

Young

Nordic Journal of Youth Research

ARTICLE

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SAGE Publications
(Los Angeles, London, New Delhi,
Singapore and Washington DC)
www.sagepublications.com
Vol 18(1): 55–75
10.1177/110330880901800105

Buy Nothing Day in Japan: Individualizing life courses and forms of engagement

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I got fed up with consumerism, had to do something, took the ‘just-do-it’ mentality of Buy Nothing Day, and tried to do something different, something other than others do.

Akiko, Gifu City, Japan

Abstract

Buy Nothing Day (BND) in Japan is a case for connecting notions on individualization of life courses and emerging forms of civic engagement. Based on interviews with BND Japan participants, we will see who participates and why. Moreover, we will explore how this participation interacts with the Japanese context. The highly educated participants of BND are well aware of the notions of seeking and shaping their own path in life, including civic life, and especially of doing so in a loose network of like-minded others. They are uncomfortable to define themselves in a one-dimensional way. There are three categories of motives to participate in BND Japan. The participants appreciate loosely structured, lifestyle-oriented and spontaneous activism. Also, they reflect Japanese cultural and structural conditions by, especially, separating their lives, identities and activism from the ‘world above’, the polity in Japan. It is complicated in Japan to present an ‘authentic self’ in one’s lifestyle that is stable and noticeable across roles, situations or contexts if one does not want to risk exclusion.

Keywords

civic engagement, consumerism, Japan, individualization, biographical perspectives

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we present the results of a small case study on participants in Buy Nothing Day (BND) in Japan. BND is an alternative site of civic engagement related to political consumerism. Our aim is to perform a first exploration of BND in Japan. This case study provides information on BND as an alternative, emerging form of civic engagement, a form of engagement that is usually not well covered in common survey research. On this type of civic engagement, there is little to no information related to Japan at all. Providing this information might be useful to understand the rise and shape of alternative forms of engagement in other societies as well as forms of engagement that are regarded widely popular among younger generations. We will present several theoretical notions that have served us as sensitizing concepts. On the one hand, we have learned from social movement theory, especially theory on new social movements, and notions on new forms of civic engagement, including political consumerism. On the other hand, we refer to notions from (political) youth studies that can help explain why BND is attractive to younger generations. A central element in these theoretical perspectives is the process of individualization in the context of the opportunity structure of a society. Before presenting our theoretical and research frameworks, we will first introduce the reader with BND in Japan, saving our analysis for the next paragraph.

BND is a 1-day moratorium on consumer spending, a day of protest and a day to celebrate sustainable lifestyles, according to its promoters. BND is celebrated by making fake advertisements building on the logos of well-know brands, by offering aesthetically equally powerful designs that carry a social activist message, and by doing something creative at BND. That can be going to a store and just running around the aisles with an empty cart. It can be creating a stand to cut up credit cards. It can even be something classic such as staging a demonstration or organizing a teach-in. The very point of BND is to bring attention to corporate culture's consumptive activities with the hope that people start thinking by themselves, and buy smart or stop buying every once in a while.

It all started in 1992 in Vancouver, Canada, 'as a day for society to examine the issue of over-consumption' (Cohn, 2005). Now BND events are taking place in 65 countries with allegedly millions of people joining. From a 'relatively insignificant event in its early days', BND has become a 'huge phenomenon', according to one of its founders, Kalle Lasn, an ex-advertising executive and editor of the Canadian anti-consumerist *Adbusters* magazine (Cohn, 2005). BND took off worldwide when the campaign was put on the Internet after the mid-1990s. In some countries, like in Japan, there is an elaborate central Web site showing, among others, what events took place and are in planning.¹ The timing of BND is North American. Each year BND takes place late November. In the US, it is on 'Black Friday', the Friday after Thanksgiving when the shopping frenzy for Christmas is at its peak. The BNDs around the world follow suit,

usually taking the next day, Saturday, which is the busiest shopping day of the week in many countries. In many developed countries in Europe and Asia, the year-end shopping battles in late November still have to reach their zeniths. Still, at that time, most store displays, most advertising and most public spaces in many countries, also in Japan, are already preparing for the upcoming Christmas consumer fest.

With the arrival of the present-day coordinator, BND revived in Japan. The coordinator is a European woman in her 30s living in Kyoto. She knew BND from the US where she has lived. Soon after she arrived in Japan in the late 1990s, she more or less stumbled on a powerful idea to start BND in Kyoto. She found a bag of Santa Claus suits in the garbage. The idea of Zenta Claus was born. Since then, at every BND in late November, right in front of the high-end department stores in central Kyoto, one or more persons dressed as a Santa Claus quietly sit, legs folded and eyes closed, among the bustling crowd of shoppers. 'The concept', the coordinator says, 'builds on the Japanese tradition of meditation and at the same time comments the Western Santa Claus shopping spree'. The BND Japan Web site adds some further authority: the Zenta icon refers to a Zen realization by the German artist Yana Milev: 'the revolution starts where you sit'.² The iconic Zenta image caught on quickly and is now part of the core imagery of BND around the world. The act of meditating as a Santa Claus in the midst of shopping war zones brought the necessary mix of protest and street performance to BND.

