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Being Modern in Socialist Modernity: Domestic Technologies and the Emergence of Fashion

Abstract: The article discusses the social space of consumption of domestic technologies in urban settings in People's Republic of Poland. It argues that the state-implemented progress discourse was the key factor in the emergence of fashion within this context. Retrospective in-depth interviews were analyzed. Together it is 39 interviews with 27 participants. The interlocutors belong to elder historical generations. The findings suggest what was the course of the process of fashion emergence in socialist modernity. In the first step, due to the progress discourse the value of being modern was internalized. It allowed for adoption of 'progressive' domestic technologies. The fashion in terms of imitating novel and external patterns emerged. In the second step, due to the shortages of goods, the owned domestic technologies raised the social status of its owners. This is how social emulation emerged as the process of imitation and competition for the higher standard of living.

Keywords: Domestic technologies, socialist modernity, fashion, discourse of progress

Introduction

Electrification, running water, washing machines, fridges, vacuum cleaners, TV sets, telephones were the subjects of common fascination and then desire. They transformed the everyday life in the second half of the 20th century in Poland. They had been becoming part of everyday life since the post war years like in European countries (De Grazia 2005).¹ They were the carriers and symbols of modernity like in the US, where the mechanization of everyday life took place earlier, already in the 1920s (Cowan 1976; Bell 1978; Slater 1997). It was the policy of the socialist state that implemented progress through material infrastructure and domestic technologies (Humphrey 2005; Pine 2007; Zalewska 2020): towns and villages were electrified; residential blocks fitted with bathrooms, sanitation and running water were built in cities; in the workplaces efficient labour was rewarded with vouchers for flats, washing machines, refrigerators, TVs; progress was promoted in schools, workplaces, culture centres, rural housewives' circles and at exhibitions (Kula 2001; Stańczak-Wiślicz 2017). However, the centrally controlled economy was inefficient (Giza-Poleszczuk 2002)—people had to wait for flats for many years, electrical appliances were often impossible to buy without vouchers, because the supply did not keep up

¹ In 1961 19% of households had a washing machine, and in 1995 98%. In 1959 2% of households had a fridge, and in 1990 98%. In 1959 5% of households had a TV, and in 1980 93% black and white and 6% colour (Schmidt and Skowrońska 2016).

with the demand. Despite the state making it difficult, information on the living standard and consumption level abroad did reach Poland and they evoked aspirations of Polish consumers. The living standards in the USSR, GDR, and, especially in the so-called West, meaning Western Europe and the US, were considered “better modernity”. The progress, at first implemented by the state, was then developed by the consumers, who worked out many complicated strategies of gaining consumer goods (Kornai 1992; Wedel 1986; Sikorska 1998), imitated one another and competed about being modern. Classical sociological literature points out that fashion in the sense of social emulation does not exist in authoritarian states (Slater 1997). Nevertheless, there are empirical examples that consumer culture governed by fashion emerged in socialist period in Poland (Fidelis 2009; Zalewska 2017; Wasiak 2020; Zalewska and Jewdokimow 2022).

Drawing on ethnographic data, this article discusses the social space of consumption of domestic technologies in People’s Republic of Poland (People’s Poland). It argues that the state policy was the key factor in the emergence of fashion. Firstly, the state policy implemented innovations in everyday life. Citizens could experience comfort of using domestic technologies (in comparison with the earlier drudgery of everyday duties such as laundry, cf. Zalewska 2020) and they internalized the value of being modern. Secondly, the socialist economy was inefficient, there were shortages, and the evoked desires were not satisfied. Individuals started to look for other strategies of achieving the value of being modern than those assured by the state. The mechanism of social emulation emerged, and the citizens imitated each other and competed about standard of living.

The article starts from discussing the concepts of modern fashion and socialist modernity. Further it presents the methods of the research. Then, it discusses the internalization of the value of being modern. Finally, it analyses the emergence of fashion in the social space of domestic technologies consumption.

Modern Fashion

The current literature on fashion concentrates on dress and clothes, defining fashion in reference to both inseparable elements — social mechanism as well as characteristics of clothing (Davis 1992; Edwards 2011; Kaiser 2012). In this study, the social mechanism of fashion is at stake, and that is why I refer to the classic concepts of fashion.

According to classics, fashion is a form of imitation—it satisfies the needs for sociality, conformity, belonging (Tarde 1903; Simmel 1957). It was defined as a wave of imitation of new or external strange patterns—coming from outside the community (Tarde 1903); or as a wave of imitation that will spread but it will not last long, it will be replaced by a new wave (Simmel 1957). For Tarde the definition of fashion was based on the source of the imitation: innovation or external pattern is imitated, while for Simmel the definition of fashion was based as well on its changeability.

