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Inadequate Life?Evidence of Consumer Attitudes to Product Obsolescence

Published: December 2004

Volume 27, pages 421–449 (2004) Cite this article



Journal of Consumer Policy

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Abstract

Public interest in the durability of household appliances may be traced back 40 years to criticism of planned obsolescence raised by an emerging consumer movement. A recent revival of interest in product life spans has taken place in the context of increasing waste generation and debate prompted by proposed producer responsibility legislation, but data on the age of discarded products and consumer attitudes to product life spans have been lacking. This paper draws upon recent data from research into discarded household appliances in the UK to enhance a theoretical model of product obsolescence and explore some implications for marketing and public policy. A survey of over 800 households provided quantitative data on consumer attitudes and behaviour relating to appliance life spans and a subsequent series of focus groups enriched this data with personal narratives. Respondents were evenly divided on whether or not appliance life spans are adequate. Variations in behaviour demonstrated how users may influence appliance life spans. Overall, the results suggest that consumers have an important role in reversing the trend toward increased

appliance waste but currently face economic disincentives and lack adequate product information.

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About this article

Cite this article

Cooper, T. Inadequate Life?Evidence of Consumer Attitudes to Product Obsolescence . *J Consum Policy* **27**, 421–449 (2004). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10603-004-2284-6

Issue date

December 2004

DOI

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10603-004-2284-6

Keywords

Focus Group | Marketing | Public Policy | Life Span | Economic Policy

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