In Kyoto in 2007, Zenta made its sixth yearly appearance at the street intersection near Kyoto's main department stores. A group of assistant Zenta's (including children one of the interviewees brought along) handed out flyers, tried to talk with passerbys or when people stopped explained what their action was about, played musical instruments, did several things, in short, to attract attention. 'Some were interested, but many were too busy to understand the meaning of what was going on ... Many walk very fast, and we were unable to catch them to provide information. It was a too noisy a place too', says a 30-plus-year-old man from Tokyo who travelled to Kyoto for the occasion.

In Osaka, BND is different. The coordinator instigated the Osaka event that started in 2003. She recommended a group of people working for homeless people to join in and to support an event in Nagai tent park village, a homeless village in the south of Osaka. The 30-something Japanese man who got involved as a supporter and who names himself a 'working poor', told me that at the event, he and other 'have-somes' brought food to the homeless at BND. The food was donated by an organic food shop in Osaka. He was happy to support this as 'most of poods are forced to consume cheap poisons and wasted food or trashed cans to keep alive'. But 'BND itself is not poison to the brutal economic system of the world under which poods and homeless are starving. My efforts are directed at trying to destroy this injustice.' He is a self-described 'anarchist' with a web site containing similarly strongly phrased comments and picture reports of protests against evictions of homeless from different Osaka parks.

In Tokyo, BND 2007 passed calmly. Three young American men carried a couch on the central square in front of Shibuya Station, a top location for shopping by younger people from all over the country. The Americans sat down and just relaxed, chatted and played some music in between the thousands of shoppers passing by every minute. 'When asked what we were doing, I told them "we're relaxing." There were no flyers and no discussions: I took it as a funny thing. Nobody reached, but nobody offended either. They all felt safe.' A few hours later, the police asked them to move away with their couch because 'they could not just sit there doing nothing. They said: "you're using space and that is a disturbance." Many passerby were confused, but we did not disturb anyone', says the 26-year-old American interviewee.

In Gifu, a small city not far from the large urban area of Nagoya, a young Japanese woman organized her first-time BND in 2007. She wanted 'to do something different, something other than others do ... If I want people to think, I need to make it fun. Yet, I could not come up with anything.' With her mother and her mother's friend, a bar owner, they eventually decided to have ... a swapping event exchanging items with no money involved in the bar of my mother's friend. Something with general items, not only about the environment ... It was a great success: many people, locals, outsiders not in our network, many from the Brazilian and Peruvian minority community turned up. A great diversity of things happened, new communications arose and the networking was great.

Cooked dishes were traded for things from stores, handmade items were swapped and the bar gave items away.

In Nagano, the city in the midst of the Alps in central Japan, a 34-year-old Canadian organized the Global Cup Soccer Tournament for BND in 2006. People dressed in costumes mimicking global brands kicked a ball shaped as the world. 'The goal was to show how global corporations are kicking the world around by encouraging over-consumption: a street action, not aggressive, not angry, but outgoing.' They also handed out flyers, talked to people and invited them to come to a community centre in downtown Nagano and watch the movie 'The Corporation', a movie set in Vancouver about the origin of corporations as a legal entity, but also about sweatshops, pollution and how people are shaped into buying things. Some 40 people, mostly Japanese, came to the community centre out of a 1000 flyers handed out. 'A good score.'

Not many other things happened in Japan at the last few BNDs. The BND Japan Web site offers an endearing report from Guam(!): a person admits to have put a BND sticker on a shopping bus that drives tourists, many of whom are Japanese, to the local K-mart.

THEORETICAL FRAME

We will try to explore BND in Japan by connecting different theoretical approaches that can yield sensitizing concepts for our exploration.

Political research perspective: political consumerism as a new form of civic engagement

One way of looking at BND is conceptualizing BND as a form of political consumerism. Characteristics of BND correspond to the conceptualization of political consumerism by Michele Micheletti et al. (2004), especially the so-called negative form, namely consumer boycotts. They conclude that political consumerism differs from regular political action in three ways. First, market tools (and not tools from the political domain) are used to influence the political domain or — and that is more the case for BND — to have influence outside the political domain (the market place). Second, it is a private act but it affects the public, political domain. Third, it is an individualized act of involvement. Central in the approach of political consumerism is the notion that the consumption market becomes a new arena in the struggle for power: consumers take action in their struggling for power with producers and the political elite.³

Social movement theory can be used when looking at explanations for the success of political consumerism. Doug McAdam et al. (1996) describe the emerging consensus between scholars on explanatory variables in the rise of social movements. They point at the interaction of three key factors: political opportunity of the context of the movement, mobilizing structures of the movement and framing processes. This consensus can also be seen as a convergence of succeeding approaches of the last decades. After the more cultural explanations of social movements from relative deprivation theories of the 1960s, there has been a shift to theories focusing on structural factors. In the 1970s, the mobility and group structure of a social movement became the focus of attention in the so-called resource mobilization theories, while in the 1980s the focus shifted to the structure of the context of the social movement. This focus is central in political opportunity structure or political process theories that conceptualize the context in different ways: from the broader economical and political context to the more narrow vision of institutions in this context (Meyer, 2004). As a reaction to the more structural theories in the 1970s and 1980s, there is a cultural turn in the 1990s, looking at the importance of cultural factors in social movements. Marco Giugni (1998) distinguishes between a micro, meso or macro cultural approach. In the micro approach, the focus is on individual motives and processes to become active, while in the meso approach framing is central: interpretation schemes of the social movement on what is the problem, the need for a certain form of collective action and the motivation to do so. In the macro approach values are central. Macro-structural changes have led to new cultural orientations. New social movements are seen as a reaction to value changes.