Both scholars based their concepts on two contrary terms: imitation and innovation. For Tarde all human behavior is imitative (Tarde 1903). An innovation appears when two beliefs or desires meet in the individual and they fit together; then the individual composes of them a new belief or desire. The new desire/belief spreads (or not) as a wave of fashion. When

the belief/desire is normalized in the community, it becomes custom. Custom is for Tarde complementary to fashion form of imitation. Custom is imitation of the patterns existing in community: following parents and elder authorities within community. According to Tarde, custom dominates in social life of all societies. Among dominative custom patterns, sometimes the waves of fashion occur, these are innovations from within the community or strange patterns from the outside. If the fashion disseminates, it becomes custom followed by next generations. However, there are ages of fashion: such epochs and places that fashion waves occur more often. Intense social contacts (big cities, intense transport, development of commerce) are factors facilitating fashion.

For Simmel (1957) imitation and innovation are both responsible for fashion. Individuals imitate groups to which they belong or aspire and at the same time they distinguish from those they want to stay distant. Some individuals want to stand out by fashion within their groups. Their imitation of fashionable patterns is innovative to some extent, it includes some new elements. In Simmel's observation, fashion governed the spheres considered less important in social life (the ones not determined by morality, ethics, customs), namely the look, aesthetics, leisure, associated with consumption. However, Simmel noticed that—in modern cities—changing waves of fashion concern more social spheres than in the past.

Both classics claim that the direction of imitation is from “superior” to “inferior” (Tarde 1903) in terms of values respected in the given social system (e.g. people imitate individuals stronger or richer, or more educated) and from higher to lower social classes (Simmel 1957). Both scholars notice that people imitate those with a little higher status and not those very distant in social space.

Gilles Lipovetsky (1994)—drawing on the fashion concept of Tarde—claims that fashion rules from the 18th century onwards and its influence spreads onto the whole Europe and globally. At the dawn of modernity, fashion disseminated among the bourgeois as a form of rivalry with aristocracy (Campbell 1987). Fashion replaced taboo or sumptuary law of the pre-modern times (Appadurai 1996), which in terms of Tarde are called the ages of custom. The changes towards fashion governing consumption were called the consumer revolution. The factors of consumer revolution were mobile society, industrialization, urbanization, growth of money economy, waged labor, literacy, expert knowledge (Appadurai 1996). Throughout modernity fashion conquered more and more social spheres and became widespread (Lipovetsky 1994; Appadurai 1996).

The mechanism of fashion is twofold. Social emulation is the mechanism of the so-called Simmel-Veblen model of fashion (Campbell 2005). Social emulation is about maintaining and raising the position in the social space. In the process of emulation, agents implement new patterns of behaviour to imitate practices found at the higher social positions, and to impress and compete with those on the similar social positions. This mechanism refers not only to economic status driven fashion, but the mechanism of imitation and competition may refer to various values respected in a particular social space.

Secondly, on the individual level, fashion is connected to emotions and imagination. Adapting a new pattern of behavior gives pleasure to an individual due to the mechanism of modern hedonism (Campbell 1987). Modern individuals are engaged in the pursuit for the new products or new behaviors. Modern individuals imagine that adapting new desired behavior will give them the experience of pleasurable emotions, such as joy, excitement.

However, after adapting a new behavior or buying a new product, these emotions disappear rather fast. Then individuals transmit the imagined pleasures onto another object and the whole cycle repeats (Campbell 2005). It is contrary to what we see in traditional societies, where the pleasure was achieved by the virtuoso performance of a perfectly embodied, repeatedly mastered practice (Bourdieu 1977).

From the 1970s, fashion is claimed to dominate in all the spheres of social life in affluent western societies (Lipovetsky 1994; Appadurai 1996). From this point, it has become horizontal. People imitate each other in slight aspects, every individual is a unique collage of many patterns. Fashion is a way of building individual identity by observing and imitating many persons in narrow aspects (Lipovetsky 1994). The status-driven theories of fashion have been condemned by Blumer and other scholars who do not take into consideration the historical changes of fashion, as Dowgiałło (2015) underlines. However, individuals still imitate those patterns that they value and want to identify with. Thus, status is still important driver for fashion, although it does not have to be economic status.

