

Demystifying the dis-domestication of consumer products

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Prolonging the lifespan of products is vital in order to decouple economic success from environmental impact, according to Marie Hebrok of the National Institute for Consumer Research (SIFO) in Oslo, Norway. Writing in the Journal of Design Research she is developing a theory of dis-domestication of products that should help inform designers and manufacturers as to the social perspective on how consumers dispose of products as that product becomes obsolete.

Conspiracy theories often claim that manufacturers of goods in fields as diverse as light bulbs and smart phones incorporate planned obsolescence into their [products](#) to hurry along the next purchase rather than building everlasting items. The truth is perhaps less subtle: inexpensive products are made cheaply and of low quality so that they wear out more quickly and have to be replaced frequently. This is the predominant business model, particularly in electronics but also in clothing and furniture manufacture, suggests Hebrok. Environmental pressures in terms of energy, pollution and limited resources are pushing designers towards improving the longevity of their products, and have done for decades, according to Hebrok. "Design scholars have traditionally emphasized the material aspect of longevity and sustainability, leaving the [social aspect](#) underexplored," she adds.

Nevertheless, devices become redundant in the lives of consumers, stop working because of component failure or parts wear out to the point where, in the case of furniture, the item becomes unsightly and uncomfortable. As such, there is much research in the area of eco-

design, lifecycle and cradle to grave analysis of manufacturing and use. While the ethos of reduce, reuse, recycle has come to the fore, inevitably products must be replaced if the consumer is to maintain a chosen lifestyle. It would be better economically and environmentally if said product had greater longevity and a "greener" design.

Hebrok has developed a framework for research into eco-design, sustainability and design for life that considers the mutually constitutive social and material factors that might lead to dis-domestication of a given product. These include the consumer's changing circumstances, moving house, financial gains or losses and changes in social status. They also consider the use of materials that age poorly, difficult and time consuming fabrication methods and maintenance and repair costs. Hebrok also points out that in the case of furniture, the focus of her case study, users may have little knowledge of nor motivation for maintenance and repairs; they may perceive their products as going out of stylistic fashion or having some sentimental reason either to keep the product or dis-domesticate it.

Hebrok suggests that the social aspects of disposing of a worn out product in the home, what she refers to as dis-domestication, should be as important a focus of research into design and [sustainability](#) as the material aspect of that product, the actual sourcing of the components and the fabrication of the product. Moreover, designing for [longevity](#) might also take into account the psychology of long-term use of a given product in the face of new, modal designs that emerge and in terms of also making it useful in the long term so that it does not become redundant or obsolete in terms of its technology.

More information: Hebrok, M. (2014) 'Design for longevity: taking both the material and social aspects of product-life into account', *J. Design Research*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp.204-220.

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