Things to Have for a Belarusian: Rebranding the Nation via Online Participation

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Abstract: The paper focuses on online consumer activism targeting Belarusian vyshyvanka, i.e. commodities with geometric ornament. Its reinvention was spurred by a global trend of nation branding and by post-socialist nation building. The consumption of ornamented products incites ‘rebranding of the nation’ which gets resemanticized and reinvented via online user-led content creation, as prosumers, often younger cosmopolitan urbanites, like, share, discuss, remix and perform other kinds of digital manipulations with recognizable geometric imagery. In their online incarnations, ornamented products become a semiotic space where ideas about nationhood are explored. At the same time, as online communities reinvent the meaning and socially reinforce the use of ornamented commodities, they re-create their group solidarity and social cohesion. The mechanics of this integration relies on the ability of some digital units to serve as memes and pointers, with the help of which, users can become aware of each other.

Keywords: participatory culture, nationalism, online consumer activism, sociation, Belarus, vyshyvanka, produsage

In the spring of 2016 the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, a Nobel Laureate in literature, mentioned in an interview that she had bought a condo in downtown Minsk, which turned out to be in an ‘elite’ building. That information was reposted by several media outlets and dozens of bloggers and instantly sparked a heated controversy in the Belarusian segment of the internet, as commentators faced off in a debate over the writer’s consumer autonomy vs. her perceived obligation to give away the prize to a hospice or children’s hospital. Some commentators stipulated that with that purchase, Alexievich (who donates generously for multiple humanitarian causes) decimated the moral stance of her books that deal with trauma and moral choice in Soviet history.
Introduction: consumers and nations in cyberspace

This cultural evidence demonstrates how consumption can be constructed online as a meaningful act, an integral way to realize one’s autonomy and choice, or an orientation towards and belonging with community: an individual can be perceived either as a private consumer, or as a community-embracing citizen. Formerly, ‘citizens’ and ‘consumers’ used to be considered opposing categories: the first one outward looking and embracing public interest, the second, self-interested, inward-looking and private (Scammell 2003). These days, however, the two are often combined in the figure of a socially aware citizen-consumer who embraces consumption activism in support for a cause. This trend has become momentous with the advent of the internet, which greatly expanded the freedom of choice and consumer empowerment through access to a wide array of commodities. At the same time, the rise of social media—where everyone ‘watches’ everyone else—provided a new venue for the construction of identities and group belonging through an ‘orchestration of commodity meanings’ (Scammell 2003) and allegiance to products and consumption styles. With the arrival, in the 2000s, of Web 2.0, or ‘social software’, that made user-led content creation possible, branding and consumer activism have become powerful vehicles for delineating regional, class, ‘moral’, national and other communities. By reinventing the meaning of commodities and socially reinforcing their consumption, online communities re-create both their group cohesion and its visibility.

This paper has been informed by my interest in the way online consumer and national activism draw on each other in the post-Soviet region, where the formation of new nation states and the resemanticization of identities have been taking place during the paradigm shift of the information age. It has been a trope, since the publication of Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities that the cohesion of modern nations had largely resulted from print capitalism and some other industrial technologies (Anderson 1983). However, with globalization and the rise of world migrations, an assumption was made that nations might become dispersed, while social commentators were concerned that ‘the non-territorial character of the Internet would lead to fragmentation and unprecedented cultural differentiation, making it difficult… to uphold a collective sense of national identity based on shared images, representations, myths’ (Eriksen 2007: 1). Pretty soon, however, it became evident that the internet ‘has in the space of only a few years become a key technology for keeping nations… together’ (ibid). Drawing on two contemporary nation building resources—consumption and digital media—this paper seeks to explore a particular case of what can be called sociation (linking individuals together) through consumer activism that targets Belarusian vyshyvanka, i.e. a shirt or, currently, any other product decorated with embroidered or printed geometric ornament that has been codified as ethnic or national (Image 1; see also “‘Kalgas!’ vs ‘Patsanskaia tachyla!’” 2016).

The reinvention of national ornamented dress is one manifestation of the global phenomenon of commercial nationalism, and vyshyvanka, an element of ‘backward’ peasant culture, has been recently rediscovered by urban youth cohorts as a powerful national icon and a political tool. As the editors of a recent volume wittily subtitled Nationalizing the Sell argue, these days the banalization of nationalism and nationalization of commercial culture can be theorized as nation building resources alongside with ethnicity, industrialization, print capitalism, culture, identity and discourse (Volcic et al. 2016: 3).
A recent revival of interest in material objects (apparel designs, textiles, embroidery etc.) which can be mobilized to express regional, ethnic, or national identities and serve as important conduits for political communication and group visibility, in the post-socialist region (Molnár 2016: 165), is one good example. Some scholars propose that commercial nationalism tends to be incited to a greater degree by the nations which are emerging from some form of authoritarian or colonial rule, launch an orientation towards a more democratic or participatory polity, are engaged in a process of developing an outward-looking market economy and, at the same time, seek to create the symbolic and discursive repertoire of the nation state (Turner 2016: 14). As cyberspace became a new terrain where national communities or their factions struggle for visibility and recognition (Madianou 2006), commercial nationalism has turned into an online phenomenon.