The mechanisms of fashion are characteristic of democratic (Lipovetsky 1994) and capitalist (Slater 1997) societies. There are no taboos, customary norms, sumptuary laws, political suppressions that could limit possible fashions of behavior. Don Slater (1997) identifies consumer culture driven by fashion with the modern West (capitalist and democratic), because central values, practices and institutions of everyday life are at the same time the central phenomena of consumer culture, such as market relations or consumer choice. However, the decolonial perspective in fashion studies claims that such concepts of fashion are orientalist and based on simplistic binary oppositions (tradition–modernity and East–West). The dichotomy West–East is evaluative: the West is richer, progressive, civilized, thus modernized and better; while the East is poorer, backward, barbarian, thus traditional and worse. The decolonial perspective places Polish fashion discourse as in-between the Soviet and the Western patterns (Nowicka-Franczak and Raciniewska 2017). In comparison with Tarde’s concept, the decolonial perspective makes assumptions about the directions of imitation, while Tarde’s theory is an open tool for studying where and how two beliefs meet (innovation) and what is the direction of imitation.

Socialist Modernity

Socialist modernity was identified with mechanized production and waged labor for the state (Pine 2007). The participation in this modern world was experienced through labor and consumption: the workplace, regular salary and waiting for the flat, gaining subsequent apartment furnishings, including domestic technologies, raising the living standard. The socialist state shaped the material living conditions (Reid and Crowley 2000; Crowley and Reid 2002; Zarecor 2011; Féherváry 2013), what Caroline Humphrey (2005) calls ‘ideology in infrastructure’. In the urban People’s Poland, the material living conditions were blocks with standard, small flats fitted with gas, electricity, running water and sanitation. Similar processes took place not only in domestic sphere. Under the label ‘modernity’ the socialist state promoted moderate consumerism in the spheres of garment,

body care and leisure. It aroused consumer desires and pursuit for acquiring commodities (Fidelis 2009).

Socialist modernity is a descriptive concept developed by historians and anthropologists. For better sociological understanding of the described mechanisms and drawing on the notion of discourse (Foucault 1972), the progress-oriented actions of socialist state were conceptualized as the progress discourse (Zalewska 2020). The discourse, in Foucauldian terms, establishes its own rules linking language and reality. It is a system of knowledge production: the performed practices systematically create the objects to which they relate. The progress discourse creates reality as undergoing constant change, which is positively assessed. The socialist modernity was created through industrialization, but also through implementation of material infrastructure in everyday life of citizens and promotion of the idea of progress. The narratives of the citizens that grew up in the People's Poland prove the internalization of the progress discourse: they are dominated by the statements like "the progress must move on". However, the research shows that the privileged in the socialist state (managers of state-owned factories, military service, individuals on high positions in the Party structure) had better access to modern material infrastructure (Zalewska 2020; cf. Zarycki and Warczok 2020).

In theory, the state policy was planned to reach every citizen "guaranteeing the maximum satisfaction of the ever increasing material and cultural needs of the entire society" (Porter-Szücs 2020: 85). The state authorities allowed for moderate consumption satisfying needs, but desires were perceived as irrational and as a reason of the inefficiency of the market. The state economists were concerned on the supply-side of the market. They tried to adjust the consumer demand to the rational level of supply (Porter-Szücs 2020). Moreover, the execution often even did not meet the ends of the plans (Mazurek 2010). In result, the state policy did not meet the goals of consumers.

The consumers—dissatisfied with the official supply—performed complicated strategies of gaining consumer goods on informal market (Wedel 1986; Kornai 1992; Sikorska 1998). Consumer products coming from the West were symbols of a high standard of living (Kurz 2008). 'Being western' could raise the value of the good and the status of its owner (Wasiak 2020). This is what happened on the market of videocassette recorders (VCRs) consumption in the 1980s (Wasiak 2020). The owners of VCRs (produced on western markets and informally imported to Poland) were persons having access to western job markets and western consumer markets. The VCR costed twice annual salary of the average Polish citizen. Still the diffusion of the technology was very fast in Poland, the VCR became a status indicator. The mechanism of social emulation was empirically proven in the social space of VCRs consumption. Another example of social emulation concerns the wall unit consumption at the turn of 1970s and 1980s (Zalewska and Jewdokimow 2022). The working class imitated each other within the state implemented progress discourse; while the socialist middle class contested socialist patterns of furniture and competed by following western trends and pre-war traditions. Valuing western domestic technologies over internal or Soviet technologies—in my opinion—is the result of the politics and economy of the Soviet bloc. The production of domestic technologies in the Soviet bloc took place in the context of the rivalry with the West (Reid 2002). The production of domestic technologies was perceived in Poland as "catching up" with the West, what can be proved by importing

Western technologies to produce consumer goods in the 1970s (Davies 2005) or the intelligence service activities of technology transfer from Western countries (Sikora 2019). Lastly, the production of domestic technologies in the Soviet bloc was not always a success (Wasiak 2020). However, these processes re-introduced the opposition (mentioned in the previous section) between Modern West and Traditional East, even though the authorities in the states of Soviet bloc made efforts for modernization of everyday life.