From the political consumerism and social movement theories, we use the notion that BND can be seen as a new type of political consumerism, a new type of civic engagement as a reaction to structural and cultural changes. A new type of action that can be explored by the interaction of three key factors:

political opportunity of the context of the movement, mobilizing structures of the movement and framing processes.

Political youth studies perspective: individualized civic engagement of young generations

Another helpful source for exploring BND can be found in political youth studies. These studies, in sum, announce a turn-away from institutionalized politics towards more individualized forms of engagement. There are evidences that the political orientations and behaviours of young people differ significantly from earlier generations (see the overview by Hooghe, 2004). Voter turnout is in decline and young people tend to skip traditional party politics altogether. These developments can be interpreted as not only a life cycle effect (young people differ from older people because of their age) but also a cohort effect (young people differ from young people 20 or 30 years ago). The latter finding is of special importance because the central theme in political youth studies perspective is the idea that youth is a vehicle of social and political change (in negative or positive way) and that generational replacement is one of the driving forces for societal and political change.

Behind the idea of generational replacement lies the notion of the formative period. Macro changes like secularization and individualization affect not only the entire population but young people in particular because the changes are experienced in the formative period of their lives while the initial political orientations of older generations are shaped decades ago. Studying the political behaviour of young people may therefore offer a glimpse of the political domain in the future. These notions can only make sense if we can assume that political behaviour in the formative years persist through life or, to put it in other terms, that generation effects are stronger than effects of ageing or periodical events later in life.

There is no consensus how to conceptualize the shift in political orientations of younger generations. Some authors point to political cynicism and lack of political interests. Others point out that institutional arrangements have a negative impact on young people's political behaviours. Some of them refer to a broader trend in declining participation in all kinds of forms of civic engagements (Putnam, 2000). In sharp contrast is the opinion that young people do not have lost their interest but prefer other ways of political participation or, in a broader sense, civic engagement; an opinion that is also more common among youth researchers. Surveys show that young people are more sceptical about the political institutions, but are more committed to democratic norms and to tolerance than older generations and participate more in informal and flexible forms of involvement (Inglehart and Norris, 2003).

Dietlind Stolle and Marc Hooghe (2005) build one of the earliest frameworks of analysis for this more fluid type of civic engagement.⁴ The framework focuses at four elements: (1) structure, (2) issues, (3) mobilization and (4) style of involvement. The structure is not formal or bureaucratic, but horizontal and

flexible, building on the loose connections needed to succeed in today's late modern society. This structure also fits efforts to quickly address issues and coordinate (global) actions through e-communications. In terms of issues, it is said that new initiatives are less concerned with institutional (party political) or ideological politics. Instead, lifestyle elements are politicized with actions many do not even call political. In line with this are 'subpolitics' or daily decisions, such as shopping, taking on a political meaning (Micheletti, 2003). Close to home issues, such as waste control, can make people feel connected without the requirement of formal membership or ideological identification, say Stolle and Hooghe (2005: 161). Mobilization, next, is said to be spontaneous, ad hoc and irregular, with easy entry and easy exit options, and with the danger that the 'organization' (a group of organizers or other more loose networks) dissolves quickly or experiences serious fluctuations in its 'membership'. Finally, the type of involvement is less group oriented. It can be supported by advocacy networks and can have a far-reaching impact on businesses or government, but the act is usually individualized: a purchase decision, forwarding an e-zine, voting on a web site. While action may be coordinated collectively, the act is often performed alone.

From this perspective, we use the notion that the shape of BND can be seen as a shift in issues of engagement from institutional politics to consumer lifestyle politics which are characterized by an informal structure, ad hoc mobilization and individualized style of involvement. Do the interviewees use the same notions in the framing of their motives to participate in BND?

Youth studies perspective: individualization of life courses

The attractiveness of individualized lifestyle politics, such as BND, may be explored from a new direction by looking at the youth studies perspective. A central theme is the process of individualization which seemingly has led to the transition from a standard to a choice biography. This process also changed the meaning of the concept of youth. Both the content (more autonomy, more choice, more central position of the idea of self-realization and self-development; for example, du Bois-Reymond et al., 2001; Fuchs-Heinritz, 2000) and the boundaries (shortening, lengthening, blurring; for example, Pais, 1995) of youth have changed. Not only life phase boundaries but also boundaries between life domains have blurred. New generations have to deal with a life course that is believed to be less predictable and more dependent of individual choice (Kohli, 1985; Wohlrab-Sahr, 1992).

