

Consumer practices for extending the social lifetimes of sofas and clothing

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Abstract: Consumers play an essential role in efforts to extend product lifetimes (PL) and consumers' practices can determine how long and active lives products get. Applying the framework of Social Practice Theory, this paper argues that in order to suggest changes to how consumers can contribute to longer product lifespans, research needs to focus on consumer practices. The data material consists of 4 focus group interviews with 38 participants about household goods and 29 semi-structured interviews about clothing. Previous research shows that consumers' expectations of product lifetime has decreased, while satisfaction with products is relatively high, which may indicate that product break down and/or replacement is more accepted. Therefore, we argue, it is necessary to focus on social lifespans.

Our findings show that products such as clothing and sofas often go out of use or are disposed of before their physical lifespan ends, and it is more common to donate or sell old clothing and sofas than buying the products second hand. There are a number of routinised practices, such as disposal of functional items, that are considered normal, which leads to less reflexivity of seemingly unsustainable practices. The material in products, or the expectation to the material, is highly influential for practices that can extend the social lifespan, such as maintenance. We conclude that by understanding practices as integrated and influenced by elements of the material, social and cultural, policy interventions may have a greater impact on the social lifespan of products.

Introduction

In the past 20 years, the consumption of furniture and clothing in Norway has increased by 119% and 37%, respectively (SSB, 2019). If the increase is to continue, this will make it difficult to meet the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan (European Union, 2020). A great potential for reducing environmental impacts is longer product lifetimes (Cooper, 2010). This can reduce material recovery, pollution and energy consumption in all phases of a product's life cycle because a longer service life can replace or postpone new purchases (Downes et al., 2011). Consumers cannot control the quality or markets for products, but they can decide when, how and what to acquire, use, clean, maintain, repair and discard. Previous research on product lifespans finds that many products go out of use before their physical lifespan ends (Cox et al., 2013). This especially applies to products such as clothes and sofas

(Hebrok, 2016; Laitala, 2014b). While the 'physical lifespan' is related to the product's durability and strength, the 'social lifespan', sometimes referred to as emotional lifespan, denotes the time the product is socially acceptable (Klepp et al., 2020). In some cases, when a social lifetime ends for one user, the product may find a continued lifespan with a new user. However, this is not an optimal way of consuming as it supports rapid replacements and a throw-away mentality, in addition to increasing the environmental impacts of transport. It is therefore important to explore how the social lifespan of products, such as clothing and sofas, can be extended.

In order to understand and suggest changes for how consumers can contribute to longer product lifespans, research need to be focused on consumer practices from an everyday life perspective (Spurling et al., 2013). A review of

consumers' expectations of product lifetimes found a decline over the past 25 years (Gnanapragasam et al., 2018; Gnanapragasam et al., 2017). At the same time, there is evidence that consumer satisfaction in general is relatively high (ibid.). It appears that consumers have come to accept products that break down early and/or have become accustomed to replacing products more rapidly. This cannot simply be reduced to consumer behaviour alone, as there is a plurality of factors in the everyday life that influence how practices are performed. Based on 4 focus group interviews with 38 participants and 29 semi-structured individual interviews, we seek to understand: *how do everyday consumer practices influence the social lifespan of sofas and clothing?* Our analysis employs the framework of social practice theory (Shove et al., 2012), where social practices, such as acquisition, laundry, maintenance and disposal are the main focus. In line with a number of studies on consumer practices (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014; Spurling et al., 2013), we argue that understanding the dynamics of practices that impact the social lifetime of products is crucial if we are to change consumption towards more sustainable patterns. This paper is informed by the Norwegian research project LASTING¹, which aims to study how to increase the lifespans of durable products.

Theory

Highlighting both practical and meaningful use of products in everyday life, Social Practice Theory understands the individual agent as a carrier of practices, and consumption as "a moment in almost every practice" (Warde, 2005, p. 137). Practices are reproduced by activities (bodily and mental) relying on practical and socio-cultural competence, motivations and emotions, and material objects (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005). Following the framework developed by Shove et al. (2012), practices are composed of three elements, as illustrated in Figure 1: the material (product, the body, environments and infrastructure), meanings (cultural standards, shared norms) and competence (social skills, knowledge of laundry and maintenance), which conduct a dynamic flow that affects practices related to social product lifetimes. As these practices are repeated and routinised, they are intimately linked to reproducing what people understand

to be normal (Shove, 2003) and as such, they are difficult to change. However, all practices alter and evolve over time (ibid.) and to foster the necessary change towards more sustainable consumption, we need to understand the constitutive elements of practices and how they shift.