Below, I will look at the transformation in the social space of domestic technologies consumption: from state-implemented adoption of technologies based on rational and progress-oriented ideas towards consumption driven by social emulation.

Methods

Domestication of technologies in the second half of the 20th century in Poland was studied by the team of sociologists from Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw (Joanna Zalewska) and Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Marta Skowrońska and Filip Schmidt) in 2018–2020 as a part of a grant entitled “The consumer revolution in Poland.” The quantitative data on saturation of Polish household with domestic technologies were gathered. The quantitative data proved that the saturation of the domestic technologies was faster in cities than in villages (Schmidt and Skowrońska 2016; following Statistical Yearbooks, Local Data Bank, Household Budget Research GUS). And as far as technical infrastructure of residential buildings is concerned (water mains, sewers, central heating, gas connection), there were huge differences between regions for a disadvantage of former Russian partition (apart from Warsaw). The qualitative research concentrated on the avantgarde of the domestication of technology, meaning big cities. Warsaw and Poznań were chosen as sites of research: Warsaw being a well technically developed island in the former Russian partition and Poznan as an example of well technically developed city from the former Prussian partition.

For the purpose of this study, retrospective in-depth interviews with 11 married couples were analyzed, immediately followed by 22 individual in-depth interviews with the partners separately. Dyadic interviews concentrated on the domestication of technology in the couple's joint household. Individual interviews concentrated on the domestication of technology during individuals' childhood and youth in their family of origin, as well as they gave the opportunity to present the participants' individual perspective. A combination of dyadic interviews with individual interviews conducted independently with each person in the pair allows for exploring the similarities and differences between the experiences of dyad members to capture the dynamics of the relationship between the individual's reality and the couple's reality (Żadkowska et al. 2018). There were also 5 individual in-depth interviews with widows analyzed, because there were difficulties with finding elder married couples, while there were many widows eager to take part in the interview. Together it is 39 interviews with 27 individuals: 17 participants from Poznan and 10 from Warsaw. There was planned the same number of participants from both cities, but the recruitment of the participants in Poznań went efficiently, while the pandemic made difficult the recruitment in Warsaw.

The interlocutors belong to elder historical generations of socialist Poland (Świda-Ziemia 2010): (G1) the war generation and the ZMP generation² were concentrated on post-war progress, this was especially true for those of peasant origin who received education or gained waged work and improved their living standards (8 participants); (G2) the generation, who grew up in the period of reduced terror after the death of Stalin. During their school years they were subjected to Stalinist indoctrination, so they adapted to a double standard: in official life they obeyed the socialist rules, in private they valued everything that was capitalist and western (Świda-Ziemia 2010) (9 participants); (G3) the generation of the Little Reform, who showed a lack of interest in politics and were interested in rising the standard of living (10 participants). The oldest generations were delighted with the socialist modernity happening around,³ while the younger desired the standard of living of western modernity. The participants of the research represent various social positions. Within each historical generations, they were chosen on the bases of the jobs they had at the age of 40. Within the research group there are the unemployed, labor workers, office and technical workers, specialists, senior managers of state enterprises. Among participants from Warsaw there were no specialists and unemployed, as the researched group was smaller. Among the G1 there were no specialists, while among the G2 and G3 there were no housewives (unemployed) at the age of 40.

To thank them for participation, the participants were given a voucher to use in many retail chains. The survey was conducted with conscious consent and it was fully anonymous.

The analysis was conducted according to anthropological inductive method, where theoretic reflection interweaves with the emic interpretation of collected ethnographic data. I had been earlier working with fashion concepts. Thus, when the data revealed the race and rivalry between the citizens for the better living standard, I started to think about it in the terms of fashion. I developed the inductive categories for the analysis of the material—coming from the dataset, however the concepts of fashion and socialist modernity had an impact on what categories I saw in the data. For example, the concepts of fashion made me pay attention to the first contact with the technologies, mutual observation between people, persuasion, and desire. Meanwhile, the concept of socialist modernity made me pay attention to the access through the state and through the market. These are the categories:

1. Following next steps in the race of being modern (which technology comes first, which next etc.).
2. First contact with the technology through:
 - family and friends—someone around had the technology earlier (presented or allowed for using it)
 - media
 - state institutions, exhibitions
 - abroad.
3. Access to the technology through:

² Association of Polish Youth (ZMP) was a mass youth ideological-political organization that indoctrinated young people in the post-war period.

³ Even individuals who disapproved of the communist regime, approved of technological revolution in the post-war period.