These developments are seen as structuring principles of contemporary life courses that, seen from the perspective of youth, bring new demands and opportunities and, most importantly, create ambivalence and risks (for example, Furlong and Cartmel, 2003; Walther et al., 2002). Their own biography becomes the central focus of living and learning and the key questions are those on who one wants to become and what choices (in any domain) contribute to becoming one's true self (Vinken, 2004). In earlier articles, we have described several key

factors in life courses of prototypical, so-called biographical self-determinators (Diepstraten, 2006; Diepstraten et al., 2006). The key biographical orientations are directed at lifelong (and life-broad) learning framed as a permanent exploration of authentic challenges without an end goal or long-term planning but with a strong link to definitions of who they are and what they want to become. These key factors are developed in cosmopolitan weak-tie networks that also allow them to capitalize their learning experiences.

These key factors suggest that agency becomes more important. Many agency concepts are proposed such as the personal competence of 'biographicity' (reflexivity to test and monitor choices on their identity satisfying power; Alheit, 1995), coping strategies such as 'active individualization' (strategic approaches to personal growth; Coté, 2002), networking abilities (Walther et al., 2005), remaining open to present, respectively, truly live a reflexive and flexible life story, respectively, lifestyle (Giddens, 1991). Biographical reflexivity would be the core competence. Reflexivity is first of all a process of self-confrontation with the unplanned, unmanageable, unintended and therefore seems to build much more on non-knowledge (what we do not know) than on knowledge (what we know). Reflexivity competences, hence, not only include abilities or skills such as planning, evaluation or adjustment but also include the capacity to continuously monitor one's thoughts and actions, to test and retest how one is doing at any given moment. Herewith, it acknowledges that one's life course as well as one's competences will never be definitely finalized and fully developed. Another basic principle of reflexivity is self-destruction. People should be willing and able to abruptly part from a given route in their biography and take on a completely new one (Vinken, 2007). Because young people are increasingly spending more time among themselves, with more autonomy, 'learning from each other' or developing youth cultural capital becomes a crucial factor in the life course (du Bois-Reymond, 2000).

The amount and kind of biographical reflexivity and youth cultural capital depend on structure and the social networks to which people relate. Opinions are divided on whether the impact of agency is indeed higher than structural and social factors. Are self-chosen ways of life and personal networks indeed more important (Castells, 1997; Giddens, 1991), are institutions such as education and labour market the new structuring mechanisms (Beck, 1992; Mayer, 2003) or do we 'just' have the attitude of growing self-direction and do we 'only' have a new self-ideology that prevents us from seeing social structure at work (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Elchardus, 1999)? Whatever one's position in the debate, the key point is that people (in Western societies only) are less willing to acknowledge social structuring. In the eyes of a new generation, the creation of a self-chosen unique path of life has become the main life mission (Veith, 2002; Vinken, 2007).

Can we use notions from this theoretical perspective to explore the mobilizing structure of BND, the kind of people BND attracts? Are especially people from younger generations with individualized life course orientations more susceptible for this type of engagements?

Political opportunity structure theories on Japan

Last but not least, we need theories on the opportunity structure in Japan to explore BND in the Japanese context. The impact of life course developments on forms of civic engagement will not be the same in every context. Japanese society presents younger and older generations with its own, unique opportunity structure, a structure that in its own right stimulates or hinders the extent to which (young) generations can live the life as a citizen, in a traditional or emerging form. Put in classic opportunity structure terms, the degree to which 'ordinary' people are likely to be able to gain access to power and to manipulate the political system is generally regarded to be very low if not equal to zero in Japan (Schwartz and Pharr, 2003). Of course, also in Japan, there is an abundance of (mainly small) civil society groups and cooperatives active in providing informal care, dealing with neighbourhood issues, supporting school sports and culture, tackling local environmental problems, promoting food safety, and so on. Up until recently, however, there was no legal framework for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and voluntary organizations, large or small, to operate, making it extremely difficult to gain financial and other types of means. A strongly developed professional body of advocates, which campaigns to advance social issues and influence national policy debates, is lacking (Pekkanen, 2006).

A Western, or perhaps better still, a US model of civil society does not seem to apply very well. Policy development and decision making take place in organizations that build on close ties between government and the business sector, like in many European and other Asian countries. NGOs lack privileged relationships with decision makers and have to work hard to form alliances. In these settings, they are not likely to trumpet their causes in noisy conflict, but by subtle advocacy (Vogel, 1999). Consumer organizations, for example, usually have little chance to impact the regulations and policies that are co-jointly decided upon by government and market parties (MacLachlan, 2002). Sometimes, however, in moments of dissension between government and market parties, they are able to form an alliance with either side and impact the policy agenda. As also Nakano (2005) shows, within cooperative relationships, volunteers struggle for freedom from state or market influences. They might not have political influence, but deliberately use their volunteer identity to take action and indirectly shape state programmes, manipulating the state and mainstream policies according to their own agenda. They keep a distance precisely because that enables them to act compassionately, spontaneously and flexibly (see also LeBlanc, 1999).

There is debate on whether NGOs, for example, through international conferences, do have a Western-style impact on the polity or not (see, for example, Chan-Tibergien, 2004; Hasegawa, 2004; Hirata, 2002). It is beyond the scope of this article to dwell in length on this and other Japanese civil society-related debates. The key point is that the world of politics in Japan is mainly for the 'Okami', meaning those who reside above and with whom it is best not to

engage too much. Vice versa, this world does not easily allow ‘lesser Gods’ to have voice or influence. There is strong evidence that this is institutional: the political institutions, as Pekkanen (2006) states it, with its regulatory framework, financial flows and political opportunity structure, make it that civil groups and individual people have little influence. We would like to add that it is in part also a cultural matter that people denounce having influence given the Confucian historic context of which the Okami notion is an illustration. It is also a general, across cultures perhaps universal, issue that the world of politics is something one does not want to get involved in and that people avoid the public sphere ‘trying hard not [to] care about issues that would require too much talking to solve’ and instead shrink ‘their concerns into tasks that they could define as unpolitical’ (Eliasoph, 1998).

