of made in Finland and then I would trust on hand-made. Maybe if it was manufactured, say, in the Nordic countries [...] I would count on these very simple markings. But the global systems, I wouldn’t trust them. In any case, it wouldn’t be a high priority for me.” (Female 27b Fin).

”... I think the same [that] goes for all organic labels is that there’s so much white washing or green washing in that kind of sense that you never really know where it’s going. (...) And I wouldn’t trust Ikea if they say that’s green, I don’t trust H&M when they say that it’s organic.” (Male 30c Ger)

The interviews showed furniture retail chain Ikea to have a special role in consumers’ furniture discourse in both Finland and Germany. The consumers used the company as an example when they talked about the furniture they own and their previous and future purchases. Also they tended to use Ikea as a universal example on more abstract subjects such as environmental and safety issues. The talk about Ikea’s furniture offers a useful tool to decode the meanings and expectations consumers have concerning furniture also on more general level. For example the consumers discussed frequently negative experiences concerning the Ikea-furniture. It was thought to lack the durability and uniqueness that the consumers suggested they were looking for. There was also the tendency amongst them to use price as a legitimating reason, when explaining why they would still purchase furniture in Ikea – even after self-experienced disappointments with the previous ones had made them aware of the low quality trade off. Ikea-talk was so frequent and spontaneously brought up in our data that we could see indications that young generation European consumers see Ikea for furniture as being close to what “Hoover” is for vacuum cleaners or Xerox for copy machines.

Furthermore, the results interestingly underlined that young consumers’ may have high respect for handicraft skills associated with traditional wooden furniture and the value of embedded national heritage although their immediate furniture choices may be dictated by budgetary reason to target towards low-end mass-produced market.

“I think people, our generation, (...) we value things that have a kind of story.” (Male 30c Ger)
“From a flea market in Hämeenlinna a wooden table which I’ve sanded myself. [...] it has an immediate emotional value, when you’ve worked on it yourself.” (Female 27a Fin)

According to results in both countries consumers gave special value to the used furniture, especially the ones they had inherited, repaired or built themselves (see also Ilmonen 2004). These pieces of furniture raise consumers’ affection, because they have a personal bond to them, giving meaning beyond their functional values. Also the used furniture was valued for its time lasting, solid wooden structure, which was juxtaposed with the non-solid materials typically used in the modern day low-budget alternatives. Furthermore, it appears that the young Finnish and German adults gain cultural understanding of the sustainability potential of the wooden furniture (also Kozak et al. 2004, Jaskari 1999), particularly through the experiences they have with inherited or second hand furniture.

Discussion

It seems that Finnish young consumers of this study tend to relate environmental and origin issues to the domestic country of origin. In comparison the German consumers are generally more concerned about the issue of rain forest wood or long shipping of the material or products. Both Finns and Germans were trustful of the domestic and European regulations, and ready to believe that what is offered in the Finnish and German market, can also be regarded as fairly safe to the consumer.

Interviewed consumers were aware of and uncomfortable with the environmental compromise they were making when buying cheap and short-lived furniture. Both the Finnish and German consumers tended to explain their purchase choices using thrift speech typical of both consumer cultures (Autio et al. 2009, Walsh et al. 2001). According to some, the making of conscious purchase choices were seen time demanding and yet difficult to be certain about. Recycled and inherited furniture appeared as a safe ground for young adults struggling to meet their contradictory economical and

environmentally sound ideals. In placing the results to four conceptual dimensions by Ilmonen (2004), the raw material and origin represents symbolic meaning of furniture while recycling and use of second hand furniture is about productivity dimension in a process to create something new. In contrast, discussion on Ikea and lack of financial resources to buy solid wood or design furniture, is related to economic dimension via allowable budget and young consumers' price sensitiveness.

The young adults in this study describe a continuum of the different life phases, where they position themselves often in a period before responsible or long-lasting consumption choices. Similar feature was found by Rämö et al. (2012), which concluded that the Finnish consumers in the age group between 20-25-year old predominantly argued their wood product purchases to be driven by price and trendiness, instead of environmental and societal reasons. Also in this study the young adults brought up the importance of limited budget and their ongoing life phase in which the responsible purchase choices were not current.

The studied consumers have already experienced their 'good and bad' furniture choices when they have furnished their first own home. Through their experiences with inherited, second hand furniture, and Ikea they are gaining awareness on what is culturally approved and what is the taste of their own, when talking about furniture and wood material. They indicate a generation that has a globally shared 'Ikea-language' to express their identity when discussing their furniture values in their lives and creating their home (see also Björkvall 2009). Therefore, in the future research, we see interesting opportunities in analyzing in more depth the symbolic value of Ikea for the young consumers and for example in comparison to consumers in the next life-phases (between 30-45 years and up).

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