Figure 1. Elements of social practices, modified from figure in Shove et al. (2012)

Method

The data material consists of 4 focus group interviews with 38 participants about sofas and 29 semi-structured interviews about clothing. These data were collected to study product lifetimes, among other topics. The focus groups were conducted as part of the Norwegian Reference Budget for Consumer Expenditures (Austgulen & Borgeraas, 2018). The informants were asked about their consumption of sofas, how long they should last, cost and how often they replace sofas, and on quality versus price. The semi-structured interviews on clothing were conducted for two different purposes; 16 of the interviews with 18 informants were part of the research project Textile Waste. Informants were located in Oslo, Trondheim and neighbouring counties. The informants were chosen to represent a variety of consumers with different life situations, age, gender, civil status, income and family size. They also had varying levels of interest in clothes, fashion and environmental issues (Laitala, 2014a). The informants were asked about clothing-related practices such as acquisition, use, laundry and disposal. The remaining 12 interviews were conducted as part of the research project KRUS (Klepp, Tobiasson, et al., 2019) and informants were located in the western part of Norway.

¹ See web page: <https://lasting.world/>

These questions also revolved around clothing-related practices, but with a focus on local clothing, wool and labelling. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. For this paper, they were analysed with thematic content analysis, where we looked for descriptions of everyday consumer practices that impact the lifespan of sofas and clothing.

Social and physical lifespan

How long we keep and use clothing and sofas is determined by both physical and social conditions. Physical life is how long the product can be used before it is so worn that it is considered broken. Physical service life is often referred to as "quality" but is also affected by how the product is maintained and used (Laitala & Klepp, 2020). How much wear and tear is accepted depends on both practical considerations and how this is perceived. For example, a slightly worn garment may not be accepted as formal wear, while the same degree of wear is okay for leisure. A stained or worn sofa is likely to be more acceptable in the kids' room than the living room. Therefore, it is difficult to define physical service life without saying something about the cultural and social meanings that influence how much wear and tear is acceptable. Socially durable products are those that can be used over a long time and still be valued or accepted. How long this is, depends on many factors. For clothing, this phenomenon is often associated with fashion. However, many clothes become socially unacceptable for other reasons. These include clothes that no longer suit our age, body and taste or transitions in life such as pregnancy and work situations.

Results and discussion

Our data shows that consumers are more inclined to donate or sell their old clothing and sofas than buying the products second hand. This corresponds to a survey conducted in Norway, where 86% of clothing acquired were new and less than one garment per person per year is purchased used (Laitala & Klepp, 2020). In 2019, 31 700 tonnes of textiles were collected in Norway, and 97 % of these were exported to a global market (Watson et al., 2020). Sofas are frequently advertised at online marketplaces for used products in Norway. In 2016, approximately 46.400 sofas were attempted to be given away at the biggest of them. In the same year, 157.000 sofas were put up for sale (Finn.no, 2017). This means that up

to 9% of Norwegian households wanted to dispose of used furniture via the marketplace during 2016. Sofas are often replaced before they are physically broken, but we do not know how many of the sofas find a new owner. However, this indicates that a large proportion of them could have had a longer life.

There are several differences between the product groups of sofas and clothing, that have implications for their social lifespan. Clothes are often considered as non-durables with a guarantee period of 2 years, while sofas are considered as durables with a 5-year guarantee. These factors will impact the differences between sofas and clothing, and the following sections will first present findings from each product group and then compare these from a practice-oriented perspective.

Clothing flows

The social lifespan will vary tremendously based on the type of garment. Our data showed that coats and woollen sweaters had a much longer social lifetime than clothing for specific occasions, such as weddings. Informants occasionally donated large volumes of functional clothing, either because the garment did not fit anymore or because it was a long time since they had worn them. The donations would usually happen during a decluttering of the wardrobe, which for many had become an annual or biannual event. A common trigger was a lack of space. Clothing is rarely purchased as a replacement for discarded garments (Maldini, 2019). Practices of acquisition and disposal are connected but independent processes (Maldini & Stappers, 2019), affecting the social lifespan and volume. The tendency of wardrobes filling up, which leads to occasional and almost ritual decluttering, has become a characteristic of clothing consumption in affluent societies (Klepp, Laitala, et al., 2019), exemplified by phenomena such as the 'KonMari' method by Marie Kondo (Chamberlin & Callmer, 2021; Kondo, 2014). The problem, however, is that the practice of decluttering frees up space for new items, and as our data shows, for some consumers, it facilitates the purchase of new clothing as a routinised practice.

