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Narratives of product longevity: a business vs. consumer perspective

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Abstract: This paper explores narratives of product longevity expressed by businesses and consumers, with the aim of illuminating and comparing ways in which the two stakeholder groups express their engagement with products in the context of prolonging their lifespans. We base our analysis on consumer focus groups and interviews with company representatives. Our focus is on textiles (incl. clothing) and furniture. We find that technical and emotional durability are the two dominant ways of understanding product longevity by company representatives. Consumers, however, tell a different story, of living with their things, of use, of time passing, and of life events triggering change. This is a context in which social and systemic factors play a large role in determining the lifespan of a product – factors that are external to the product itself. Although all can agree on the importance of technical durability, problems connected to excessive production volumes and how products feature in everyday life are avoided in narratives produced by business actors. We argue that corporate narratives of product longevity are diverting our attention away from production toward consumption, keeping questions of volume and growth at arm's length. These conflict with consumer narratives of product longevity that grapple with the materiality of the things within the context of lived lives in a consumer economy.

Introduction

Product durability has become one of the main selling points for businesses promoting themselves as sustainable. It has become widely recognized that, although important, the technical durability of products is often not the deciding factor for decisions of disposal (Laitala & Klepp, 2022; Evans & Cooper, 2010). With the publishing of the book entitled *Emotionally Durable Design* by Jonathan Chapman in 2005, the belief that emotional attachment could be embedded into products to prolong their lifespan became incorporated into design strategies applied both in companies and in design education. As such, it is an idea that has become part of the narratives of product longevity and sustainable production and consumption more broadly.

Narratives are produced through collective efforts to create coherent understandings about who we are and how we act (Barthes, 1975). Present narratives about sustainability are dominated by ideas of green growth and circular economies (EC, 2020; UN, 2022). These narratives influence how all actors in society think and act. For instance, what

production companies consider to be sustainable production, and what consumers consider to be sustainable consumption. This again directs resource extraction, production, marketing, and consumption practices. Thus, it is of great importance to shed light on specific layers of narratives as they are invoked by both business actors and consumers.

Theoretical and methodological approach

The analysis distinguishes between small n-narratives (personal experiences), big N-Narratives (themes supported by the n-narratives) and Master Narratives (cultural ideology driving the narratives) (Tannen, 2008), exposing the layered nature of the construction of collective narratives about product longevity and sustainability.

The analysis is based on data material from six focus groups with Norwegian consumers, of both genders (17 men, 19 women, ages 22-76) conducted Nov/Dec 2021, and 9 semi-structured interviews with representatives from 4 furniture companies and 5 clothing companies in Norway, ranging from start-ups to

big scale companies, specifically selected for their focus on extending the lifetimes of their products. The interviewees were company representatives in positions such as sustainability manager, designer, founder, CEO, CFO, creative director, and marketing director.

Participants in the focus groups were recruited through the agency Norstat. Before the focus groups, the participants were asked to submit photos of products they like and have had for a long time or conversely, that they dislike and have only owned for a short period. These photos were used as prompts during the conversations and elicited concrete product stories along with more general questions about the acquisition, use, and disposal of the products.

The focus groups and interviews were transcribed and coded inductively. Quotes are presented with pseudonyms and ages.

Results

We analyse the responses from the interviews and focus groups as narratives that the representatives are constructing to respond to questions about product longevity, and that consumers are constructing around how products are involved in their everyday life.

The business narratives: the lives of products

The interviewed businesses view product longevity to be determined both by factors related to the technical durability of materials and construction, as well as the emotional durability of aesthetics, and function.

(...) our primary goal is to make our products last for a long time, preferably for generations. A part of that concerns the choice of materials and that things are built to endure the intended use, and that people do not get tired of them very quickly and choose to replace them. (Kitchen manufacturer)

Emotional durability is a well-recognized aspect of product durability amongst the interviewed businesses, primarily addressed through storytelling and transparency. Transparency most often concerns the value chain of the products, showing and being honest about where materials come from, how and under

what conditions they are made, and how they are transported to the customers.

What keeps your product in use for a long time? - I think it's the relationship with the production and our story. Being proud of the garment is the most important factor in making the garment last a long time. We use storytelling to show the production of the products, and we notice that as a result, the products get a higher value for the consumer. We invite people to the factory to walk around and talk to people in production. We want everything to be completely transparent, and we notice that it works. (Clothing company)

Local craftsmanship is highlighted as contributing to both technical and emotional durability, by ensuring certain qualities related to material and constructional strength, local identity, and aesthetic timelessness. Furthermore, as described by the kitchen manufacturer below, the local aspect allows for a high level of personal service and building close relationships with customers.