Proceeding from this premise, this essay is going to explore two questions. The first one concerns the meanings of Belarusian *vyshyvanka* as a national commodity, as these are invoked and collectively produced online. I am interested in the values, modes of consumption, and ways of being that are normalized and appropriated as national through online manipulations with recognizable geometric patterns. The second question concerns sociation or togetherness, i.e. the way communities of national enthusiasts ‘meet’ and come to know each other online, as they negotiate the semantics of nationhood. It is possible to propose that *vyshyvanka*, in its multiple online incarnations, serves as a pointer which helps the ‘con-
verted’ recognize each other and integrate into a community, as they like, share, tag or remix online content.

Notes on methodology

Research of online media requires addressing some methodological, as well as ethical issues that arise out of the special nature of the material. Studies of nation building largely stem from the tradition which can be encapsulated by Homi Bhabha’s metaphor of ‘nation as narration’, i.e. textual affiliation or unity (Bhabha 1990). These days narration takes place online to the same, if not to a greater extent, than it does offline, while the studies of online phenomena are often rooted in analytical paradigms which treat online data as textual discourse (see, for example, Nikiporets-Takigava et al. 2016). However, that which takes place online can be seen as a social act (Kozinets 2010: 124), rather than a text. It encompasses diverse forms of content and agency: social interaction is not an event, but a process that can be observed as it proceeds. Its units can be images, discussion logs, linking and tagging networks, remixed units incorporating diverse elements appropriated from various platforms, when users ‘seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content’ (Jenkins 2006: 3), and other types of user-created content. Thus, my research of collective technology-enhanced meaning making and sociation is driven by several inter-related concepts which address content production in contemporary social software environments.

The first of these concepts is participatory culture or active involvement, in contrast to passive spectatorship, of online media users with content production. Technically, this concept, which evolved in media studies in the early days of the internet, may embrace a broad range of activities, not necessarily mediated, such as group projects (Jenkins 1992). However, it is with the internet-enhanced opportunities for individual participation that the term began to be used widely to deal with content production which takes place when users take media ‘into their own hands’ (Jenkins 2016). This takes me to the second concept, that of media convergence. The term was introduced by Henry Jenkins to denote the flow of online content through many media channels and across multiple media platforms (Jenkins 2006: 2), as users like, comment on, share, link, remix, tag, edit or transform in any other way online textual, visual and audio content, often moving it from one digital source to another. This kind of participation in cultural production has been enhanced radically with the arrival in the 2000s of Web 2.0. The social software protocols of Web 2.0 offer easy to comprehend tools for online user-led content creation or produsage. This concept encompasses the notion of user collaboration in participatory environments, where the boundaries between producers and consumers may be blurred or removed, as they turn into prosumers (Bruns 2007).

As this study focuses on on online processual interaction and produsage, nationalism is viewed not as a rigid political ideology, but as the participatory process of creating and negotiating meanings and regimes of effect via symbolic manipulations. Contemporary netnography of online life goes beyond texts as the source of content to explore ‘people’s interactions through various technologically-mediated means’ (Kozinets 2010: 113) and uncovers the way members of online cultures invoke those meanings in specific relations and interactions. More specifically, the units of my analysis are going to be images, memes, discussions logs

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and other products of user-led content creation as they appear on and travel across multiple platforms. This research was informed, besides the background reading on ethnic textiles, by searches of and observation of interaction on vyshyvanka-related web-pages, Facebook (FB) groups and personal pages, and other forms of media for about two years. I also interviewed, as a part of an ongoing project, seven vyshyvanka enthusiasts.

The second issue that needs to be addressed concerns the ethics of internet research. So far, much debate has focused on whether online interactions are to be treated as that which take place in public or private space (Kozinets 2010: 141). Technically, the content of online produsage is usually publicly available and legally accessible. At the same time, research into online interactions involves private people, who do not expect or realize that their spontaneous exchanges can be publicized outside of their community. With this kind of sensitive data, the rule of thumb is to not uncover the identity of online communicators, unless these are public figures making statements for media outlets. Thus, I omit or blacken names or nick-names and white-out faces and profile images to preserve communicators’ anonymity.

**Rediscovery and reinvention: a brief history of vyshyvanka**

The Ukrainian word *vyshyvanka* derives from a root that is common to several Slavic languages and means ‘to embroider’. Initially, it stood for a traditional cotton or linen shirt decorated with embroidered or woven geometrical ornament and, as the subculture of national attire began to gain momentum in the post-Soviet region, the word was borrowed into other languages. In contemporary Belarusian parlance it substituted local names for a traditional peasant shirt; a composite word *vyshymaika* (embro-t-shirt) has been coined for contemporary ornamented attire. With modern technology, geometric ornament can be applied on almost any surface, and is currently used on socks, hats, scarves, ribbons, book and phone covers, mugs, furniture upholstery, cars, trains and even walls etc.; some enthusiasts have recognizable geometric patterns tattooed on their bodies (‘Festival tatuirouki’ 2016).