CASE STUDY

To explore BND in Japan, we used notions from the different theoretical perspectives we have mentioned above. Our theoretical exploration brings us to our three central research questions:

1. Mobilizing structure of BND: do especially young people with individualized life course orientation participate in BND Japan?
2. Framing of BND participants: do participants frame their motives for BND as consumer lifestyle politics that is characterized by an informal structure, ad hoc mobilization and individualized style of involvement?
3. How does the political opportunity structure of Japan interact with the mobilizing structure and framing of BND?

Our case study into the three questions started with extensive desk research. We analyzed literature on and the web sites of BND and BND Japan including the underlying links to other web sites and forums. Subsequently, through these forums, we contacted participants (by posting messages and e-mailing/phoning key people). First, contact was established with the coordinator of BND Japan. Next, this coordinator mentioned names, who, in turn, mentioned new names of potential interviewees. Using this snowball method, we interviewed eight participants (in English) in Japan between December 2007 and April 2008: old-timers, first-timers, men, women, Japanese citizens and foreigners living here, all about half/half. Most of the interviewees were in their mid-30s, one just passed 26 years of age.

We acknowledge that we contacted only a small number of interviews, which cautions us to draw any definite conclusions about BND Japan. Given the central aim of our article — to perform a first exploration of BND in Japan — we believe the small number of respondents is sufficient. In qualitative interviewing, it will always be a question whether one has definitely reached the point of saturation or not (if that is at all necessary in an exploration). After

carefully comparing the first six interview transcripts, however, we did reach the conclusion that a point of saturation was imminent. Given the aim of providing a first exploration, moreover, we do refrain from making comparisons with BND in other countries.

Most interviewees were delivered by one person, the coordinator of BND Japan. Three people we interviewed lived in Tokyo, three in Kansai (the area around the cities of Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe), one each in the smaller cities of Gifu and Nagano, in central Japan. We balanced the number of men-women, foreigner-Japanese, region, and so on, carefully before contacting them. Still, the key criterion was their ability to speak English.⁵ Of course, it can be argued that because of the selection through the coordinator and the fact that all respondents were to some extent familiar with the coordinator, we may have missed specific activists or perspectives. We believe that this bias will be limited. Most interviewees indicated that the relationship was usually limited to exchanging information and tools on BND. The interviewees were not active in the same social circles as the coordinator. Many interviewees were active on a one-time basis. Given these facts, it can be argued that the selection is not particularly biased.

After interviewing the coordinator, we provided other interviewees with an outline of the intended interview. The outline listed several questions on how they got to know BND, why they engaged in it, what activity they engaged in, how they would define BND and the people engaged in it, why they think it is necessary, whether their lifestyle is low consumption, whether they think BND helps and whether it should stay as it is. Another group of questions related to politics in Japan, their interest, activity and opinions in this realm, their opinion on NGOs in Japan and their own connectedness to groups with a similar mission as BND in Japan. Crucial here was the question whether or not their BND engagement is an alternative for activism in politics or other groups. A fair share of the start of every conversation went into learning about the lives of the interviewees, their histories and their desired futures.

RESULTS

Mobilizing structure of BND: who participates?

The coordinator is a highly educated woman, working as a researcher in university education in Japan. She is also a highly networked person, naming a large number of organizations to which she relates. These organizations focus on alternative lifestyles or giving a voice to grassroots movements in Japan. She is no match to the aforementioned Kalle Lasn and his aggressively voiced conspiracy thinking. As a 'Kalle Lasn'-light version, she expressed concerns over business control, amazement too, but no harsh condemning warrior-type of slogans. She is the key initiator and coordinator of, as the BND Japan web site claims, a network of about 350 activists and 15 businesses and organizations.⁶

She provides the core body of text on the BND Japan web site. She produces the newsletters and she serves as a Webmaster of the BND Japan web site. She also plays a key role in the network of most interviewees and their activities related to BND. Without her, the interviewees frequently noted with worry, BND Japan is likely to come to a full stop. The coordinator herself stresses that at first things started with her friends from the eco- and slow food movement, from where it snowballed through friends of friends, mainly in the Kansai area: 'Only in a later stage BND "professionalized" with myself as its central coordinator.'

Almost all interviewees, however, were closely involved in at least one other network of activists, whether that concerned community issues or a global creative anarchism platform. Much of BND builds on a network of friends or on an even looser one of people who joined someone they just met once at a party. They do things at their locale, without much interference of the BND leadership.

The people are predominantly foreigners living in Japan. Most interviewees expressed their regret about this, wishing more Japanese people would join in. 'I invited more people to join me, but all who came were fellow-Americans', says the Tokyo organizer. 'In Kyoto now more people participate, but almost all foreigners. I want this to change', an old-time Kyoto BND participant says.

