

# Study explores how meaningful but unused products hinder sustainability

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Custom sneakers, vintage dishware, a limited-edition car—each is an example of a product owners may regard as special and irreplaceable, fostering strong feelings of attachment.

From a [sustainability](#) standpoint, designers have long believed that attachment was a good thing: If people keep products they care about longer, they'll consume less and send less waste to landfills.

New Cornell research provides a more nuanced understanding, showing that product attachment can also unintentionally encourage less sustainable behavior. To prevent damage or loss, people may limit use of their most prized possessions—preserving shoes in a box, dishes as decorations or a car in storage—and buy additional, less meaningful goods for practical daily purposes.

"The goal has been to get people to hold on to products longer, which was seen as inherently more sustainable," said Michael Kowalski, a doctoral researcher in the field of human-centered design with a background as an industrial product designer. "But that's not always the case if people aren't actually using these things."

Kowalski is the lead author of "I Love It, I'll Never Use It: Exploring Factors of Product Attachment and Their Effects on Sustainable Product Usage Behaviors," published Dec. 31, 2022, in the *International Journal of Design*. Co-author Jay Yoon, assistant professor in the Department of Human Centered Design in the College of Human Ecology, and director of the Meta Design and Technology Lab, is the adviser to the research.

The research seeks to inform designers about the multiple factors driving product attachment and which could be tapped to encourage a product's active use for as long as possible—consistent with sustainability goals—and avoid continued redundant consumption.

That's important because Americans, on average, now throw out seven times more durable goods (meant to last at least three years) than they did in 1960, according to the research. Meanwhile, the average new U.S. home, the main location where these increasing numbers of products are used, stored or thrown away, has grown by 1,000 square feet over the past 40 years.

"Perceived irreplaceability as a factor of attachment has been designers' gold standard, but it turns out addressing it does not guarantee a product's impact is going to be sustainable, if people are so attached to it that they don't dare to use it, instead storing it away," Yoon said. "We need to give more attention to other factors in this relationship."

Kowalski began to explore those factors after designing and building a wooden dining table for a family member. As referenced in the research article's title, her seemingly paradoxical response upon receiving the completed piece was, "I love it, I'll never use it."

Seeking to better understand that outcome, Kowalski interviewed individuals of varying demographics in their homes about the products they felt attached to and why, and which of those items they actually used or didn't use. The more than 100 objects discussed included a dresser admired for its craftsmanship, bowls that had belonged to grandparents, and a stuffed animal invested with childhood memories.

Two cars illustrated how attachment could inspire either active or passive product use. One owner adored a car—nicknamed Stella—that was reliable and capable in extreme weather, providing the joy of adventure-filled driving experiences. Another similarly loved a special-edition convertible that they stored in a garage and drove rarely, using other cars for daily transportation.

Kowalski and Yoon identified seven key factors influencing product

attachment, including aesthetic qualities, durability, performance and the memories and emotions invoked. Through an online survey of more than 220 participants, they further analyzed how those factors differently affect attachment and long-term usage.

Perceptions of irreplaceability, they determined, did the most to foster product attachment, yet also led to less sustainable behaviors. Products that were durable, resistant to obsolescence and pleasing got more use, while those associated with meaningful memories and sentimental emotions got less.

The researchers said the findings highlight opportunities for [designers](#) to prioritize products that people both want to keep and engage with—because they are well made, enjoyable and age gracefully. On the other hand, products valued as unique and irreplaceable may inadvertently promote less sustainable consumption. That means designs emphasizing limited releases, personalization and beautiful-but-scarce materials should be considered with caution.

"Creating a sense that something is one-of-a-kind increases attachment but decreases actual use of a product," Kowalski said. "Designers need to be mindful of consumers' psychological and emotional experience in addition to their practical needs to promote sustainable [consumption](#) in the long run."

**More information:** PDF: Michael C. Kowalski and JungKyoon Yoon, [I Love It, I'll Never Use It: Exploring Factors of Product Attachment and Their Effects on Sustainable Product Usage Behaviors \(2022\)](#)

Provided by Cornell University

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