Patterned embroidery used to be an element of peasant attire in East/Central Europe still in the Middle Ages. Early attempts to classify their local variants into recognizable ethnic patterns and manipulate them for nation building, delineating group boundaries, and making symbolic claims date back to the era of Napoleonic wars. Inspiration for this emerged from a body of ideas that came into being with bourgeois transformations of social order and the formation of nation states and new models of individual and collective identity. Some prominent European intellectuals, who proclaimed the ‘folk’ as a bearer of national spirit, believed that innate national character expressed itself in particular traits, as well as in language, customs and material culture: in dress, crafts, utensils and other artifacts (Hagemann 2000: 184). With time, a similar process of discovering folk cultures took root in East/Central Europe, as ‘late nations’ within multi-ethnic Russian and Austrian Empires were beginning to ‘awaken’ and reinvent themselves as distinct entities. As educated elites and petty bourgeoisie in those multi-lingual territories were adopting Westernized and modernized European dress, vyshyvanka remained an element of the peasant life world. Ethnographers and literati who viewed folk textiles and other objects of peasant culture as the products of national ‘soul’ and folk
genius, started to collect and classify them, as a form of their service to the nation (see Lobachevskaya 2013 for the Belarusian case).

Homemade embroidered attire was still in use in Belarusian countryside in the 1920s, but was ousted, with industrialization and modernization, by factory-made apparel (Chuchvaha 2010). However, Soviet cultural policy supported folk arts and crafts, and collections of local textiles made their way into museums and served as inspiration for sophisticated dress of government-funded ensembles of folk song and dance. In 1951, a stripe of geometric red- and-white ornament was added to the flag of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, a founding member of the United Nations, ‘to highlight its national specificity’ (Skobelev 1997). After sovereignty, a slightly modified pattern made its way onto the flag of the Republic of Belarus.

With national revival during perestroika and independent statehood in 1991, there was a rise of interest in national culture, and ethnic motifs began to be reinvented by ‘revivalist’ rock bands, historical re-enactors, and national activists. However, Belarusian revival was rather modest. Still, a new nation-state needed some instruments to produce difference and communicate nationhood, and the symbolic repertoire of folk traditions was one source from which they could be drawn. In a telling photo, taken in Minsk in 2006, the leaders of New Independent States (including those from the Caucasus and Central Asia) wear Belarusian embroidered shirts, obviously a whimsical gift from the president Alexander Lukashenka (‘Lukashenka i Putsin’ 2015).

It was as a reaction to the Ukrainian Euromaidan of 2014, where vyshyvanka was celebrated as a national symbol, that patterned ornament made a really big ‘comeback’ in Belarus to be repurposed by opposition activists, with support from the Belarusian section of Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, into a popular identity enhancing tool with a strong political message and some consumer potential. After the first pilot batch of five hundred embroidered t-shirts proved successful, a project was started to develop the brand (Francisak 2016), and pretty soon the ornament landed on t-shirts and multiple other products. Almost immediately, online prosumers embarked on working across various media platforms to digitally remix familiar elements coming from different cultural terrains and signal their emotional mobilization, involvement or solidarity with Ukrainian plight (Image 2). These enthusiasts, younger, urban, educated and often cosmopolitan, tend to see Belarus as a successor-state of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (where medieval Belarusian was the language of legal codes and government documents) whose European belonging was interrupted in the 18th century, when these lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire. This cohort supports the political project of ‘return to Europe’ and is critical of the Soviet period of Belarusian history. The symbolism that they ascribe to vyshyvanka derives from the white-red-white or ‘independent’ flag that was in use in self-proclaimed Belarusian Peoples’ Republic of 1918, and in 1991-1994, immediately after independence. Thus, an ‘embroidered’ stripe that used to be featured on the web page of Nasha niva, its Belarusian-language mouthpiece, appealed, in the eyes of its audience, to European or ‘anti-Soviet’ national and political values. Similarly, attire with geometric patterns tends to be perceived as an assertion of national values and a statement of resistance, for example, to the perceived threat of ‘russification’ or of ‘Russian takeover’ (K. 2017), which was actualized in online discussions as a reaction to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

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On the other hand, the government project of nationhood takes over from the Soviet one: the socialist period, and especially WWII, when Belarus lost a fourth of its population and developed a strong anti-fascist resistance, are seen as defining for the contemporary modernized nation. At some point government institutions and media became aware of the potential of ethnic embroidery and began to use it for their visual propaganda. However, they tend to reinvent its meaning by invoking socialist symbolism, often through the use of red and green colours of the Belarusian flag. For example, ornamented stripes were used at some point on the webpage of the main government newspaper Belarus Today [Belarus segodnya] that took over from Soviet Byelorussia [Sovetskaya Belorussia] and is published in Russian (Image 3).
The stripes frame the telling red-and-green slogan ‘Made in Belarus’, thus invoking the image of the socialist-born republic that prides itself on its industrial potential. Thus, currently the two parties, the opposition that considers itself pro-European and the government that is often viewed as ‘pro-Soviet’ or pro-Russian, compete for the ownership of vyshyvanka and the re-definition of its symbolism.