- the state (the participants have never earlier seen the technology; talons; long waiting, lack of access, arranging [załatwianie])
 - internal market (earn money and buy for money: formal / informal)
 - the family / the family is the intermediary—someone from family got a voucher and gave to the participant or gave money
 - the non-family: within neighborhood, exchange with others
 - abroad (gift from abroad, bought abroad).
4. Technologies seen widely around and desired.
 5. Persuading to acquire technologies (among, family, friends, neighbors, workmates).
 6. Reactions towards newly possessed technologies (among, family, friends, neighbors, workmates).

Being Modern

The social emulation in the social space of domestic technologies consumption was about the standard of living that proved the person was modern. The point was to gradually gain all the goods, which was the measurement of successful life.⁴ The interlocutors told the stories of what they gained and in what order, emphasizing that they had fought for a better living standard keeping in mind their children who needed a desk for studying and a bed for sleeping. All our interlocutors participated in the social emulation as the state propaganda of modernity, new residential building, vouchers for domestic technologies were targeted at all the citizens. Polish sociologists of the late socialist period were negative about this common attitude as materialistic, they believed that 'having' dominated 'being' and regretted the moral condition of the Polish society (Gliński 1987). However, the ownership of a refrigerator, a TV, even a carpet, showed that the family was modern. From this perspective we can see that socialist modernity—just like capitalist modernity—is inevitably connected with consumer culture.

What is typical for fashion mechanism in capitalist societies is that people see the innovation and how it is used by others. What was intended within discourse of progress (however not fulfilled) is that people experienced the modernity in their everyday life due to the implementation of material infrastructure by the state. The implementation of material infrastructure by the progress discourse allowed the interlocutors to experience the comfort of domestic technologies in dormitories (students), worker hostels (workers, scholars) and company flats (workplace executives, uniformed services): bathrooms, showers, washing machines, TVs. The novelties were also promoted by the state: the interlocutors learnt about domestic technologies from household goods shops. Bogdan, a geodesist interested in technology, would regularly visit a shop to be up-to-date. Organized exhibitions were another source of knowledge, though it was not a typical way of learning about domestic technologies for the interlocutors. Danuta, a technical office worker, saw a TV for the first time in 1950 as a teenager. It was presented in The House of the Polish Word in Warsaw. She recalls that it was a sensation.

⁴ I thank Filip Schmidt who was the first to spot that our participants talk about a 'race' for a higher living standard.

The older respondents (G1) remind that in the early socialism the domestic technologies were accessible through the state policy. Edward at the age of 40 was the director of a dairy factory⁵ operating on national scale. He points out that all domestic technologies were available thanks to allocations of consumer goods in factories, meaning they were issued to workers by the employer, or through vouchers given in the workplace. The goods that were not sufficient for sale on demand were secured for those having vouchers being a special license for the purchase. Edward mentions the washboard, the rotary washing machine, the bicycle, the WFM motorbike—all this was issued to the chosen employees or available on vouchers. Józef, a foreman, an engine constructor and ZMP activist was given not only a voucher for a radio but also a flat for which the employer paid half of the price and for the other half he was given an interest free loan.

R: And this Pionner radio was something back then, did others have such radios, too?

M: Well, it had already started to appear (...) But it was issued by the employers. Not that you could buy it in a shop, because you would find it there.... Normally, well, they'd get, say five Pionners or something, and one was always for me, if there was something better...

And the flat I got, forty thousand... And, well, they dismissed the twenty thousand... and it took me, don't know, ten years or something to pay off the remaining twenty thousand. (Pos7 M G1)

Both these men held a managerial position in the state-controlled factory. It contrasts with what was said by the other respondents from the same generation, who, as a bonus for efficient work, at some point of their career, were given a voucher for a rotary washing machine but had to wait many years for a flat. Although, with some goods (e.g., rotary washing machine, cf. [Zalewska et al. 2024](#)) the state managed to reach to all the citizens, the shortages were structural characteristic of socialist economy ([Kornai 1992](#)). The discourse of progress evoked the consumer aspirations among majority of citizens, but it was not able to satisfy them. This is how the mechanism of fashion emerged on the broad scale: people started to compete about being modern. As shown by Polish sociologists of the late socialist period, the consumption was uneven, often there was not enough for basic needs, but the state of the art fitted flat was on display ([Gliński 1987](#)).

Fashion as Imitation of External Patterns

To observe the emergence of fashion, I will trace the first contacts with novel domestic technologies among the interlocutors. The first contact with domestic technologies evoked sensation and amazement ([Zalewska 2021](#)). Some interlocutors had a chance to experience new domestic technologies beyond their local community. Having internalized the discourse of progress they read these innovations as 'better modernity' than what the progress discourse had implemented in their community. The internalized progress discourse prompted individuals to adapt these strange novelties. This is how fashion understood as imitation of external, strange patterns ([Lipovetsky 1994](#)) emerged. Back in local communities, they stood

⁵ For maintaining anonymity, the names of the interlocutors have been changed, as well as the information that could allow their identification, such as the kind of industry in which the given interlocutor worked. In the quoted fragments M stands for male, F for female, R for researcher.

out. Their new domestic technologies were admired by the locals (due to the internalization of the discourse progress and the value of being modern), and the process of fashion as social emulation begun in local community.