The very nature of BND makes entry and exit easy. Most organizers and participants do not know if they will be joining BND again next time. BND Japan is neither a movement and nor an organization, it is a 1-day event, the interviewees stress. The BND Japan web site confirms: 'Events are organized by anyone who wants to. Therefore, every place, every event is different. It's up to you. So far, in Japan, there are small business owners, students, designers, teachers, "regular working people," dads and mom's, citizen's groups (environmental groups, peace groups, labor groups) organizing events and activities.' As the BND coordinator says: 'BND is "activism for beginners." For many it is a first involvement leading to more intense social activism, doing something useful not just for themselves or their family but for other people, aiming at social change.' This analysis diverges somewhat from the experiences of the interviewees, many of whom are expert organizers and active participants in other social change networks before and while joining BND. An interviewee who frequently stressed she is 'only a common homemaker' turned out to be an active social entrepreneur, contacting people in the local parent-teacher association (PTA), asking questions to politicians, aiming at mothers who visit her own language teaching school, and 'trying to change others, meaning people I know, friends, family, students'. The interviews present several contradictions that people engaged in the new types of activism deal with: they aim at broader social change, try to reach out beyond their own circle, and at the same time they stress it is important to impact one's own circle, one's own life. 'The importance of BND is that it reinforces commitment and the self. It tells you you're OK ... It is a way to stress yourself that it is important, to strengthen your values', the BND coordinator says.

Despite their diverse backgrounds, they share the ability to look at their social activism from a creative, cultural perspective. They build on knowledge of Japanese culture, seek inspiration in powerfully designed images and in a do-it-yourself way create artistic objects with which to support their message. What is also typical is that almost all of them have university training. The 'working poor' organizer from Osaka has even visited two of the best universities in Japan. Two of the interviewees work (part-time) at high-level universities. All of them have, during their student years, been active in various social activism networks. All of them have been outside Japan, including the Japanese nationals, for a longer period in their younger years. Many of them mention a list with different social roles with which they identify. They are not 'only' an English teacher or 'just' an artist. They are also organizers, publicists, musicians, entrepreneurs, consultants and so on. Only a few of them tell me who they are and what they do in a straightforward, single-role way. They are a 'mere' homemaker, an 'ordinary' salaried man, a university lecturer. Yet, even they have many faces. The homemaker is also an entrepreneur and a language teacher, besides a community activist. The salaried man is also a translator of social activism literature and Webmaster. The university lecturer appeared to be one of the most networked community activists of the lot. Here we perhaps touch upon the most important feature of the activists involved in BND: they have a social network that is not only large but also diverse, ranging from like-minded, well-educated people engaged in similar activism groups to 'ordinary' people sleeping in homeless parks, bringing their kids to school, working hard to make their business a success. If anything, they are not one-dimensional, they are not either an activist or something else; they combine different roles and identities in themselves and in their networks.

Framing of the motives by the participants

The first category of motives that emerges from the interviews is the appreciation of participants of informal, non-hierarchical, flexible network structures consisting of so-called loose ties (for example, Wuthnow, 1998). BND has a strong leader, but this is certainly not advertised on the BND web site. The relationships of the event organizers and participants with the leader are not that tight or exclusive, especially not outside the leader's hometown of Kyoto. There is no guidebook defining the structure of BND Japan. What is more, many interviewees spontaneously expressed their aversion to tight structures, as a model for day-to-day life in Japan or for BND. There is a general distrust of organizations: 'There are no "nice" organizations. There are a lot of activist organizations ... but they are looking for sponsors to survive, so end up not being able anymore to criticize media or big corporations', according to one of the interviewees, a salaried IT worker in Tokyo who hides his BND activism from his colleagues and clients and maintains the Japanese version of the BND Japan web site. BND is also open for any new initiative of outsiders. If they report to have organized an event, they are part of BND. The actions themselves

make them ‘member’. There is a newsletter/bulletin board network, and people, also those who do not organize something at any moment in time, can join it without any screening. There are no membership conditions, no fees or regulations. This loose structure element concurs with the notions of Stolle and Hooghe (2005) on what typifies emerging forms of engagement. The appreciation for loose network structures also relates to the theoretical notion of youth cultural capital: participating in order to meet ‘equals’ is a goal in itself for most participants. As implied in the notion of youth cultural capital, developing and experiencing new things together with peers is crucial in new learning biographies.