**Things to have: rebranding the nation**

The most charismatic Belarusian internet store that was inspired by the idea to popularize embroidered t-shirts and other commodities is called *Symbal.by* (www.symbal.by). A slogan at the top of its web page reads: ‘Things to have for a Belarusian’. A red stripe below the slogan features the store’s name. Written in white letters and interspersed with the elements of geometric ornament, it is a coded message. Letters ‘BY’ in the name/electronic address have double meaning: first, they stand for Belarusian domains on the internet; second, they are homophones to the English word ‘buy’. A store’s banner that pops up on friendly websites and in groups on social media makes use of the same slogan and design pattern (Image 4). It brings together the national and the commercial to suggest that one can contribute to the national cause by consuming national commodities, in this case goods with ethnic geometric patterns on them.

**Image 4. Banners used by Symbal.by**

*Source:* symbal.by (05.13. 2016)

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By calling on individuals to assert their belonging via (conspicuous) consumption, the banner creatively encapsulates the logic of commercial nationalism. The ‘production of cultural meanings related to nationhood… organized by principles of economic exchange’ (Kania-Lindholm 2016: 108) is an established phenomenon, and, traditionally, everyday consumer nationalism has been employed by two types of entities. On the one hand, there are state institutions that resort to it for nation branding, marketing and building a reputation among other nations; on the other, there are commercial entities (Volcic and Andrejevic 2011). However, Symbal.by does not belong with any of these entities. An affiliate of the Art-syabziba (art estate) Foundation, the project is a creative partner to a plethora of new national cultural, educational, and entertainment initiatives: historical preservation groups, ‘national rock’ bands, enthno-music festivals, architectural and cultural heritage organizations, historical re-enactors, new Belarusian language study programs for adults, media outlets and other associations which seek to reconstitute the public sphere and re-articulate the project of nationhood. As voluntary associations promoting collective action, they belong with civil society and often operate in ‘alternative’ online public spheres. In fact, there is mounting evidence that since the turn of the millennium in many post-socialist countries, civil society has emerged as the main arena in which the symbolic repertoire of a new nationalism is articulated, the one that is quite different from that which the state promotes (Molnar 2016). In Belarus, these public initiatives, which represent a ‘cultural turn’ in oppositional politics, became possible with a recent political liberalization. Their leaders view culture, rather than direct political action, which is problematic in authoritarian Belarus, as a tool for national mobilization and reaching wider audiences. They also reject the project of nationhood that is based in the Soviet past as outdated and supposedly driven by ‘Russian interests’. Thus, they challenge the political legitimacy of the current regime and seek to reconstitute the public sphere by saturating it with discourses, projects, initiatives, visual symbols, consumer goods, and other vehicles of ethnonational mobilization.

Consumer goods can perform a mobilizing function if they have recognizable (national) markers; however, these used to be associated with peasant culture, allegedly low and outdated. Thus, they need to be reinvented to look hip and appealing to a new consumer cohort: young urbanites of the era of want-supplying economy which entails a new post-industrial mode of global consumption that came into being with the so-called ‘end of scarcity’. In affluent want-supplying economies, where the needs in mass-produced, standardized, durable goods had been met, the problem is finding customers, rather than producing commodities (Hobsbawm 1994: 269). The arrival of micro-electronics and digital technology made it possible to follow the ‘law of consumer satisfaction’ by switching to less standardized goods, customizing commodities, producing small batches for niche audiences, and satisfying individual wants (Streeck 2012). Thus, consumption practices of late capitalism emerged as a platform for lifestyle struggle, as diversified consumption provides opportunities for the demonstration of status, individuality and taste, self-expression, and the construction of identities (Bourdieu 1973; Giddens 1991).

In the post-socialist region, transition to post-industrial consumption was accompanied by emerging social differentiation and class formation, while the availability of choice (of goods and services) is often equated to democracy. One of the reasons is that socialism was associated with the scarcity of consumer goods, and, as the practices of consumption are deeply
embedded into power relations, consumer satisfaction, hedonistic approaches and self-expression via consumption, i.e. the consumer right to choose, can sometimes be seen as the forms of resistance to socialism (Berdahl 2010: 34). Currently, as a relatively broad circle of urbanites in post-Soviet metropolitan areas has access to international brands and a wide variety of commodities, new types of consumers are emerging. Consumption is one way of integrating into the social world, and educated young adults often view themselves as consumption pioneers and the instigators of social change, as they transfer new ideas, lifestyles and forms of citizenship. In a recent telling example, a Belarusian-speaking FB user reposted someone’s LiveJournal (a popular blogging platform) post. The post incorporated a link to a Ukrainian commercial site which advertises (in Russian) ornamented attire and claims that customers can have their names coded into traditional geometric elements and printed on a t-shirt (Image 5).

Image 5. A screenshot of a Facebook posting

Source: O. 2016

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In a discussion that followed on FB, a Belarusian commentator, who found the idea of coded names appealing, asked how he might get such a t-shirt in Minsk. The product appealed to him, for, as he reasoned, ‘the symbol of my name resonates with my soul’. With this popular meaning making, ‘it is what the symbol means to the person using it that is important’ (Buckland 2003: xii). While the commentator insisted on his ‘spiritual affinity’ with the geometric image of his name, he also mentioned its social function as well: it was styl′no, i.e. cool or trendy and made one distinct.