Craftsmanship has become equated to high quality. The materials in combination with the craftsmanship are decisive for the lifespan. When the customer journey begins we start a dialogue to understand who the customer is and what they need. Then we take them with us to the production facilities and show the craftsmanship, the materials, and how things are made. We lead the customer through a very different process than other kitchen manufacturers do, and that creates a completely different relationship with the product they end up with. (Kitchen manufacturer)

Not succumbing to the ever-changing trends dictating the market is an ideal sought to achieve by upholding collections with minimal annual updates across decades. According to the businesses, the stability of such collections allows customers to upgrade, repair, and add to the products they already own, instead of replacing them with new ones.

Our furniture is classic and they fit the collection and the style of our company, which means that you can mix and match more easily and can buy new products that fit together with the old. (Furniture manufacturer)

Furthermore, the availability of spare parts, ways to upgrade existing products (e.g., new fronts, covers), the design of flexible furniture that can be used for multiple purposes, and services for multiple use and ownership (i.e., leasing, takeback, and resale) are strategies highlighted. The companies interviewed view the responsibility for ensuring longer-lasting products as divided between themselves and their customers. To help their customers they offer guidelines and services for maintenance and repair.

When asked about the apparent paradox inherent in both increasing product lifespans and the production and consumption of products, companies fall short in addressing the systemic problem of global production volumes and overconsumption. Their response to this is investing in services for multi-use and multi-ownership. Several companies argue that there is still room for their products on the market and that, from a sustainability perspective, their products should take market shares from less sustainable companies.

The businesses' small-n narratives are dominated by descriptions of how they work to ensure material and emotional longevity. The material longevity comes from using certain materials particularly robust and that are processed into products in such a way that the final product is also robust, and can withstand use over "generations", and from consumer education and maintenance and repair services. Emotional longevity, on the other hand, is something embedded into products mainly through storytelling about the supply chains, but also through the construction of identity through their brand and designs. The big-N narratives that support these ways of doing are value driven and refer to what sustainable materials and value chains are, the advantages of local production, what constitutes high-quality products, and consumers investing in these values.

We increasingly choose sustainable materials - recycled polyester, recycled wool, recycled down, and organic cotton. However, we would never choose poor-quality materials even if they are recycled - quality always trumps. (Clothing company)

I think there has really been a change in the consumer's way of thinking to appreciate more what they have and buy less fast fashion, buy

less low price, and actually value good quality from local businesses and support what is Norwegian. (Furniture manufacturer)

The n- and N-narratives draw from a Master-narrative that businesses should create sustainable, long-lasting products. This fits within the dominant imaginary of green growth where the significance of volumes is camouflaged by value-based narratives that focus on the "greenness" of materials and production, and romanticize products and businesses through storytelling.

The consumer narratives: living with products

Stories and anecdotes of their practices and products that lasted or that didn't, dominated the consumers' small-n narratives. For both textiles and furniture, physical aspects like the material withstanding use, appearance and comfort mattered. In a few instances, the brand or perceived quality of the product was used as an explanation for why it had lasted so long. Adversely, the products that didn't last had lost their function or aesthetic appeal or had never fully had it.

For each product, the consumers were asked why they liked or were satisfied with it. The response was often simply that it had lasted - the duration of successful use had created a bond with the product. When they spoke of emotions it was as 'sentimental value' and related to personal history, often to someone they held dear. However, these products were also still largely functional.

A more surprising attachment was described by Freya (45) to a simple, mass-produced, two-step wooden ladder (Figure 1), that had been used for everything from its intended use to an extra table and even home exercises during the Covid-18-pandemic, and could be sanded down and repainted when needed. As such, it possesses the "evolutionary capabilities, enabling a co-evolution with the user" without which "we will forever be growing a landfill of discarded objects whose only crime was failure to keep the story alive" that Chapman (2005, p. 120) discusses, but not in a way predictable by a designer.



Figure 1. Freya's favourite piece of furniture.