A second category of motives of the interviewees can be described as the engagement in daily lifestyle issues, the same issues that were mentioned by Stolle and Hooghe (2005) too. In Japan, it is as much about the negative impact on the environment as about the mental addiction to buying, about the loss of modesty, the loss of the traditional hesitation as regards wants and money, about consciousness of where goods and foods are from, how they are produced, the seasonal fit, about a sustainable lifestyle in general. BND and its issues are far away from the polity (see more on this later), but are they close to the daily lives of the participants, do they overlap with their lifestyles? Yes and no, is the unsatisfactory answer. Those who appreciate the informal structure and are allergic to existing organizations are the ones for whom anti-consumerism is an all-encompassing lifestyle. The Kyoto BND visitor from Tokyo mentioned above and the Osaka organizer both emphasize their anarchist lifestyles and ideologies that obviously align with a strong dislike of organized Japanese structure in general. ‘I seek people with similar views, who have a common spirit, the do-it-yourself spirit ... Even if you’re not an artist, live like one: make your own food, clothes, basic things. Make it yourself. Resist capitalism. Make not consuming part of your lifestyle. Cooking. Creating. Enjoyment’, the Tokyo anarchist (and video artist, visual artist, part-time anthropology lecturer, art journalist and graphic designer) assures me. There are more people who relate BND to their own life, but the coordinator admits: ‘The relationship with my own ecological/political lifestyle and BND is weak. So it is for many others.’ ‘The Culture Jam message to buy nothing isn’t fit for me. I buy, but only the best stuff’, says the Gifu organizer who ensures me her Prada wallet is her only high brand item (an example of buying good quality stuff that lasts long). Most interviewees do, however, make an effort, however small in some cases, for instance, by driving an older, smaller car instead of the brand new German ones which colleagues of the IT worker drive. By carrying one’s own chopsticks (my hashi) around and refusing the ones that food stores give away. By having a private BND more than once a month, even if that is sometimes because one simply lacked time to shop that particular day.

A third category of motives builds on the importance of spontaneous, ad hoc activities with easy entry, easy exit; another characteristic of emerging forms of engagement mentioned by Stolle and Hooghe (2005). As stated, anyone having an idea to organize a BND event can do so. The American carrying his couch

into Tokyo's Shibuya Station area did consult the coordinator of BND ahead of the action, but they did not meet or discuss any of the particulars. Just as long as they do not violate the BND motto of not selling or buying anything, they can go ahead. The BND coordinator does send flyers, booklets and other items to the ones who plan an event. In the course towards each BND and at BND itself, there is no formal strategy to mobilize people. At BND itself, participants aim at reaching out to the surprised public who are usually unaware of BND was coming to town. The exception is the Gifu event which was carefully planned and organized in order to reach as much people, including local politicians, as possible.

Political opportunity structure in Japan

In several ways, it becomes visible that the culture and structure of Japanese society influence the features, motives and behaviours of participants in BND Japan.

First, even with foreigners outnumbering Japanese people in BND Japan, BND Japan is not per se an individualistic form of action. Efforts are made to come out in numbers when performing on the streets: flyering, meditating or kicking a globe. Efforts are also made to connect to other groups, such as the homeless or minority groups, or to be backed up by groups, such as food stores, cafes, broadcast media and local community groups.

Second, interviewees, foreigner or Japanese, are aware that in Japan some types of actions are counterproductive and other types of action, especially when more Japanese flavoured, are more effective. Loud, noisy, provocative and strongly political or ideological actions and angry, aggressive and confrontational attitudes are not liked, not by the BND participants and according to them not by the Japanese public. 'Never will something good come out of pointing fingers', the Gifu organizer explains. 'It is important not [to] be too forceful. That is not effective. Just show others your "my hashi" at dinners. Show others you use paper on two sides, that it is non-white paper', the 'homemaker' from Kyoto argues. 'It is a strategic choice: humor keeps protest non-violent. In Japan angry protest would not be OK. Demonstrations would be too strong. It was difficult to talk to people in the street, to impose thinking on others, to send out the BND message and at the same time communicate that we do not want to hurt small business or that we cross legal lines', the Nagano organizer points out. 'The Culture Jam message is useful for Japan, but difficult to fit in Japan', the Tokyo anarchist maintains. He continues:

It is not impossible, but it is more important to live like a culture jammer. The key weapon is humor, as for instance the Clown Army at G8 summits shows, because too much aggression puts Japanese people off ... Yet, BND Japan should go beyond funny and provide more pictorial, graphic information to make an impact or use Japanese masks, build on the Japanese sense of humor, on the manga/animation tradition or use animistic Gods, e.g. the God of the poor, of the drunken, etc., instead the imported character of Santa Claus.

Third, a strong divide between BND activism and the (party) political domain is observable. BND is definitely far away from the world of politics as is. ‘Politics and politicians, they do not matter. They are too adjusted in Japan to look at as an arena of change’, the above mentioned IT worker says. ‘BND should never become political, if so, the Japanese stay away. Politics is not “their problem,” it is something for those from above’, the Gifu organizer adds. ‘My attention is more to the base, my circle, there where I make the first steps of change. I think of my social circles as a tree in which each should do what he/she can. I can tell students, kids, mothers and they can use that in their own tree’, a BND Kyoto participant tells. ‘Most parties in Japan do not want to work for change and politics is a different world for most Japanese anyway ... I prefer groups that are local and work on a daily basis, deal with daily life’, the Canadian Nagano organizer stresses. ‘There is no connection with politics, with economy, no aims to influence policy outcomes, no lobbying. BND is more aimed to serve as a network, to connect people, and to serve a cultural goal, that is to make a difference in culture’, the BND Japan coordinator summarizes.

The interviewees, in sum, refer to several cultural and structural peculiarities of acting out as a citizen in Japan. The more collectivist approach, the less confrontational and more silent strategy and the strong responsiveness — in attitudes and activities — to the separation of the (more important) lives of ordinary people and the (less important) word of the polity (which includes the ruling party, bureaucracy and big business in Japan). In these approaches, strategies and attitudes and activities they mimic, if not, reproduce the cultural and structural constraints of Japanese society.