This consumption log, as R. Kozinets calls such discussion threads (Kozinets 2002), can provide some insight into the meanings that vyshyvanka consumers construct in online social interaction. In the example above, it is individuality: one’s unique symbol allegedly resonates with one’s ‘soul’ and makes the person unique as well. Second, the commentator uses ‘the language of cool’ which invokes status and social distinction. The concept of cool/trendy is of special importance for self-presentation amongst younger cosmopolitan cohorts worldwide and in the post-Soviet region as well, as it provides ‘non-monetary’ tools for younger, not necessarily affluent, but still privileged urban groups to delineate boundaries and declare their belonging, i.e. to manifest social distinction (Frank 1997). While post-socialist Belarus is not a rich country, it is a stable socialist-type welfare state that was able to avoid massive poverty and extreme social differentiation that are characteristic of some countries in the region, as the development of neoliberal capitalism and, with it, of Western-style middle class was consciously ‘halted’ there (Gapova 2009). However, some commentators interpret Belarusian social stability as stagnation that is accompanied by the socialist-style standardization of consumption, and younger urban Belarusians are aware of and yearn for international trends and consumer, as well as political, choices and declare these preferences in the language of consumption. To some extent at least, the re-invention of vyshyvanka as a hip commodity has been inspired by post-industrial want-supplying economy which embraces customization and individuation, as new cultural practices of consumption and the expression of taste and group belonging by younger urbanites are based on the rise of individualism.

At the same time, in its online existence and collective imaginative produsage, the visual trope of vyshyvanka can serve as a site for rebranding the nation, i.e. re-articulating Belarusian nationhood in contemporary terms of ‘hip’ consumption and lifestyle. In a globalized and multicultural world, where nations, as they engage with transnational markets, brand themselves and compete with each other for attention and distinctions, and private citizens yearn to belong with the visible ones, vyshyvanka has a lot of potential. As a commodity, it is inexpensive to produce (printed ornament can be applied almost anywhere) and its geometric patterns can be remixed in various ways to allow multiple interpretations. Most importantly, its meanings can be re-created collectively in online interaction and dispersed on various media platforms. As posts, memes, consumer webs etc. contribute to public debate about civil attitudes and lifestyles, and consumers feel empowered, they participate in the production of meanings. Further in this section, I will briefly zoom in on such meanings that are ascribed to Belarusian nationhood in the participatory environment of online interaction, as quality, authenticity, belonging with Europe and fun.
Quality

*Symbol.by*, and other (online) stores for ornamented commodities, sell products that are made in small batches, often rebranded for particular events or niche audiences or are custom-made. As consumer goods that satisfy individual or specialized wants, they are positioned as quality products via an opposition to similar, but mass produced goods which are supplied by big industrial ‘socialist-style’ factories (artistic needlework by professionals and connoisseurs is left out of this discussion). In one instance, a leader of *vyshyvanka* FB community posted a photo from a big department store in Minsk that featured cheap t-shirts with ornamented prints sold as ‘goods with the symbols of the state’ (Image 6). The photo was preceded with an ironic remark: ‘See the pile of embro-t-shirts the state (i.e. state-owned factories) has spat out’.

In a very short period of time, the post got more than 110 likes and was shared twice. In the consumption log that followed, mass produced t-shirts were described as ‘beneath contempt’. One commentator, saddened by the ‘contamination’ of quality and individuality, remarked:

> So sad that everything has been turned into mass production (*shirpotreb*). It is repealing and destroys the very interest in putting this on and taking care of the thing. They are going to wear them dirty and used out. To say nothing of their colours. P…. you need to contest this stuff with the quality things that you make. And with more information about them. (P. 2016)

Unexpectedly, such affirmations of quality that is ascribed by national enthusiasts to distinctly Belarusian products, chime with a remark that was recently made by the president Alexander Lukashenko who claimed, simply, that ‘Belarusians are Russians with a mark of quality’ (Lukashenko 2016). This statement needs to be put in a context. Belarusians are often believed to be not really different enough from Russians to claim separate nationhood, while the Belarusian language is interpreted as a dialect of Russian. At the same time, recently Belarusians have been constructing their national distinction by building pride in the quality of their urban environment and civilized and European behavior of urbanites, which are often contrasted, in media, online, and in everyday conversations, to ‘uncivilized’ driving and parking habits of tourists with Russian/Moscow number plaits on their cars. This ongoing construction of national difference, when natives are contrasted to ‘ugly foreigners’, builds, in part, off the notion of quality, which can be sustained by various discursive means, as well as via consumption patterns. Obviously, online discussions of ornamented products seek to enhance their consumption and, at the same time, to teach nationhood.

Authenticity

The enthusiasts of national ornament revival usually reject government-sponsored folk art, as it is seen as an inauthentic imitation of peasant culture, long gone or devastated by the Soviet modernization project. In opposition to this, these enthusiasts claim that their patterns reproduce original Belarusian geometric patterns, supposedly the most ancient in Europe.