Sofa exchanges

The expected lifespan of sofas raised many discussions in the focus groups. A consensus between the groups was a social lifespan between 5 and 10 years, with 4 years being the

shortest lifespan agreed upon in one of the groups. The main difference between the consumption of clothing and sofas is that sofas are not acquired in the same quantities as clothing. For sofas, the practice of decluttering also impacts the replacement of new sofas, but the decluttering may be part of a larger refurbishment or moving. In Norway, frequent refurbishment of the home is common. Our data showed that such refurbishment was highly connected to the replacement of sofas, which also corresponds to previous studies (Hebrok, 2016). One informant expressed that the expected physical lifespan was not even relevant, as they had a habit of replacing sofas occasionally. As with clothing, the sofas disposed of by the informants were rarely completely broken and were therefore often sold or donated to a flea market. Other factors affecting replacement were the design and colour, but also wear and tear, especially from children and pets. Most informants had an impression that the quality of sofas, and furniture in general, was better before. In other words, the expected social and physical lifespan is relatively short and influenced by an expectation of planned obsolescence.

Everyday practices

The practices of tidying up, decluttering and disposing of items are formed by economic, social and cultural elements that combined may lead to more functional products being disposed of. If external measures, such as the right to repair and improved consumer rights, are to have an effect on social lifespans, considerations that also target practices are more likely to have an impact on unsustainable routines in a throw-away culture.

The standards of what is normal behaviour, for example that it is considered normal to donate, sell or in some way dispose of functional garments and sofas, are manifested in cultures. This will affect the meaning and performance of practices related to both acquisition of new products and the expected social lifespan. An important factor that affects clothing is the low prices that lead to more acquisitions and more disposal, which means that the material itself affects the social lifespans. Because shared notions of what is a normal length for a products' social lifespan is evidently decreasing, this may affect the length of time consumers find it acceptable to keep products in use. In addition, the low expectations regarding product lifetimes and planned

obsolescence may lead to second-hand products being less attractive (Wieser & Tröger, 2016).

For both clothing and sofas, it is socially accepted and considered normal to dispose of items even though they are not broken. However, it is considered low morale to throw away products as waste before their technical lifespan ends, and our findings show that people are happy with selling, donating or in any way giving away their old products to make room for a new. Thus, an essential factor that actually drives the practice of acquisition is the practice of disposal. The infrastructures that facilitate these disposal practices are textile collections, flea markets and web pages and apps for consumer-to-consumer sales. Because there is an alternative to disposing of items as waste, disposal is accepted based on the belief that a textile collector or flea market will take care of the product. However, it is rarely known what happens to discarded items and it appears that this is also less reflected on by consumers, which accentuates the practice of disposal as routinised. The issue of environmental concern is that the social and technical lives do not coincide. Buying used is one of many ways to increase longevity, but it would be better if more clothes were acquired only when clothes are worn out, and that no sofas were acquired during refurbishment.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for the need to understand the performance of social practices in everyday life as related to how consumers engage with product lifespans. In order to increase the physical lifespan, it is necessary to also increase the social lifespan. Expectations of short physical lifespans impact the social, and vice versa, which leads to a decrease in maintenance and care. Extending the social lifespan of sofas and clothing will involve different practices, related to the acquisition, use and maintenance such as repair and laundry. It may also involve measures that influence how long consumers expect products to last, both physically and socially. Such measures can involve the material, by making clothing in flexible sizes or by providing ways to let consumers change the cover of sofas after some years. Material adaptations can also prevent social factors related to new needs, such as changes in life situations or other transition stages. Decluttering that leads to donations for reuse are practices that ultimately

shorten the lifespan. For policy interventions to have an effect, it is necessary to target routinised understandings, competences and use of materials that ultimately lead to shorter social lifespans. Many of the donations made to flea markets end up as waste, as very little is reused locally compared to the amounts of products discarded. It would thus be of environmental benefit if there was a correlation between the physical and social lifespan.

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