Among older interlocutors (G1) only Edward, director of a big state-controlled factory, had the opportunity of contact with the novelties abroad. The first contacts of the interlocutors (G1) with the domestic technologies abroad took place in Russia. In the hotels in Russia (in which he stayed while there) Edward experienced well-equipped bathrooms, while in his social circle everyone had a bathroom as late as in the 1970s. In the 1970s, when it became easier to go abroad, GDR became the source of domestic technologies due to passport-free movement between our countries (cf. [Mazurek 2010](#)). The interlocutors brought from there: hair-dryers, mopeds, modern kitchen appliances and emphasised that in Germany flats were better equipped. The status of the GDR on east-west direction was ambivalent. Although the part of the Soviet bloc, it was on the west from Poland, and its economy was impacted by the western Germany.

Over time, the Soviet-produced domestic technology started to be perceived as worse than western, because unreliable; and the key cited example was the TV set Ruby that happened to explode:

The neighbor bought Ruby, and it burned. And we had fire all the way up here. The whole house was filled with smoke. (Pos2 M G3)

Besides from abroad, the contact with external patterns took place in big cities. Two interlocutors, Marian and Paweł (G3), living in their family homes in the country, encountered bathrooms through wider social contacts. Marian worked full time in a factory, but he travelled a lot because he also did extra work: he painted zebra stripes on the pedestrian crossing as well as bridge railings. As for Paweł, he went to a nearby big city where he saw a bathroom in his acquaintances' flat. He was strongly impressed.

And then, when I was in (city's name) visiting friends, I saw that it could be like my room: you have here not a toilet—I said—but a room. And you could empty it just by pressing a button. You could wash your hands, there was a water tap by the side. I was totally astonished. (Waw8 M G3)

They both brought the ideas back home. In case of Paweł, the father opposed saying it was impossible because they did not have running water in the house. Whereas Marian, despite his father's protests, transformed the larder into a bathroom at the break of the 1970s and 80s, before his wedding, so that his wife could use it. He dug a septic tank, activated the neighbors and soon the entire street had running water. He pulled down a wall of which he knew it did not support the entire construction, so that he could expand the room a bit to fit in a bathtub. He installed a darkened window, put the glazing. The experience of seasonal jobs, also at building sites, enabled him to accumulate the knowledge useful in this context.

F: We had the bathroom, the toilet and other in our street did not!

M: Nobody did, we were the first.

F: Nobody [laughter]. We the first. (...)

R: How was it that you made up your minds while nobody around had it, but still somehow?..

M: Well, you know, I was young and energetic, so I wanted to make something...I having lived somewhere, seen something, what other people had, figured out it was feasible...There was even a window, well I changed it, made a darkened one for intimacy.

R: And you say you were inspired by some other flats you'd seen, yes?

M: Well, not really, I mean, well, progress, it must be so. (Pos5 FM G3)

We can see the impact of the state policy in the statement that progress is a must, as well as fashion in terms of imitation of external patterns: "I having lived somewhere, seen something, what other people had, figured out it was feasible." The couple is proud, that due to modern bathroom they stood out from local community. In Simmel's terms, we can interpret conforming to the common belief that progress is a must as the need for similarity/imitation. When the family implemented the progressive technologies, they would be similar and familiar in the local community, because it was in line with the common beliefs.⁶ The distinctiveness manifests in adaptation of novel, even strange (from the point of view of local community) technologies. Thus, the adaptation of the external domestic technology is at the same time similar/familiar and distinctive.

Fashion as Social Emulation

The relations between individuals in local communities were crucial for the social emulation process. The common value of being modern gave high social status for individuals owning novel technologies. Presenting oneself as the owner of novelties may be interpreted as raising or confirming one's social status. Not only novelties raised the status of its owner, but individuals with higher status had better access to novel technologies. The interlocutors used the word *szpanować* meaning showing off, presenting themselves as owners of new technologies, mainly motorbikes, cars, TVs. In the context of social emulation, it is important that the Polish language dictionary draws the word *szpanować* from the German *spannen*, being a colloquialism meaning "see, observe, follow" ([The University of Warsaw Counselling Service 2021](#)). Two executives in big state-controlled factories described their attitudes using the word *szpanować* in the context of motorbikes. Edward, director of a big factory got a voucher for a WFM motorbike being a big attraction, colleagues would come to adore it, nephews would secretly take it for a joy ride. Stefan worked in a big company as a railway construction manager, travelled all around Poland, being in charge of each of the building sites for a few months, and then moving to another place. In one of the towns, Soviet-made Iż motorbikes emerged. One of the colleagues had an Iż. Stefan bought it in a shop without a voucher. He reported that Iż had been something you could boast about as not everybody had a motorbike, so he impressed his family in the country. Later, when he was buying cars: Syrena and the little one (Fiat 126p), they were too common in the streets to evoke interest.