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Image 6. A FB posting featuring a rack with mass produced t-shirts and a consumption log

Source: P. 2016

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Some believe that ‘Belarusians, like no other Slavic tribe, were able to keep the purity of their ornaments till the 20th century’ (Belokhvostik 2014). The claim of authenticity is sometimes substantiated with references to ethnographic and historical studies. The scholars of material culture everywhere trace geometric ornaments to early agricultural civilizations, when some most elementary patterns were ascribed meanings and used to symbolize seasonal cycles and other phenomena of the peasant universe, e.g. the Sun, earth or spring revival. Belarusian ethnographers used to classify and describe such geomantic patterns (Katsar 2010) still in pre-online days. With the revival of folk attire and the opportunities for produsage that digital technology provides, a tendency emerged to rework these elementary patterns into ‘alphabets’ and ascribe them a wide range of meanings and even abstract concepts (Image 7). Supposedly, patterned ornaments make a code, and several variants of Belarusian ‘unique people’s code’ currently circulate in the alternative public sphere of the internet. While some new enthusiasts of this subculture seek to ‘decode’ the meaning of existing patterns, for example, the one used on the national flag, others are more interested in “synthesis”, i.e. in creating a contemporary symbolic system that, at the same time, would have an intimate connection to the imagined national past. Some creators of alphabets, who draw from folk needlework, stylize their reinvented patterns into Runic-type or pagan symbols to make a reference to ancient spirituality, the pagan roots of folk culture, pre-Christian traditions and other versions of mythical nationalism.

**Image 7.** An ‘alphabet of Belarusian geometric ornament’

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*Source:*
https://facebook.com/MinskCity/photos/a.1679239262339673.1073741828.16792255390077/12/1718832488380350/ (01.06.2016)
This imagery is supposed to assume Belarusian kinship with Baltic, Germanic, or Scandinavian peoples, and some elements, e.g. swastika that is used in some ‘alphabets’, imply even more ancient connections. These trends are not unique to Belarus: with the global culture of nation branding, the practices of appropriating and reinventing peasant dress by contemporary revivalist groups which seek to assert cultural uniqueness, authenticity, and historical continuity, take place all over East/Central Europe (Molnar 2016) and elsewhere. The members of these subcultures see rebranded peasant apparel and geometric patterns as the manifestations of ethnic identification that supposedly tie their national community to some mystical heritage and powerful spirituality.

Belonging with Europe / being European

The claim of Belarusian European belonging is politically charged and, at the same time, ambiguous. However, it can be made concrete, asserted and reinforced via particular lifestyles and consumption practices, as these are the instruments of constructing difference and attaining status. Scholars of consumption maintain that contemporary producers not only pay more attention to individual wants, but, in fact, work to develop them, as ‘marketing discovers, but typically also develops consumer preferences; it asks consumers what they would like, but it also proposes to them things they might be prepared to like, including things they never imagined could have existed’ (Streeck 2012). Consumption webs and online advertising can map a path for desire, educate one’s taste and, in fact, initiate consumers into a certain way of life and link them to a real or desired social class (Kozinets 2002) by not only pointing at new products, but by suggesting behaviours and practices, and making symbolic connections that present these products as culturally appealing, ethical, and distinctive.

One example that may reveal this connection is a poster that advertises online products with a geometric pattern—a hat and a scarf—as Valentine’s Day gifts and pairs them with some trendy postcards designed by a local artist, but carefully stylized as casual ‘European’ drawings (Image 8). Presenting gifts ‘for him’ and ‘for her’, the poster follows a distinct advertising code and serves as an acculturating force suggesting a new holiday that was recently borrowed into post-Soviet culture, as well as ways to celebrate it with double gifts.

At the same time, consumption may be made into a political tool that is used to inscribe the nation into imaginary ‘European’—as opposed to Russian/Soviet—cultural and symbolic space by associating geometric patterns with particular values and political convictions. It is well known that global corporations often cooperate with human rights, ecological, or feminist organizations to promote their commodities as ‘moral’ and their consumption as a way to contribute to a cause. Similarly, an ethnic ribbon that was made into a national symbol can be partnered with products that communicate clear meaning and values. In a FB posting (Image 9), a wrist ribbon with a geometric pattern is visually coupled with, first, a white-red-white ribbon traditions and other versions of mythical nationalism. The photo was originally posted on the website of Svaboda, a Belarusian-language media outlet of Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe. The accompanying text added one more dimension to the message, as it verbally opposed vyshyvanka to the ribbon of St. George, a widely recognized Russian/Soviet military and patriotic symbol. Recently reinvented as a symbol of the Soviet victory in WWII, it also

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became associated with anti-Western political convictions and even Putin’s rule. The title of the reposted article asked: ‘Is vyshyvanka going to defeat the ribbon of St. George?’, while the lead explained that the standoff of ribbons is “a war of two styles’, Belarusian and Russian. A commentator on FB reacted to the question by asking, succinctly: ‘Why does one ever need to compete with stupidity?’ Obviously, a link to the (national) cause has been created, and thus, consumption was made into an ‘act of citizenship’: a consumer was ‘turned’ into a citizen.