The way the consumers contrasted these successful and unsuccessful product stories revealed the M-narrative that "things should last" and other connected narratives that followed them from acquisition, throughout use, to disposal. The big N-narratives of why they do things displayed the ideal product practices, e.g., of holding on to our things:

[...] I have given away too many things. I've moved too many times in life so all the nice things have gone and old clothes to Fretex (the Salvation Army) and... [...] (Cate, 44)

The consumer stories show that durability is much more complex than the linear process of acquisition, use and disposal, and dependent on factors external to the product itself. Holding on or letting go of a product as such became a negotiation between the volume of possessions and space/storage, life events such as moving and having children, price and resources, conscience, etc.:

Moved in June, then I bought a pretty expensive sofa and already found a chocolate stain after the kids. I've just realised that it will get worn, it doesn't matter. Change it in 5-6 years. (Emil, 37)

The process of letting go often takes time and involves several steps, such as storing the item or moving it to a secondary location - a cabin or a less important room - before disposal. For clothing, this involves uses in less visible ways, underneath other clothes or at home, or doing manual labour. These steps are enabled by the material conditions of the consumers' lives and are easier to manage later in life when one's living space(s) were larger, like how David (57) described that they *"'re also so lucky as to have a garage, and then there's no room for the car in the garage (...)"*

The M-narrative that "you shouldn't waste things" is evident in both Cate's and David's quotes above. But in many cases, things are wasted, or not kept. Likewise, things are not always bought to last.

The general trend was, however, accumulation, and letting go was, therefore, a necessary result of acquiring more "stuff" - when something comes in, something has to go. Here younger informants more often contributed to lifetime extensions through inheriting items or buying second-hand, while older informants expressed sorrow and guilt for already having accumulated so much they could not inherit anything more:

... a mother that is 96 [...] every time I'm home she "You can... do you want this? [...] that?" They have cupboards and drawers bursting and it's sad to have to say "No. No. No." all the time because we don't have room for another cup in the cupboard anymore. (Douglas, 62)

Overall, in their accounts of dealing with their various possessions - clearing out, gifting, reselling - there was a clear narrative stating that "we should buy, have and throw away fewer things". The guilt, sorrow and negotiations related to throw-away consumption also showed through the preference for modes of disposal that enables re-use. When Benny (66) said *"[t]hat they're starting to talk about us keeping things for longer. You don't just produce and produce, and discard and discard and discard and discard"*, he also pointed directly to the producers - increasing lifetime should lead to lower production.

Discussion

As recognised by both company representatives and consumers, technical durability is a good start when seeking to prolong the lifespans of products, but not enough. Emotional attachment has been identified by the design profession as the magic ingredient for keeping products in use, and companies have attempted to embed it into products through storytelling. However, seen in the light of the present challenges of overproduction and waste mountains, this is also ineffective. When comparing the present narratives conveyed by business actors and consumers, it becomes evident that emotional attachment cannot be embedded in products by companies. Our findings suggest that, while the efforts to embed emotional durability into products may enhance brand loyalty and help consumers make product choices, it is the products that last and are used that become emotionally durable. Chapman (2005, p. 118) describes this beautifully in his example of the teddy bear: *“narratives of this intimate nature cannot be purchased and the many layers of emotional investment embedded in the old bear are impossible to replace or simulate”*. Technical durability is significantly impacted by circumstances in the consumers' lives, which further limits the influence of the producer. As found by Fletcher (2012, p. 222) in the context of clothing; *“garments which defy obsolescence do so in informal or unintentional ways, rarely as a result of design planning or material or product qualities”*.

The Master-narratives conveyed by both businesses and consumers focus on the importance of products lasting. However, businesses focus only on their own products, while consumers have to relate to all products. The interactions between different products and all other factors that are evident in their large-N and small-n-narratives are therefore lost in the business approaches. Changing life phases and life events greatly influence and, in many cases, shorten the lifespans of products (Hebrok, 2016).

The dominant narrative of long-lasting products as an effective way to reduce consumption is being challenged by recent research that has found that the connection between increased product lifespans and reduced production volumes is weak. Furthermore, the potential benefits are negated by the volumes of new products being put into the world (Tham &

Fletcher, 2019; Maldini, 2019; Zink & Geyer, 2017). In this perspective, the narratives conveyed by businesses about technical and emotional durability function to conceal the fact that it is the issue of volumes, not durability that is at the core of sustainable solutions for production and consumption.

Conclusions

We have shown how companies and consumers convey both converging and diverging narratives about product longevity. They agree that products should last as long as possible and be made from durable materials. However, when it comes to ideas about and experiences of emotional attachment there are some notable differences. While companies put a lot of effort into storytelling, consumers describe attachment to develop over time and in actual use. The attachments that form have very little to do with storytelling and everything to do with personal experiences and relationships. In many cases, life events and circumstances also hinder this process. Furthermore, the narratives created around what influences the lifespans of products, that are embedded within a larger socio-technical imaginary of green growth, contribute to concealing a disconnect between product longevity as a sustainability strategy and the negation of its effect through production volumes.

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