M: Just then Iż motorbikes emerged in (place name) and a pal had one so I got kind of...encouraged to get one, too.

R: They emerged just then and you could get one or not, yes?

M: Well, or not. And I liked it. When I came to my folks in the country I did impress them (...)

R: Out there they didn't have them yet?

M: No, not there, well... (Pos14 M G2)

⁶ However, there were processes of reluctance, resistance and reserve in regard to domestication of certain home appliances discussed by Skowrońska (2020).

The novelties emerging in the public space were seen as attractive and sensational. Bogdan, a geodetic clerk, very keen on novelties, recalls that the TVs evoked sensation even though the broadcast time was short—a few hours a day and there were frequent distortions. On Thursday when the Italian thriller series 'Cobra' was broadcast, all the neighbors from the entire tenement building would gather to watch. Albert, a scientist from a technology institute and Halina, a physician, recall how they bought on the informal market their first car, Scoda from her dentist colleague. It was in 1967 when cars were a luxury, in their block 24 families lived and there were only 5 cars. Neighbors and colleagues would visit them to adore the car. It was the same with the bathroom that Marian made on his own, neighbors would come to see it. Then some neighbors imitated him and made themselves the toilet where the larder had been. Regardless the modern technologies were implemented by the state or appropriated by informal strategies, they woke up interest, they carried up the meaning of modernity, and they became desired.

Attractive novelties were shared by the owners with neighbors, cousins, colleagues. The stories about the entire block or tenement building watching TV at the first TV owners' flat are anecdotal in Poland. Josef a factory foreman and a ZMP activist said that right after the war only one neighbor had a Czech radio and its waves were received by loudspeakers in the entire neighborhood. Albert and Halina would give neighbors lifts in their new Skoda in an emergency, for example to the railway station.

Yes, of course, we gave lifts, will you take us to (place name) for a holiday there because...Of course we will. That's the way it was. It was so convenient, but also for other, we didn't lend it but we gave lifts somewhere when needed, say to the station, so that they wouldn't be late, well, hop on. Yes. (Pos12 F G2)

It may be interpreted, that because the progress discourse let people experience the novelties, similarly people wanted to experience those owned by family or neighbors. Whereas in capitalist societies, promoted products are only put on display, so people to a lesser degree expect to experience the new technologies before the appropriation of them, they often satisfy with seeking information about the product (Lehtonen 2003).

Colleagues encouraged others, if they were happy with some novelty, they exchanged experience. They prompted one another on the ways of gaining novelties, information was passed on through the word of the mouth, on when there was supply in the household goods shop. Elżbieta, a chemistry teacher, remembers that colleagues would tell her that without a fridge she wouldn't manage with children.

Here my friends who had children earlier than we did: 'you can't do without a fridge, you must have it, with children'. Well, I must, I must. 'Because the milk you must put in, or you must put this or that.' Well, I didn't have to because I was breast feeding, so I didn't have to, but they claimed it was necessary... (Pos2 F G3)

Halina, the physician, was persuaded to buy a rotary washing machine by a neighbour convincing her like in a perfect commercial:

No, don't know if someone persuaded me to buy a Frania, whether it was the friend downstairs, who had two children and I saw that Frania in her place... And she just says 'listen it's a wild thing, there's a wringer and everything washes itself'. (Pos12 F G2)

The above examples show that the aspirations of interlocutors were shaped through constant comparison to a reference group.

Zofia, a drafter in an architectural office (G1) remembers that it was common to want to have a washing machine and a TV, they were fashionable. Washing machine was fashionable, because it 'made things easier', as for TV that the children would not go elsewhere to watch as it was becoming common to watch in your own place.

Because it was fashionable, such a fashion came, it made things easier and so on. (Pos13 F G1)

And simply because the neighbours had it and so on, also for the children so they wouldn't go somewhere and just such fashion. (Pos13 F G1)

For Marianna, a factory worker (G2), that 'everyone wants to have it' was a justification enough for the purchase of a colour TV.

R: And do you remember what motivated you to buy a colour TV?

F: Everybody wanted to have it.

R: So just fashion?