Image 8. A poster advertising Valentine’s Day gifts

Source: http://uy14.mjt.lu/nl/uy14/592 (01.06.2017)

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Fun

The resemanticization of the nation includes into its purview not only the quality of products with which it is associated, but also the practices of individualization. ‘Fun’ as practice of self-actualization, is one more concept that is coded into vyshyvanka-related consumption. Fun, a close attribute to ‘pleasure’, though not as passive, is an important element of contemporary consumer culture and lifestyle politics which emerged with the commercialization of media and ‘the promotion of entertainment-based commercial popular culture to which media systems are central’ (Turner 2016: 18). Digital units with vyshyvanka often present people who wear ornamented t-shirts while doing somethings pleasurable and entertaining, like taking bike rides, which is a recent urban ‘craze’; posing in front of recognizable architectural or natural sites to which they have obviously traveled (‘Autastopam na krai’ 2016) or participating in memorable cultural events, i.e. having a full life and at the same time engaged in self-development. These pastimes are culturally ‘enframed’ to be socially acceptable, meaningful and prestigious. A photo (Image 10) that was taken at Patriotic Tattoo Fest of 2015 features a young woman whose topless upper body is covered with geometric patterns. While in Europe, where vyshyvanka consumers seek to belong, this kind of objectification of women’s bodies would belong in the commercial, rather than civic sphere where democratic organizations operate, in the post-Soviet region nudity and sexualized (female) bodies are acceptable and celebrated, as they are perceived as the signals of modernity, liberal values, as a rejection of the sexual austerity associated with socialism.
Online interactions over goods with geometric patterns display and highlight new products; at the same time, they teach new forms of consumption, ways of life and pastimes and thus rework the meaning of nationhood for younger cohorts. Newly invoked cultural meanings draw from the association of *vyshyvanka* consumption with modernity, ancient nationhood and authenticity, individuality, and being on par in the ‘Europe of nations’. In the online environment, a pattern is unfolding, as communicators who use goods with geometric ornament turn out as ‘quality people’: they are authentic, but European, and they have fun. The participants in the suggested pastimes, which are both fun and focus on personal fulfillment, are mostly younger urbanites, sometimes with precarious employment, but, importantly, often included into international human rights, feminist or ecological networks. In contemporary market systems the rhetoric which proposes activism via choosing what to buy or where to spend time is reliant on one’s ability to pay with time to the same extent, if not more, than with money (Mazullo 2011: 766). Much of the fascination with being European, hip, and active tends to ignore structural inequalities.

**Consumers as participants: the modes of engagement**

The online ‘life’ of *vyshyvanka* goes beyond the semantic rebranding of nationhood, however important this function may be: it is the integration of those ‘feeling the same way’ into a community bound by the ties of some strength, that is of no lesser importance. Since in information society old forms of community and mechanisms of national cohesion, as researched by Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and other scholars of nationalism, are considerably weakened, a question arises about the instruments of social integration that might be at work in new digitally mediated collectivities. Berry Wellman, an internet research pioneer who...
coined the phrase ‘communities in cyberspace’, used to argue that computer networks are social networks (Wellman 1999). Building on this insight, this section is going to look into some technologies with which community integration among the consumers of vyshyvanka can be mediated.

To theorize postindustrial consumption as a technology that facilitates social integration, Wolfgang Streek applies the concepts of sociation by which he means ‘a way for individuals to link up to others and thereby define their place in the world’ (Streeck 2012). He postulates that sociation takes place as consumers realize their choices, for they set themselves apart from some social groups and unite with others: some examples of this ‘bonding by distinction’ were provided in the previous section. In the internet age it seems reasonable to extend the concept of sociation by consumption to embrace social integration by participation. A brief clarification might help to make sense of this reasoning. When the concept of participatory culture was first introduced, the term encapsulated activities which implied a ‘blurring’ of boundaries between cultural production and social exchange and which were characteristic of early fandom culture. When new media platforms and practices came into being, they were adopted by fans for experimenting with media making (Jenkins 2016: 2-4). Thus, it can be suggested that social integration around vyshyvanka extends beyond collective meaning making to various forms of online and offline participation and engagement, and these serve as a mechanism of social integration.

In the previous section of this paper, an example (Image 5) was provided of a posting by a Belarusian-speaking FB user, who reposted someone’s LiveJournal post. The repost, which incorporated a link to a Ukrainian commercial site which advertised (in Russian) ornamented t-shirts, was preceded with a remark in Belarusian ‘See how we look like, if seen through vyshyvanka!’. A Belarusian commentator, who replied in Russian, mentioned that he would like to wear his ‘named’ t-shirt both at home and abroad (O. 2016), where no one is likely to have an idea of its ‘meaning’, however. In this complex cross-referencing, which goes across several digital platforms, Slavic languages, and national borders, one result is bringing the supplier and the consumer together. At the same time, the post with several ornamented patterns in it fulfilled another function, which was theorized by Fred Turner, a historian of the early internet. Turner, who studied American hippie communes of the 1970s, noticed that their members often learned about similar communities elsewhere through The Whole Earth Catalogue. The book, which was later awarded the Pulitzer Prize for its innovative journalism, had advertised some commodities that hippies might have needed. It also published ‘evaluations’ and ‘reviews’ of them that were sent by consumers from all over the country. In this way, the members of communes who used the Catalogue found out about and could contact each other: the book served as a ‘pointer’. Later, the same principle was used in early online mailing lists and internet billboards. Turner conceptualized the Catalogue as a boundary object, i.e. such around which people organize their engagement (Turner 2005). It can be argued that geometric ornament, as it gets reposted on the internet, can play a similar role. It facilitates network constitution by luring users to a recognizable image. Users then ‘friend’ others like them creating strong ties with close friends and weaker ones with distant acquaintances, as well as complete strangers. Thus people with similar interests become aware of each other, while creating relationships and establishing networks with the potential for inter-
actions do indeed give people a feeling of connection and community (Boyd 2006). Some examples of the mechanics with which online/offline integration can be realized follow below.