CONCLUSIONS

Reflecting on the three questions set out in the beginning of this article brings us first to the conclusions on the mobilizing structure of BND Japan. The notion from the youth studies perspective that new forms of engagement are especially attractive to younger generations (formative years since the 1980s) with open life course orientations seems valuable. Participants are busy with seeking and shaping their own path in life, including civic life, and especially of doing so in a loose network of like-minded others. Most striking is that they are uncomfortable to define themselves in a one-dimensional way. Nevertheless, most important other characteristics of participants will need other explanations. The fact that participants are highly educated can be seen as a classical form of inequality. It confirms ideas of certain researchers on political consumerism that this kind of civic engagement is mostly a tool in the hands of elites. This does not mean that this tool is always successful. Foreigners outnumber the Japanese in BND Japan. Yet, both foreign and Japanese participants — all well-educated — will have to deal with the Japanese opportunity structure, as we will see below.

The framing of participants is in line with notions from political youth studies perspective on why new forms of civic engagement are attractive to

younger people. We could discern three categories of motives to participate in BND Japan: their appreciation of loosely structured, lifestyle-oriented and spontaneous activism. Moreover, we can also connect this profile by using the selected notion from the youth studies perspective: the individualization of the life course.⁷ Given their desire to live a diversified life fulfilling multiple roles, they are not likely to indulge in a political world that, probably especially so in Japan, requires a single-mindedness, a topical focus and, importantly, an all-encompassing identity as a political activist or, worse, a politician. The latter would mean they would have to cast off most of the other roles and identities that make them who they are now. It would also mean that they would lose their openness to change in their life course.

Yet, also the political opportunity structure has a big impact. Our findings show that what is known from political opportunity structure in Japan is reflected in the stories of the BND participants. In BND Japan, the share of foreigners is relatively high. They, by definition, have no access to political or high-profile civic activist circles. Also, participants accept and expect Japanese cultural and structural conditions by, especially, separating their lives, identities and activism from the 'world above', the polity in Japan. The participating Japanese separate their activism rather sharply from other roles they fulfill in Japanese society. What is more, some of them argue they hide their activism from their boss and colleagues (the Tokyo activist working in the IT business) or do not talk about their activism when fulfilling specific roles, that is, because 'mothers of the children I teach English would be surprised. They expect me to teach English, thus my talk is restricted to that role', according to a Kyoto BND activist. She learned that because of her activism she was not elected in the local PTA and was prevented from doing workshops at the local school. The Japanese who, across roles and contexts, live the life of an activist to its fullest, are marginalized, such as the Osaka activist living among the homeless. In short, it seems rather complicated in Japan to present an 'authentic self' in one's lifestyle that is stable and noticeable across roles, situations or contexts if one does not want to risk exclusion. Westerners can do so, but they live a life of relative exclusion anyway. They can present themselves in all contexts as an activist, doing something different and unique, and taking their own authentic course in life. Japanese people can present themselves this way too but only inside the contexts of BND, outside normality, at least if they wish to avoid the risk of exclusion.

Overlooking the exploration of our three research questions, the most important conclusion is that notions on individualization of life courses can be combined with notions on social movements, new forms of civic engagement and political consumerism in particular. Individualization of life courses may enhance the attractiveness of individualized forms of engagement, especially for younger generations. Individualization does not mean, however, that structure is no longer of importance. On the contrary, when looking at BND in Japan, the opportunity structure of Japanese society is crucial for the kind of people

who join BND and how they motivate their participation. It seems that people with an individualized life course orientation have no other option than to go beyond conventions, also as regards civic engagement and to use tools that do not refer to conventional action.

Notes

- 1 See <http://www.bndjapan.org>.
- 2 See <http://www.bndjapan.org/english2/about/thezentastory.html>.
- 3 According to Micheletti et al. (2004), scholars disagree on the impact of political consumerism. Some see it as the only political answer to our current risk society of globalization and individualization and note that political consumerism is developing into an international regime in its own rights. The latter has everything to do with the insufficient power of nation-states or international political organizations to respond to transnational processes while new technology and free trade are opening up new opportunities to take action. Other scholars see political consumerism only as partial answer to negative side effects of economic globalization. Consumer action can help to counterbalance the power of the market by which people become slaves of mass customized lifestyles. A third group argues that political consumerism is only a tool in the hands of elite groups with a lot of economic or cultural capital. And therefore, questions can be asked about the legitimacy of this kind of political action in relation to a democratic organized regular political system.
- 4 They were not the first (nor the last) to note the emergence of alternative types of civic engagement. See for an overview Ester and Vinken (2003), Micheletti et al. (2004) or Shah et al. (2007).
- 5 Occasionally we checked with some interviewees if we were not sure about the meaning of their responses.
- 6 See <http://www.bndjapan.org/english2/about/faqs.html>.
- 7 It is beyond the scope of this article to extensively dwell on the extent to which life courses in Japan are subject to individualization. Given the high-profile debates on 'freeters' (young people in part-time jobs) and 'neets' (young people not in employment, education or training) in Japan, we note that the issue is well recognized in Japan too (see Vinken, 2004, for more arguments).

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