F: Of course. (Waw11 F G2)

The justifications given show a certain evolution, from stating that washing machine was popular because it made life easier—this was emphasised by the state discourse of progress, to justifying the wish to own a colour TV, entering in the late People's Poland, with the sheer emulation mechanism. The domestic technologies were at the beginning appropriated due to the progress discourse. The novelties were followed to make everyday life easier. In the late socialism, the domestic technologies were appropriated due to fashion: following novelties was seen in terms of conformity and competition for a better standard of living. Thus, we have observed the transformation of the meaning of domestic technologies. Firstly, being modern was the dominant meaning, and fashion emerged to enable the citizens the pursuit of modernity. Later, fashion itself was declared as a driver for consumption of novel technologies.

The above processes involved imitation and competition within local communities. From the 1960s, television slowly had been becoming a main source of behaviour patterns (Pleskot 2007). At the end of the socialist period, Polish sociologists observed that the style of life of Poles is based on the patterns they saw on TV (Dyczewski 1982; Haranne and Siciński 1987). In our material, only the youngest generation (G3) declares getting to know about domestic technologies from the media. Marian and Wanda—who started their own company in the 1980s—remember that they heard about automatic washing machines from TV. Nobody in their social circle had one. Elżbieta and Ryszard, chemist engineers, were inspired by magazines and help books while furnishing their flat.

F: ...there were newspapers, not that many, maybe not, but they were wiser. Because nowadays each of them is nothing but stupidity and sex, there's nothing in them, but there were such fine help books.

M: Help books on how to furnish a flat of this type.

R2: Yes. You read help books?

F: Yes, yes.

M: Also, of course. We searched for those novelties, we scanned them to compare ourselves to the better ones, yes. (Pos3 FM G3)

They refer explicitly to the emulation process: imitation of the better ones regarding the standard of living.

Conclusion

Much of the recent scholarship focuses on consumer culture in socialist countries in Eastern Soviet bloc (Crowley and Reid 2010; Reid 2013; Vihavainen and Bogdanova 2015; Scarboro et al. 2020). However, there is not much research on fashion governing consumption in the socialist consumer culture. Interestingly, such report come mostly from Poland, deal with clothing and body care (Fidelis 2009), technology (Wasiak 2020), and flat fitting (Zalewska and Jewdokimow 2022). They show the connection between fashion and the idea of modernity promoted by the socialist state (Fidelis 2009; Zalewska and Jewdokimow 2022).

The article concentrates on the social space of consumption of domestic technologies in People's Poland and it discusses the emergence of fashion within this context. Fashion regarding domestic technologies emerged due to the commonly internalized value of being modern. Because the state was inefficient in the promised implementation of modernity into everyday life in majority of local communities, the citizens tried to keep up with modernity by their own strategies. They started to imitate patterns external for their communities if they regarded them as being modern. This involved fashion in terms of Tarde (1903) and Lipovetsky (1994) as imitation of patterns external and strange for local community. New domestic technologies adapted from the outside made the individuals stand out in their local communities. They showed of, *szpanowali*, while their novelties were welcomed with admiration among the locals, who wanted to imitate the new patterns and stand out in the community as well. This is how fashion as social emulation emerged. In the end, the very meaning of being modern became dominated by "being the first on the street" and pursuit for the higher standard of living in comparison with a reference group, which were mechanisms characteristic of social emulation.

These findings suggest what was the course of the process of fashion emergence in socialist modernity. In the first step, due to the progress discourse the value of being modern was internalized. It allowed for adoption of 'progressive' and 'novel' domestic technologies. The fashion in terms of imitating novel and external patterns emerged. In the second step, due to the shortages of goods, the owned domestic technologies raised the social status of its owners. This is how social emulation emerged as the process of imitation and competition for the higher standard of living.

These findings have the input into the social theory of fashion. They suggest the possible direction of fashion development and the applicability of different concepts of fashion. Fashion as imitation of new and external patterns occurs the first in a society tradition or custom oriented. This is the reason why the scholars studying previous historic epochs (Tarde 1903; Lipovetsky 1994) defined fashion in these terms. However, there must be a commonly praised value that allows for the openness towards new and external patterns. In the studied case it was the value of being modern implemented by the progress discourse. When new patterns appear in a society on a regular basis and they are positively assessed, fast adaptation of new patterns becomes a status indicator. This is how fashion as social emulation emerges. And again, the Simmel-Veblen (Campbell 2005) model of fashion based on social emulation was developed upon the observations of the western early modernity. From decolonial perspective in fashion studies, the resemblance

of fashion mechanisms in socialist Poland to western early modern mechanisms of fashion is interesting. What are main factors of this resemblance—is it the orientalist discourse of Western civilization identifying the West with progress, and the East with backwardness; or the indolence of Soviet bloc economies together with the attractiveness of western standard of living?

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