As an image made of geometric elements that can be easily manipulated, vyshyvanka turns into a meme, i.e. a digital phenomenon which implies ‘(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, or substance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users’ (Shifman 2014: 8). With the arrival of Web 2.0, which allows users to contribute to different websites, editing, remixing, making profiles, sharing, liking, tagging, and uploading different forms of media (e.g. photos, videos, and music), this kind of online participation in content production became common. As memes travel via the internet, new elements are added and remixed, and rapidly evolving revisions of existing content get released for public view and further update. While creatively reworking the meme, enthusiasts of vyshyvanka make social commentaries, for example, satirizing government activists who arrived one day at a family birth centre with the gifts of vyshyvanka for the newborn (Image 11). At the same time, they ‘meet’ each other, and this community grows with liking and sharing, as on many platforms participation by friends and friends of friends, is visible to other community members.

**Image 11.** A posting in a satirical community on Facebook

Source: https://www.facebook.com/belteanews/photos/a.1390869177892215.1073741827.1390866974559102/1610445829267881/?type=3&theater (01.06.2017)
Sharing, liking, and remixing are communal acts. Those who participate in meme creation and transformation learn about each other, sometimes across several ‘handshakes’, which takes us to the second mechanism of community engagement online that is built on tagging and other mechanisms of cross referencing and intertextuality. In contemporary, technologically mediated society, messages are often delivered in the form of hashtags and memes (Stache 2015: 162). Tagging implies the process by which users add metadata in the form of keywords to shared content (Golder 2006 et al.: 198).

Image 12. A profile picture

In the case of vyshyvanka, the shared content involves images with geometric patterns. For example, a FB user created a profile picture of himself wearing an embroidered shirt and added the hashtag ‘#honar’ which stands for honour or pride, in Belarusian (Image 12). This hashtag implies two things. Semantically, the word invokes the slogan ‘One must have one’s honour’ that traces back to some events in Belarusian history and is easily recognized by national activists.

At the same time, the phrase is a slogan of a store that sells trendy attire under the brand name Honar. Having applied this hashtag, the user linked national pride as allegedly demonstrated by vyshyvanka, to himself and other consumers: this kind of linking strengthens group identity, as solidarity is built around public display of values and emotions. It is equally important that he made an effort to co-opt other users, as they were expected to respond by creating posts with the same tag and, by this, become visible to each other not just individually, but as a community on the internet which is quite real for its participants. Thus, when users are deliberately urged to respond or perform some kind of action, images of vyshyvanka or its elements can work as pointers and people finders. A user who once posted a photo of scales in a patterned jacket on FB, asked other users whether they knew of other ‘unusual’ objects with geometric patterns on them. Commentators responded with reposting pictures, adding

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An important connecting mechanism extends from the digital world to the offline one, as vyshyvanka fans, as it happened on the self-proclaimed ‘International Výshyvanka Day’ in 2016, were encouraged not only to like, share, and respond to a post, but to put on an embroidered t-shirt, contact others like them, participate in or organize meaningful events and, later, to post photos of these ‘ornamented’ gatherings on social media. Another posting encouraged FB users to wear embroidered shirts everywhere, e.g. at work or in public places and report on these experiences online. Thus, a network of individuals that are ‘bound by vyshyvanka’ gets established, as they become visible on the internet and get access to one another. Community members can be contacted directly by email or a comment; quite often, the participants of online conversations are performing rather than conversing, as they are conscious of their goal to unite a community, raise its national consciousness and, finally, organize their interaction offline. Thus communities are formed that go beyond online communication and into real life in the form of meetings, projects and shared activities. Ornamented patterns function as signs to anchor participation via collective action with a meaningful object. Online/offline communities which are brought together with the symbolism of vyshyvanka tend to become an environment that is based on trust between strangers, as they begin to view themselves as co-citizens.

Conclusion

This essay has focused on the practice of consumption of and online manipulations with Belarusian vyshyvanka, a distinctly ethnic/national product. Its recent reinvention was spurred by a global trend of nation branding and a revival of interest in ornamented peasant attire in the post-socialist region, where the formation of new nation states has started during the internet age. My intention was to demonstrate that the consumption of ornamented ethnic attire incites ‘rebranding of the nation’: it gets resemanticized and reinvented via online user-led content creation, as prosumers, often younger cosmopolitan urbanites, like, share, discuss, remix and perform other kinds of digital manipulations with recognizable geometric imagery. Thus, in their online incarnations, ornamented products become a semiotic space where ideas about nationhood are packaged. At the same time, as online communities reinvent the meaning and socially reinforce the use of vyshyvanka as a ‘national’ product, they re-create their group solidarity and social cohesion. The mechanics of this integration relies on the ability of some digital units to serve as memes and pointers, with the help of which, users and consumers can find and become aware of each other.
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